

“Let your joy be in your journey
- not in some distant goal.”

— Tim Cook

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 81 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2025

Crime Against the Environment

SHILLONG MP, Ricky Syngkon has done well by blowing the whistle on the National Highway Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (NHIDCL) dumping debris on the pristine Umngot River. The Umngot River – the pride and joy of Meghalaya which is crystal clear especially during the winter season, has now turned muddy. But this is hardly surprising. Large-scale, relentless earth cutting by the NHIDCL along the Pynursla – Dawki route for constructing the 4-lane highway has shocked environmentalists and even ordinary tourists who have a natural urge to visit Dawki to behold the pristine waters of the Umngot River. The Umngot is the reason for what is termed as “return tourism” – visitors revisiting and bringing others with them to watch this river as it winds its way into Bangladesh. Over a period of time it has been noticed that the Umngot has become murky during the monsoon season because of earth cutting activities in the upper riparian areas. Needless to say Meghalaya’s loss of forest cover is so striking that attempts by groups like Earchbanc via the Regeneration Meghalaya project to restore the eco-system by planting lakhs of trees will take a long time to cover up every deforested space.

Stone quarrying and sand mining are carrying on unabated but when such activities are carried out by locals they get away by claiming that it’s their right to a livelihood. Even politicians prefer to turn a blind eye to such assaults on the environment. The Shillong MP has never called out the local groups for similar earth cutting activities for the purpose of quarrying and selling off hundreds of truckloads of boulders every day to Bangladesh. Both activities are equally destructive so it would be fair to say that when the MP shows environmental concern and takes up an issue, he should treat all such ecological assaults with the same concern as the NHIDCL case.

As far as the NHIDCL is concerned it has been a habitual offender wherever it has worked and has been regularly pulled up by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) but has always managed to scrape through the cracks in the legal system. It will be interesting to see how the VPP-led Khasi Hills District Council handles this matter. After all, the brief for ensuring that rivers don’t turn into dumping grounds for earth and the forests don’t disappear by the day rests with the District Council which is mandated to take action. Such action unfortunately has not been visible. All the rivers in Meghalaya are turning into garbage dumps and has necessitated that concerned citizens take the matter to court such as in the case of the Myntdu river.

The destruction of the Umngot will see not just the loss of livelihoods for the boatmen but is also a loss of Meghalaya’s soul and identity. Pictures of the Umngot river find a place among the world’s photo-scape. Above all there are fisherfolk too who earn their livelihoods from the same river. It remains to be seen how the NHIDCL responds to this environmental crisis.

Creative Destruction Revisited : Insights from the 2025 Nobel Laureates

By Prof D. Mukherjee

On October 13, 2025, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that Joel Mokyr, Northwestern University; PHD Yale, Philippe Aghion, Collège de France, INSEAD; PHD Harvard and Peter Howitt, Brown University; PHD Northwestern, had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences—formally known as The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. The award recognized their outstanding contribution to explaining innovation-driven economic growth, a theme that revitalizes Joseph Schumpeter’s enduring notion of creative destruction. Their combined scholarship demonstrates that economic expansion depends on open institutions, competition, and continuous renewal—not just invention, but the systems that sustain it. Precisely, the 2025 Nobel recognition affirms that sustained economic growth is not an automatic process but a fragile achievement. For much of human history, societies remained stagnant despite periods of inventive brilliance. Only with the rise of scientific rationality, open institutions, and market driven competition did innovation begin to reproduce itself in a self-sustaining cycle. Mokyr, Aghion, and Howitt’s combined work provides a comprehensive explanation of both the conditions that allow modern growth to emerge and the mechanisms that enable it to endure through continuous innovation.

The 2025 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences was shared between Joel Mokyr, Philippe Aghion, and Peter Howitt, reflecting two interlinked dimensions of the same enduring question: why do some societies achieve lasting growth while others remain stagnant, and what sustains that growth over time? The Royal Swedish Academy’s decision to divide the award symbolized a meeting of history and theory—uniting Mokyr’s cultural and historical insights with Aghion and Howitt’s analytical modeling of innovation. Joel Mokyr represents the historical and intellectual foundation of progress. His research reveals that modern economic growth was not merely the result of technological invention but of a deep transformation in how societies generated and shared knowledge. By linking scientific reasoning with practical craftsmanship, Mokyr shows that growth flourishes in societies that value discovery, openness, and tolerance for new ideas. In contrast, Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt developed a formal model of creative destruction, expanding Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of renewal through innovation. They describe economic growth as an ongoing cycle where each new discovery replaces the old, driving competition and continuous improvement. Together, their perspectives form a unified vision of progress—one that blends cultural evolution with structural dynamism, revealing growth as both a social and intellectual achievement.

Joel Mokyr’s scholarship reinterprets the history of economic progress as a story of ideas rather than merely inventions. He asks why, despite abundant creativity, pre-modern societies could not sustain technological momentum. His answer lies in the absence of an intellectual and institutional environment that nurtured discovery as an ongoing process. Before the Industrial Revolution, innovation surfaced sporadically but failed to persist because rigid

guild systems, hierarchical traditions, and political resistance prevented new ideas from spreading or accumulating.

Mokyr locates the true turning point not in the sudden appearance of machinery, but in the transformation of knowledge itself. He distinguishes between prescriptive knowledge—the practical know-how of artisans—and propositional knowledge—the scientific understanding of underlying principles. For centuries, these realms operated separately; only when science began to illuminate practice, and practice in turn refined science, did self-sustaining growth emerge.

This fusion, alongside the rise of skilled entrepreneurs and the development of open, tolerant institutions, created the cultural ecosystem for modern progress. Mokyr thus reframes economic growth as both an intellectual and moral evolution. Prosperity, he argues, arises where curiosity is encouraged, experimentation rewarded, and knowledge freely exchanged—revealing that the foundations of growth are ultimately cultural as well as economic.

Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt transformed Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of creative destruction into a precise analytical model, revealing how innovation sustains economic growth. Their 1992 endogenous growth framework shows that progress stems from a continuous cycle where new technologies replace old ones, granting innovators temporary monopoly profits that motivate research and risk-taking. Yet these monopolies must remain open to challenge—if incumbents block new entrants, innovation falters. By linking competition, policy, and technological renewal, Aghion and Howitt demonstrated how dynamic, open markets drive sustained economic advancement.

Joseph Schumpeter’s seminal concept of creative destruction, introduced in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), remains central to understanding capitalism’s restless dynamism. He portrayed capitalism as an ongoing process of “industrial mutation,” where innovation continuously reshapes the economy by dismantling old structures and creating new ones. Entrepreneurs, in his view, were the catalysts of this perpetual renewal—driving technological revolutions that advanced progress but also risked giving rise to monopolies that could suppress further innovation. The 2025 Nobel winners have reinvigorated Schumpeter’s vision for the twenty-first century, extending it from the industrial to the digital and AI era. Mokyr redefines Schumpeter’s entrepreneur as a participant within a broader cultural and institutional ecosystem. For him, innovation endures only when societies foster openness, scientific collaboration, and tolerance for disruption—conditions that allow creativity to circulate freely through shared knowledge networks. Aghion and Howitt, meanwhile, gave Schumpeter’s intuition mathematical precision through their endogenous growth model. They demonstrated that innovation is a cumulative process sustained by competition and temporary monopoly rewards. In today’s AI-driven economy, their theory underscores a new paradox: while artificial intelligence accelerates innovation,

its concentration among a few powerful firms risks stifling future creativity. The laureates’ reinterpretation thus restores Schumpeter’s insight to contemporary relevance—reminding us that creative destruction must be governed with fairness, openness, and foresight.

The synthesis of these ideas underscores a defining principle of modern economics: innovation is the central engine of prosperity. It enhances productivity, enables efficient use of resources, and raises living standards. Through the recurring process of creative destruction, outdated technologies are replaced by superior alternatives, generating new industries and employment while ensuring the economy adapts to changing needs.

Innovation is not a static achievement but a living process that demands institutional support and societal resilience. The laureates’ combined work demonstrates that nations flourish when they transform invention into a continuous habit, embedding curiosity, experimentation, and adaptability into their economic DNA.

India’s recent trajectory offers a vivid example of innovation’s transformative potential. The nation has emerged as a leading global innovation hub, excelling in pharmaceuticals, information technology, and space research. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) exemplifies digital inclusion, enabling billions of secure transactions monthly and redefining financial access. India’s advances in frugal engineering, low-cost healthcare devices, and cost-efficient space missions illustrate how innovation can simultaneously promote growth and social equity.

India’s experience mirrors the Nobel laureates’ insights: Mokyr’s emphasis on openness and knowledge diffusion is evident in India’s expanding digital public infrastructure, while Aghion and Howitt’s model of continuous innovation resonates with the entrepreneurial dynamism of its start-up ecosystem. The nation’s challenge lies in sustaining this momentum by protecting competition, investing in education, and nurturing an environment where creativity and enterprise reinforce each other.

In the twenty-first century, humanity faces a convergence of technological, economic, and environmental challenges that echo the core themes explored by Nobel Scholars. Their frameworks—rooted in cultural openness; innovation-driven growth; and institutional adaptability—offer a unifying lens to interpret today’s shifting global landscape. From the dominance of artificial intelligence to the retreat of globalization and the urgent call for green innovation, each dilemma circles back to Schumpeter’s central question: how can societies sustain creative destruction without allowing it to collapse into stagnation or inequality?

The rise of artificial intelligence embodies both the promise and peril of modern capitalism. AI has the potential to revolutionize productivity and human welfare, yet it risks concentrating innovation in the hands of a few firms that control vast data ecosystems. Aghion cautions that such concentration could morph creative destruction into creative entrenchment, where technological leaders suppress competition. To preserve dynamism, policy-

makers must safeguard market contestability, promote open data access, and encourage startups that challenge incumbents—thereby keeping innovation both inclusive and democratic.

In global trade, similar patterns emerge. Protectionist tendencies threaten the openness that has historically fuelled progress. Aghion and Mokyr’s research converge on a vital insight: societies that resist foreign competition and the exchange of ideas ultimately stagnate. Innovation thrives in open systems—those that welcome intellectual diversity and cross-border collaboration.

The green transition presents an equally complex test. Building sustainable economies requires constant technological renewal, yet restrictive fiscal and monetary conditions often inhibit the smaller firms driving ecological innovation. According to Aghion and Howitt’s theory, these disruptive entrants are essential to dismantle entrenched, polluting industries.

Collectively, the laureates remind us that growth depends on adaptive institutions and openness to change. True progress lies not in shielding economies from disruption, but in directing creative destruction toward shared, sustainable prosperity.

The 2025 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences reaffirms one of humanity’s greatest achievements—the transition from centuries of stagnation to an era of sustained, innovation-driven growth. By honouring Mokyr, Aghion, and Howitt, the Royal Swedish Academy acknowledged not only groundbreaking economic theory, but also a profound narrative of human adaptability and progress. Their collective work weaves together history, culture, and analytical rigor, revealing how societies evolve through the continuous interplay of discovery, competition, and renewal.

At its essence, their contribution revitalizes Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of creative destruction—the process through which capitalism reinvents itself by replacing the old with the new. Mokyr situates this dynamism within the mortal and intellectual culture of open societies, emphasizing that true progress begins in the human mind—with curiosity, dissent, and the courage to innovate. Aghion and Howitt transform this vision into a structured model, illustrating how growth endures through competition, incentives, and responsive institutions.

Together, they provide a framework for addressing the dual nature of modern growth: its power to create prosperity and its potential to concentrate wealth and disrupt stability. Their insights call for balanced governance—policies that protect openness, encourage innovation, and ensure that markets remain contestable.

For emerging economies such as India, their message is particularly relevant. Innovation must become a sustained social habit, not a sporadic achievement. The laureates ultimately remind us that prosperity depends not on preserving the status quo but on embracing and guiding the creative turbulence that propels humanity forward.

(The Author is Director-INSPIRE and former Professor & Dean-Faculty of Management, Humanities & Social Sciences, Law, and Commerce & Finance, SRM University, Delhi-NCR)

The mirror that lost its light

By Lyander E Sohkhlet

As a child, I wrote my first letter to The Telegraph, about the Umngot river. I was thirteen, and I remember my fingers trembling as I tried to explain why the Umngot, our Dawki, should be left alone. I didn’t have the language of “ecosystems” or “silt management” then. All I knew was that the river looked like a mirror, so clear that you could see the pebbles sleep and the fish glide as if through air. It was beauty beyond belief. It was where water turned into light. All these years later, I find myself writing again, not against, but for. For the Umngot, for Dawki, for the very heart of Meghalaya’s beauty.

Today, that same river has turned brown. The Umngot, known as the cleanest river in Asia, flows 75 kilometres from Shillong, through the valleys of Khasi hills, before crossing into Bangladesh. It threads through Mawlynong, our “God’s Own Garden,” Asia’s cleanest village, where the air smells of broomgrass and betel leaf, and where every child knows that keeping the land clean is a form of prayer. Here, the Umngot is not just a river, it is a heartbeat. It is the sound of paddles against glass water, of boats floating so lightly that travellers from across the world believe they’re flying. But this October, when the skies cleared, the river did not. What should have been a reflection of blue has turned to the colour of dust. What should have mirrored clouds now mirrors cranes. The Umngot has been wounded by careless construction, its clarity choked by soil, rock, and negligence. The same river that inspired songs and poetry is now bearing the scars of a project that forgot its own purpose: to connect, not to destroy.

It is this magic that turned Dawki into a global postcard. Every year, thousands travel to see the “flying boats.” Their photos flood social media; travel influencers call it “a dream, not a destination.” And to the immense credit of the Tourism Department, that dream was shared beautifully with the world. Through thoughtful campaigns, stunning visuals, and the hard work of local guides and homestay owners, Umngot became one of India’s most cherished travel icons.

Our Lok Sabha MP, Ricky A.J. Syngkon, has drawn national attention to the degradation of the Umngot. He reminded the central ministries that this is not just a body of water, it is a living symbol of Meghalaya’s natural heritage. Construction debris and loose soil from hill-cutting along the road project have reportedly flowed into the river, muddying its once-pristine waters. And so, we find ourselves asking: can the agencies working so hard to build our future also protect what defines it?

But this October, when the monsoon lifted and the skies cleared, the river did not. We have seen this story before, in Uttarakhand, in Himachal, in Assam, rivers made sacrificial to the false god of speed. The Bhagirathi once paid the price for similar

offences, its violators fined crores of rupees. But what fine can restore the trust of a boatman whose river has turned opaque? What penalty can rebuild the faith of a child who once saw fish beneath her reflection?

The Umngot is not merely a tourist attraction. It sustains hundreds of families, boatmen, homestay owners, food vendors, guides. It draws thousands each year, domestic and international, to witness water so clear it seemed unreal. Its global reputation has kept livelihoods alive in villages that the national economy often forgets. But today, that livelihood floats on uncertainty. Tourists have begun canceling their trips. The season of clarity has turned into a season of sorrow. This is not progress. This is punishment, not for wrongdoing, but for belonging. We were told the road would bring prosperity. But what prosperity is worth a poisoned river? What development justifies silting over a wonder that no human hand can recreate? The road to Dawki was meant to bring the world closer to the Umngot, not to bury it under mud. There was a time when the Umngot was a promise, a ribbon of glass where the sky and stones held each other without flinching. Children leaned over boats and watched their own laughter ripple across the surface. But now, that reflection is gone. The river no longer blushes in sunlight; it hides its face behind silt and shame. And we, the ones who should have guarded it, are left to explain to our children why the water turned brown, why we traded wonder for carelessness.

Meghalaya has always been a land where people and nature walk together, not one upon the other. In Mawlynong, there are no street sweepers, every villager cleans their own path. Cleanliness is part of our identity. And yet, while the villagers sweep their leaves each morning, massive machines upstream are dumping earth into their river.

We cannot accept this contradiction.

The Umngot River deserves to breathe again. It deserves the same reverence we show to sacred groves and living root bridges. It deserves silence, not bulldozers. It deserves sunlight returning through its surface, where fish once shimmered like shards of the sky. When I was thirteen, I wrote that building a dam would ruin the beauty of the Umngot. Today, I find myself writing again, older, angrier, but still hopeful, because beauty, once lost, can sometimes return if enough people remember it. So I write once more, with the same heart as that thirteen-year-old boy: let the Umngot remain clear. Let the boats fly again. Let us prove that in these hills, progress and purity can flow together.

Let us remember. Let us speak. For when the Umngot turns clear again, so will we.

(The writer is a student of St Edmunds College, BA Political Science)

Letters to the Editor

NHIDCL’s multiple culpabilities

Editor,
Apropos of the news “Umngot water turns brown; VPPMP seeks Centre’s help” (ST October 30, 2025) the National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) was found to be dumping construction debris directly into the Bhagirathi River during road development activities in Uttarakhand. This led to serious environmental concerns, including river pollution and ecological disruption. In the initial order in November 2018 the NGT directed NHIDCL to deposit Rs 2 crore with the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) as compensation for environmental restoration. The National Green Tribunal later revised its directive in August 2019, allowing NHIDCL to furnish a performance guarantee instead of depositing the Rs

2 crore. The guarantee was to ensure remedial measures would be completed by March 31, 2020, failing which the penalty would be enforced. However, there is no publicly available confirmation that NHIDCL fully complied with the remedial measures by the March 31, 2020 deadline.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) modified its original Rs 2 crore penalty order to a performance guarantee, but follow-up compliance details remain unclear in the public domain. The NGT also mandated an audit to assess the extent of muck dumped, coordinated by CPCB and other agencies. What is missing? As of now, there is no publicly available report or statement confirming whether NHIDCL met the March 2020 deadline. There is no record of the Rs 2 crore penalty being enforced post-deadline, suggesting either partial compliance or lack of follow-up transparency. The National Green

Tribunal has intervened in several road development projects across India where environmental degradation was evident, especially during 2023 and 2024. Some of the notable cases and regions where NGT took action.

Char Dham Highway Project (Uttarakhand) where the issue was on widespread deforestation, landslide risks and damage to Himalayan ecology due to widening of roads for pilgrimage routes. The NGT directed detailed environmental assessments and compliance with eco-sensitive zone norms. The Supreme Court also weighed in, reinforcing NGT’s concerns. The latest status as of October 2024 states that 75% is completed and the environmental impact is over 811 landslides reported along 800 Km due to unsafe slope-cutting. The Supreme appointed committee submitted reports, and concerns remain over ecological fragility.

NH-44 Expansion (Jammu & Kashmir) the issue

was dumping of debris into rivers and forest areas during road widening. NGT ordered removal of debris and restoration of affected zones and mandated monitoring by local pollution control boards. The latest status indicates that it has been partially restored; full restoration is expected in several months due to landslides and bridge collapse. The environmental impact of torrential rains and fragile slopes triggered massive disruption; Tharad bridge reconstruction is a major hurdle.

Mumbai-Goa Highway (Konkan Region) the issue of hill cutting and mangrove destruction during expansion. The NGT imposed restrictions on further work until environmental clearance norms were met and sought restoration plans for mangrove areas. The latest status is that 95% of the work is completed and is expected to reduce travel time to 6 hours. However, the environmental impact is that hill cutting and man-

grove loss remain concerns, though recent updates focus on connectivity gains.

Silchar-Aizawl Road (Assam-Mizoram Border) the issue is soil erosion and forest encroachment due to unregulated construction. The NGT called for reforestation and erosion control measures and directed the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change to reassess project impact. The latest status is that the road is under repair, trucks and local groups initiated self-repairs due to government delays. The environmental impact is that road damage led to fuel shortages and blockades; strategic importance acknowledged in ministerial visits.

Peripheral Ring Road (Bangalore) the issue alleged violations of environmental clearance and destruction of wetlands. NGT ordered status reports and halted work pending review and emphasized protection of water bodies and biodiversity corridors. The latest

status is that the project is legally contested; farmers petitioned the Governor to scrap Phase I (renamed Bengaluru Business Corridor). The environmental impact alleged lapse of scheme under BDA Act; compensation disputes and lack of approvals stall progress.

NH Projects in Himachal Pradesh the issue was landslides triggered by aggressive hill cutting and lack of slope stabilization for which the NGT mandated slope protection measures and halted work in vulnerable zones until geological assessments were completed. The latest status is that there are multiple closures due to landslides; nearly 200 Km roads blocked in July 2025. The environmental impact is that NH-707 and Chandigarh-Manali Highway are severely affected; restoration ongoing amid monsoon-triggered collapses.

The common themes in NGT’s road project interventions are violation of environmental clearance

norms, deforestation and biodiversity loss, landslide and erosion risks in hilly terrain, damage of wetland, rivers and mangroves and lack of proper debris disposal and slope stabilisation. Action should be initiated in the case of Umngot River by NGT and ensure that nothing is missed.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Error in date of NJAC enactment in parliament

Editor,
I write with concern regarding the editorial dated 31st October 2025, which incorrectly states that the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) was introduced during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s tenure. In fact, the NJAC was enacted in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra

Modi’s government and subsequently struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015 declaring it unconstitutional and void on the ground that it violated the independence of judiciary.

Such factual inaccuracies, especially on matters of constitutional significance, risk misleading readers and distorting public understanding of institutional history. Editorials carry the weight of opinion, but they must be anchored in verified fact. In an era of rapid information flow, precision is not just a virtue, it is a responsibility.

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-793003

Editor replies: We apologise for the oversight and stand corrected. Our online edition carries the corrected version.

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

No longer 'Prince Andrew': How royals can be stripped of their titles

Prince Andrew will be stripped of his royal titles, meaning he will no longer be called "prince" or "His Royal Highness".

A statement from Buckingham Palace said: *His Majesty has today initiated a formal process to remove the style, titles and honours of Prince Andrew.*

Prince Andrew will now be known as Andrew Mountbatten Windsor [...] These censures are deemed necessary, notwithstanding the fact that he continues to deny the allegations against him.

Their Majesties wish to make clear that their thoughts and utmost sympathies have been, and will remain with, the victims and survivors of any and all forms of abuse.

The statement also noted Andrew will have to leave his current home, Royal Lodge, and move to alternative private accommodation.

These moves follow allegations, which Andrew continues to "vigorously deny", surrounding his relationship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The decision comes in the wake of Virginia Giuffre's posthumous memoir *Nobody's Girl*, published this fortnight. The memoir includes an inside account of the two years Giuffre spent as a "sex slave" working for Jeffrey Epstein and co-conspirator Ghislaine Maxwell. Giuffre died by suicide in April this year, aged 41, on her farm in Western Australia.

Three weeks before she died, she emailed her co-author, journalist Amy Wallace, and longtime publicist Dini von Mueffling: "In the event of my passing, I would like to ensure that Nobody's Girl is still released."

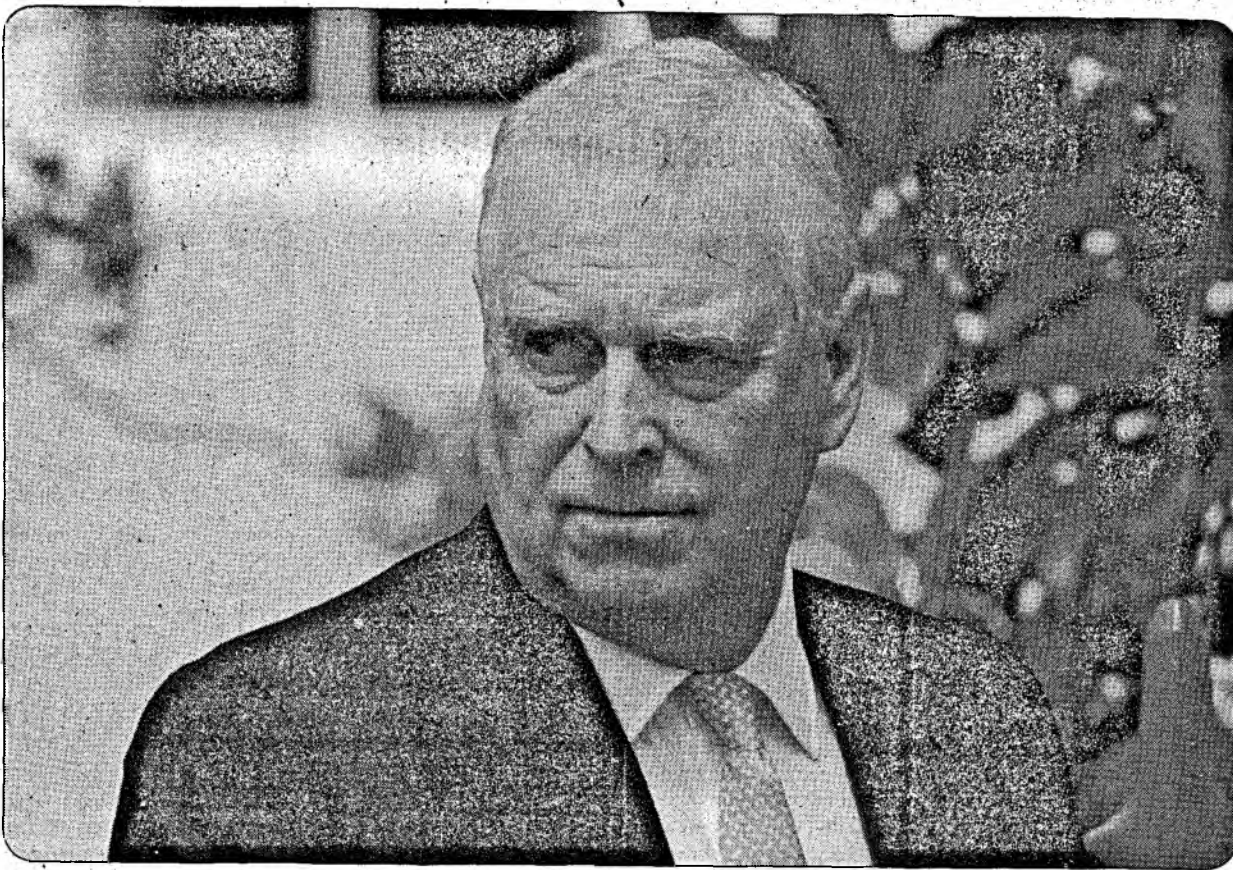
"Today," Giuffre's family said, "she declares a victory. She has brought down a British prince with her truth and extraordinary courage."

British historian and author Andrew Lownie (author of a book about Andrew and his ex-wife Sarah Ferguson, called *Entitled*), told Sky News earlier this month, "the only way the story will go away is if [Andrew] leaves Royal Lodge, goes into exile abroad with his ex-wife, and is basically stripped of all his honours, including Prince Andrew". Sarah Ferguson will also move out of Royal Lodge.

As a trauma memoir, *Nobody's Girl* forces us to bear witness to an uncomfortable truth: Giuffre's abuse was hidden in plain sight.

"Don't be fooled by those in Epstein's circle who say they didn't know what Epstein was doing," she writes. "Anyone who spent any significant amount of time with Epstein saw him touching girls." She continues: "They can say they didn't know he was raping children. But they were not blind."

Four days before the memoir was published, Prince Andrew announced he would no longer use the titles conferred upon him, including Duke of York. Three days later, leaked emails from 2011



suggested he gave Giuffre's date of birth and social security number to one of his protection officers, hours before the infamous photograph of him with her was published.

Maxwell's brother, Ian Maxwell, published an article in the *Spectator* today, headlined "Don't take Virginia Giuffre's memoir at face value". The memoir keeps his sister, who was convicted of charges including sex trafficking of a minor, in world headlines — at a time Donald Trump has said he will "take a look" at pardoning her.

Earlier this year, Maxwell was moved to a lower security prison to continue her 20-year sentence.

Giuffre's memoir is a courageous and clear-eyed account of what trauma takes — and what recovery demands.

Told in four chronological parts — "Daughter", "Prisoner", "Survivor" and "Warrior" — the memoir meticulously records the "sexual assaulting, battering, exploiting, and abusing" Giuffre endured throughout her life, most notably at the hands of Epstein and Maxwell.

The result is a devastating exposé of the fetishisation and abuse of girls — "the younger, the better", Epstein said — and society's failure to protect the most vulnerable.

It is also a damning indictment of everyone

who knew and looked away.

But how can a prince — who is, after all, the son of a queen — be stripped of the title "prince"?

Here's how it works — and what it might mean for succession.

How do you actually strip a prince of his titles?

This is within the remit of the monarch, Charles III. The monarch issues an official document called a letters patent.

They are typically used to grant a title or a right, but this is doing the opposite: withdrawing it from Andrew.

There are precedents for monarchs removing titles in this way. When Diana and Charles divorced, she lost the use of "Her Royal Highness", as did Sarah Ferguson, the former wife of Andrew. So a royal losing their title doesn't always have to be scandalous or unusual.

But what's not happened yet — because it's not within the remit of the king — is the removal of Andrew's position as eighth in line to the throne.

That requires parliamentary legislation to do — and not just the Westminster parliament, either.

To do that, the Westminster parliament would have to introduce a bill and pass it. However, the move would also require virtually identical

legislation in all of the Commonwealth parliaments (such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and so on).

That's not beyond the realm of possibility.

A bit over a decade ago, with what came to be known as the Perth agreements, the Commonwealth parliaments agreed to change the rules around succession and gender. No longer would older princesses be leapfrogged by younger brothers to get a spot on the throne.

It happened very smoothly, so it is certainly possible for all Commonwealth parliaments to agree to coordinate on something. However, the Westminster parliament cannot instruct other parliaments to pass such legislation.

So, could all the Commonwealth parliaments coordinate to remove Andrew from the line of succession? I have not seen any mention of this in media reports so far, but I would be highly surprised if this didn't happen in future.

It seems incompatible that Andrew would lose his title and still be in line for succession.

But is the son of the queen not always a prince?

By custom, yes, the son of a queen is known as a prince. But as we have seen, that title can be removed.

The best example is in 1936, when King Edward VIII abdicated so as to marry divorcee Wallis Simpson, and he lost the title of king.

He was thereafter no longer entitled to the title "His Royal Highness" and he got a new title: Duke of Windsor. He had some prestige, but was no longer entitled to use his royal title.

Edward VIII (who was also Andrew's great uncle) did not have any children. But if he had, they wouldn't have been entitled to inherit the throne.

And that was an actual reigning king, not just a prince.

Acting in a moment of crisis

Andrew has reportedly accepted the latest decision but it was made by his brother, the king.

This is a signal from Charles not just to the public but also to his heir, William, that he's doing everything he can to smooth the path for William's succession and to respond to public anger over the allegations against Andrew.

As an historian, this is a moment to reflect on how this is another example of the British monarch taking decisive action in a moment of crisis, to save the reputation of and public support for the monarchy.

Another example would be King George V, who acted decisively in the first world war not only to strip titles from family members who had supported Germany in the war, but to also change the name of his family.

They were known as Saxe-Coburg Gotha (a German name), but they became the house of Windsor. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 2, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Jupiter on your solar return chart and will give excellent results. You will get promoted in your job. Your confidence will also rise, and you will remain in good spirits. You will also fulfill your obligations with diligence. You will get lot of fame and respect. Your romantic life will be very satisfying, and you will come close to your partner. Husband and wife will have good understanding. Your children will also make good progress. Your health worries will also come to an end. Your elders will keep blessings you. You will be undertaking lot of work-related trips which will prove to be beneficial. You will be busy with literature and creative works and busy studying. You will achieve the goals that you have set for yourself. You will also get support of your bosses and colleagues.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings love, harmony and entertainment in family and personal relations. A romantic short trip may be undertaken for pleasure. People look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself, and that feels good. You have the chance to shine, largely because you are projecting yourself with self-respect as well as modesty. Opportunities both personal and professional are likely to present themselves as a result. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Activities related to communications such as journalism, literature, public speaking, debates are highlighted and would be more prominent. You feel touchy and sensitive; the attitude should be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships, and you should not take things personally. Friendships, cooperation and synergy are available to you. You would work creatively in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. You inculcate good team spirit, and you are more tactful with your co-workers, which brings harmony to your workplace. You find yourself in a whirlwind of activities and need to slow down a bit and not neglect your health.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You would have positive results from marketing, communications and public relations. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and join new courses such as beauty culture, computers, fine arts and in fields related to show business. Be sure you consider all the factors prior to putting forth your ideas. Do not go on with instinct alone; take the opinion of someone close to you. You may modernize your workplace and home and give it a new look. You may change your hairstyle, buy new clothes and spend it on luxury items. Also spend some time alone to recharge and revitalize yourself.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner, and disputes with co-workers are possible. You may feel a bit defeated by situations at home and work. Allow space and time for things to change on their own. Awkward pauses and false starts do happen; the issue is how you handle them. Use information from the data at hand and your charisma to get back on track. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walks and exercise.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) You are more inclined to take pride in your intellectual accomplishments. Find activities and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. You have mental clarity and a logical approach to resolve matters. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news. Your heart and head pull you in different directions when domestic and family related decisions are to be made. Personal relationships may be dreamy and transitory, and commitments are to be made, and promises are to be honored. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be abandoned.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) As your confidence gets a boost, you attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and handle a multitude of activity. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You

handle business seminars and express yourself more specifically about the subject. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. You might spend time on short frequent trips, communicating with people and visiting friends and relatives. You tend to entertain others with your sense of humor. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. You interact with people in positions of power and authority with grace and diplomacy. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at home and work.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) This period brings good luck for love and romance. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself. As you recall nostalgic trips, you also maintain a balance of the head and heart in professional and personal matters. You turn things around in business dealings in your favor. You are noble and generous in family situations but have a tendency to worry about those close to you. Monetary transactions bring gains in property related issues. An overseas or long-distance journey which includes pilgrimage is on the cards.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) Mixed results are foretold this week. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in positions of power and authority with tact and grace. You will be able to make good use of your talents, work experience for your work and projects in hand. You have more opportunities to improve relations with relatives and friends in your immediate environment. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally.

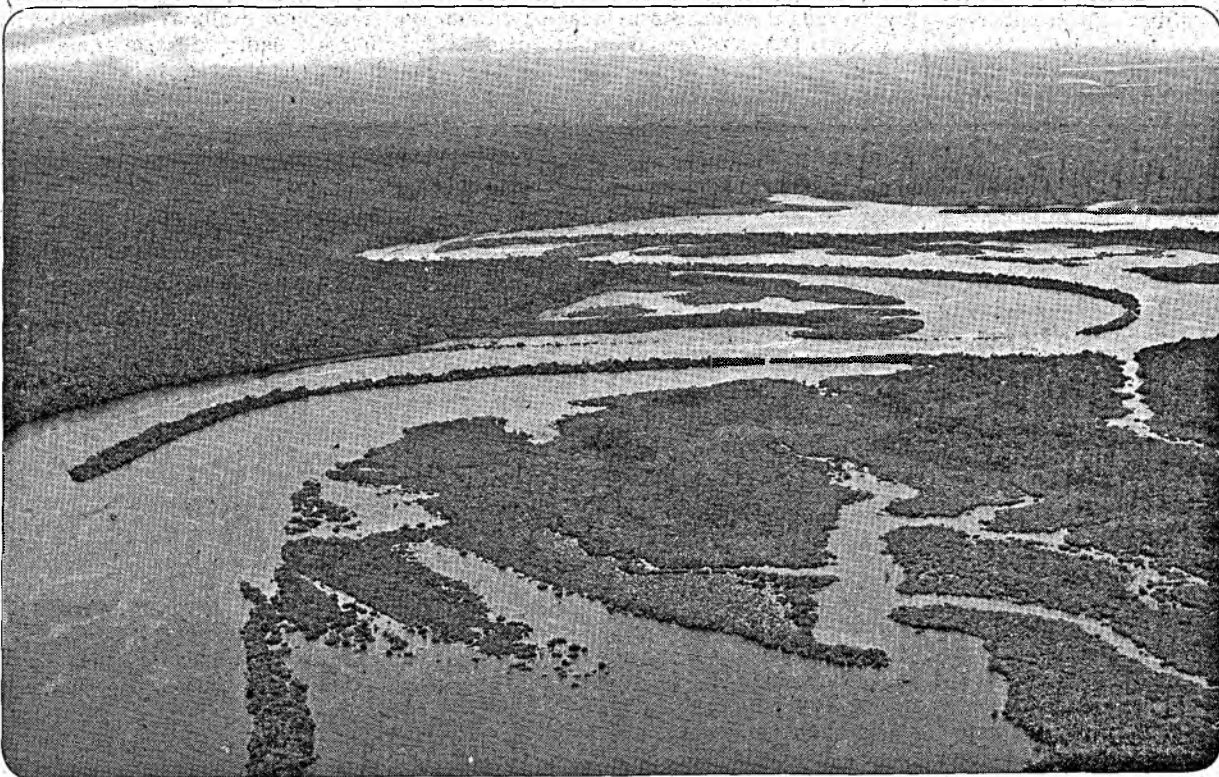
Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) New associations and beginnings in work areas will come up as new opportunities and changes may arise. You would improve your romantic and love life by bringing more sincerity, cooperation and humanity as unusual attractions and dreams could feature at this time. Domestic members would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. You tend to entertain others with your conversation. Some nagging issues and details will demand your attention.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) This phase brings more stability in relations and professional life. You enjoy being in control but many times it is not possible. When you let go you discover that many aspects can be viewed more objectively. This objective lends a new edge and adds to your passion at work. This also opens new vistas in romantic relationships and helps you communicate better. Your subconscious and intuitive abilities help you forge professional associations with the larger picture in mind. Having fun too when relaxed adds an extra element to your life.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) The ability to build on financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on cards. As you rid yourself of your inner critic you find that concepts flow and you can give shape to them. You or someone close to you may finalize a marriage proposal. Sharing your interests and communications with loved ones may be especially appealing to you. You might spend a lot of time meeting friends and loved ones. You could be stressed while meeting people's expectations and approval. Healthy food, yoga and meditation are recommended as it would help to overcome health problems.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) This is a phase that brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your efforts. Your methods prove to be effective, but you need to be circumspect as far as your interaction with colleagues is concerned. Your social life is enviable as are your interactions. You resolve an important domestic issue that has been causing a rift in relations for some time. Centering within and witnessing inner truth and reflection is the best meditation. You are strong and masterful while turning things around in a positive direction at work.

Brazil's Amazon deforestation falls even as fires surge to record levels



Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest fell by 11% from August 2024 to July this year, the government said Thursday, even as wildfires tracked by Brazil's space agency surged to record levels amid a severe drought.

According to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE), 5,796 square kilometers (2,238 square miles) of forest were cleared between August 2024 and July 2025 — an area nearly four times the size of New York City, but still a significant drop from the previous year and the lowest level in nearly a decade.

The Environment Ministry said the drop in deforestation reflects stronger environmental enforcement, expanded satellite monitoring and renewed coordination among federal agencies.

The results come just weeks before Brazil hosts the COP30 U.N. climate summit in the Amazon city of Belem, where the country will be under pressure to demonstrate progress toward its 2030 goal of ending illegal deforestation.

At the same time, INPE reported that fire detections in the Amazon from January through October 2025 were the highest since 2010. Widespread burning and prolonged drought have blanketed parts of northern Brazil in smoke, forcing flight cancellations and prompting health warnings in states such as Amazonas and Para.

Experts say the fires — often used to clear already-deforested land — risk undermining recent conservation gains.

Ibama, Brazil's environmental enforcement

agency, said during the announcement that it carried out 9,540 inspections this year, a 38% increase from 2024, issuing 2.85 billion reais (\$520 million) in environmental fines this year and seizing more than 4,500 pieces of machinery and livestock tied to illegal clearing.

Officials said over 75 civil lawsuits were filed jointly by Ibama and the Attorney General's Office against deforestation and illegal burning cases.

Márcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, a coalition of Brazilian civil-society groups, told The Associated Press the latest data show both progress and contradiction in Brazil's climate policy.

"It's great news — it shows the zero-deforestation target can be achieved if the government and society as a whole work together," he said.

"But it also exposes the government's contradictions: while one part delivers solutions like reducing deforestation, another is delivering the problem, approving oil drilling projects in the Amazon River basin."

Greenpeace Brazil, called the results positive but said lasting progress will depend on permanent safeguards and stronger global cooperation.

"The result is encouraging, but there's still room to improve," said Ana Clis Ferreira, spokesperson for Greenpeace's Zero Deforestation campaign in a statement. "It's essential to institutionalize protections that don't depend on political cycles and to implement robust action plans for periods of greater climate vulnerability." (AP)

**"Intelligence without ambition
is a bird without wings."
—Salvador Dali**

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 83 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2025

Beyond 'sadak, pani'

THE picture about Bihar assembly elections is still hazy, with pollsters predicting JDU leader Tejashwi Yadav being the most-preferred CM face while also arriving at a conclusion that the NDA alliance of JDU, BJP and others would likely retain power. The two-phase polls for the assembly would take place on November 6 and 11, while the vote-counting and result-declaration on November 14. The first phase of the campaign drew notables like the Prime Minister and Home Minister from Delhi and Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, among others. Alongside, the regional satraps like chief minister Nitish Kumar, Tejashwi, and Prashant Kishor of the Jan Suraj party are raising heat and the dust.

The large presence of people to hear these leaders are no barometer to gauge the popularity of one side or the other. Crowds are mobilised by those who have the capacity to spend crores — a game in which neither the BJP nor the JDU has much any constraint, they being the 'ruling' parties. The clout of the Lalu Prasad family helps the RJD organise huge funds aided by the party's well-oiled machinery. The Jan Suraj party is relatively a new-comer and Kishor is not a part of the power edifice. Though he had made millions by virtue of being an election manager for major political parties in the past, there's a limit to what he can afford to spend. Sizeable segments of the well-meaning middle-class are in a mood to back him, but the political character of the state being what it is, he might not make it big in the coming polls. Pollsters have predicted as much. This leaves the ground wide open for a major fight between the JDU-BJP alliance and the RJD-Congress combine, with several more of small-time parties siding with either one or the other of these two.

Clearly, so far through the campaign, it is clear that Nitish Kumar is not the hot favourite for the electorate this time. His leadership of Bihar over the past several years has not helped the state grow. Kumar started with the promise of Sadak, Pani (roads and water) to the poorly developed state some 20 years ago. He proved that he's a survivor par excellence, but one who lacked the vision or imagination to take Bihar to the next level of economic progress. His archaic mindset is no guarantee to Bihar's progress. It would appear that the people understand as much and seek a change of face. This time, however, the game may change with the BJP staking claim for the CM post if the alliance wins. Alternatively, it could be the youthful Tejashwi who could emerge successful; and for worse—it could be Kumar again if the NDA wins and he demands one more term as CM. A dark horse too could emerge as the next CM. The people are the ultimate masters of any polls. How they vote is simply unpredictable. Opinion polls are no longer the last word.

Letters to the Editor

Empathy brings healing to hearts and humanity

Editor,

In a world invariably overwhelmed by chaos, whether it be ambition, politics, or the endless pursuit of sensory pleasures, Patricia Mukhim's article "Empathy: It Demands Action" (ST, October 31) offers a moment of quiet illumination. To write such a piece is to respond to an inner call — a call that feels the sighs and sorrows of those grieving around us. Sadly, very few notice such quiet suffering.

Her closing lines really hit home: "Empathy could turn this world into a better, happier place. Let us be more kind, loving and compassionate and walk a few steps with those needing a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. We can heal the world with these small steps. Let's start small and begin today..." These words in fact carry the weight of wisdom. They remind us that "empathy" is not some optional virtue we can afford to skip, but a necessity. In chasing success, we often forget the simple inevitable truth — what we accumulate fades, but what we offer "endures."

When we leave this world, we carry nothing of

the wealth we once guarded so possessively. Titles, possessions, luxuries — none of this stay with us beyond the final breath. Yet in our pursuit of these things, we often trade away what truly matters. At the end of the day, especially in difficult times, it is "patience, integrity, forgiveness, and compassion" that truly turn out to be the treasures of the soul. Without them, we remain spiritually impoverished.

Yes, if we dive deeper, we'll only see that empathy quietly undoes what ego builds up. It softens pride, quiets anger, and dissolves the illusion of separateness. When we bask in egotism, anger, jealousy, greed, and delusion rise up to rule over the heart and soul. These traits do not bring peace; they throw us into the hole of restlessness and regret. But empathy, when practiced with sincerity, without discrimination or expectation, becomes a healing balm.

More than anything, to live with empathy is to live in "rhythm with the universe." Nature teaches us this truth more eloquently when we have the patience to observe its ways. Yes, when we walk beside someone in pain, when we listen to them with humility, when we offer comfort without condition, we are not merely helping them but also healing ourselves and

Gaps and Imbalance in Higher Education: Takeaways from the Meghalaya State Education Commission Report 2025

By Glenn C Kharkongor

The Meghalaya State Education Commission Report 2025 (hereafter referred to as the Report) devotes a major chapter to higher education. This 53-page segment contains substantial data, though there are notable gaps. Overall, the recommendations in the Report correspond fairly well with the data and address key challenges, though some areas need more data and deeper examination. The purpose of this article is to highlight certain findings of the Report and to suggest points for action.

Enrolment patterns

According to the Report, the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) had 60 affiliated colleges in 2024 with an undergraduate enrolment of 59,838 students. Of these, 46,259 students (82.3%) were enrolled in Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees. This is an inordinately high proportion and does not augur well for prospects in the job market or for the development of the state.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2021, released by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, enrolment at the undergraduate level in arts in India is 33.5%. In China it is about 25%. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 survey, 72.7% of Tamil Nadu students opt for higher studies in STEM education. Unfortunately, the opportunity to study STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in Meghalaya is available only to a small fraction of students.

A clear mismatch exists between existing degree programs in Meghalaya, market demands and student aspirations. In NEHU only 10.4% are enrolled in science courses, and a mere 7.7% in applied or skill-based programs. To illustrate, computer applications students constitute only about 0.01%, and tourism management students around 0.02% of the NEHU enrolment.

Even in management and other disciplines, the enrolment is minuscule. The figures do not make easy reading: B.Com degrees were offered in 23 colleges with 4,733 students and BBA only in three colleges with 1,255 students. BSc was available in 13 colleges with 6,242 students. The BCA program had five

colleges and 580 students. The Bachelor of Tourism and Travel Management (BTTM) had just a single college with 90 students. The Bachelor of Arts in Music is offered in only one college with 110 students, and the Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication in just one college with 60 students.

Economists and social scientists the world over recommend a strong STEM priority, especially in countries where there is an acute need to develop infrastructure, industry, and services. In the United States, STEM supports 67% of jobs and 69% of the GDP.

The enrolment pattern in Meghalaya reveals several critical issues. The small number of science students limits the future supply of qualified science teachers and researchers in the state. This needs to be seen in the backdrop of the rising demand across the world for IT professionals with new skills such as artificial intelligence. Yet very few students in the state are entering computer-related programs.

Tourism, one of Meghalaya's most promising sectors, remains neglected as a subject in higher education. Despite music being a natural cultural strength of the region, very few students are able to pursue it at the degree level. The conclusion is clear: there is a serious misalignment between the disciplines offered and the skill-based, employment-oriented needs of the state and market.

Low exam participation, high dropout

There are other statistics which are most disconcerting. Less than half of the students enrolled as undergraduates at NEHU appeared for the examinations in 2024. Of 59,838 students, only 29,905 sat for their exams. The Report does not explain this major discrepancy and why there was such a high drop out at that critical stage of education. In my view, the reasons may include the following: 1. Courses may not align with student aspirations or job prospects. 2. A significant number of students may have dropped out for other reasons such as motivation, financial, exam-anxiety, or lack of sufficient attendance.

According to the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), the dropout rate from higher education in In-

dia is 25%. In Meghalaya it is double the national average. If these numbers are pegged on to school dropouts, the percentage of youth completing a bachelor's education in our state is barely around eight percent. This is not just alarming but a pathway to disaster.

China has the lowest dropout rate from higher education in the world, less than one percent. More than 75% of its youth are enrolled in higher education. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 targets a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 50% in higher education by 2035. According to the Report, the GER in Meghalaya is 16%, about half of the present GER in India. To achieve the NEP target, Meghalaya will have to triple the number of college students by 2035, hardly a decade from now. Are we building this capacity? As of now, we do not produce even enough science teachers for our schools.

The dilemma starts from school

The school system in Meghalaya produces mainly arts students. In the 2025 Meghalaya HSSLC exams, the arts stream had the highest number of students with 22,835, making up approximately 78% of the total. The science stream had 3,922 students, which is about 13%, and the commerce stream had 2,501 students, or roughly 9%.

What this tells us is that the preponderance of arts students from school spills over into higher education, thus accounting for the high percentage of arts students in NEHU. There are not many +2 pass students who are eligible for admission to science degrees.

According to a government study the preference for science among high school students is most visible in the southern states: Andhra Pradesh (76 per cent), Telangana (65 per cent), Tamil Nadu (62 per cent), and Kerala (45 per cent) for the academic year 2021–2022. In Tamil Nadu, 35% take commerce and only two percent choose arts. In Manipur, 69 per cent of students who took the Class XII board exams opted for science.

According to Business Standard, officials from the Ministry of Education assert that despite the study including only preferences from the class of 2022, the data is indicative of long-term trends. The commerce stream

has an average national enrolment of 14 percent of higher secondary school students. But in the southern states the preference for commerce is significantly higher, about double the national average. In these high-performing states, arts students made up only about 2 per cent of the 2022 board examination population, compared to 78% in Meghalaya. This single statistic holds the key to the skewed education situation in our state.

The forward effects of the preference for science in the southern states are seen, for example, in the JEE scores for admission to the IITs. Telangana had the most students who scored a perfect score in JEE Main 2023, followed by Andhra Pradesh.

The solution

The first strategy is to increase the number of students taking science in Meghalaya. This will need more science teachers and a science lab in every higher secondary school. But there is a solution for the time being: the University Grants Commission recently issued a circular indicating that arts and commerce students can opt for science degrees. What will be needed is that colleges and universities in the state provide foundation and bridge courses in science for arts students who have taken admission in BSc degree programs.

We need to introduce more science and skill-based courses aligned with labour market needs. About a quarter of US students study in community colleges which offer job-oriented courses. If they wish to pursue a degree in a university, they are given credit for the community college diploma.

If our state is going to triple its higher education capacity in the next decade, the private sector should be expanded. The private universities in the state offer more applied and skill-based degrees than NEHU. Traditionally, US higher education has been a mixed sector. About half (46 per cent) of college students study in state universities, 28 per cent in private universities and 26 per cent in community colleges, public and private. There is a robust education loan system for university students in the US. About 70% of students take these loans.

Finally, we need to conduct extensive surveys of the main stakeholders, the students. Their opinions, aspirations and career preferences need to be documented for good planning.

Vigilance: Our Shared Responsibility

By Arindam Gautam

Every year in the last week of October or first week of November to commemorate the birth anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) in a bid to create awareness among the public of the perils of corruption as well as to bring awareness on the importance of probity in public life organizes a week-long Vigilance Awareness Week (VAW). During the rest of the year, the CVC monitors probity and transparency in the functioning of the Central Government departments as well as undertakings, but during this part of the year through the VAW programme, the CVC tries to get closer and bring awareness about CVC and its activities among people. The CVC also exhorts other Public Sector Undertakings to conduct such outreach programmes during this Vigilance Awareness Week (VAW) and almost all Central Government Undertakings comply with this directive of the CVC. This year, the CVC has chosen the theme: "Vigilance: Our Shared Responsibility".

There is no gainsaying the fact that corruption is the biggest impediment towards development of a nation. This year, the CVC exhorts on the importance of shared responsibility and alacrity from all. In other words, the CVC harps on the involvement of all as a shared responsibility so as to emerge as a corruption free nation. For this to happen, the citizens need to become vigilant so that they can contribute to the prosperity of India. Thus this year's theme "Vigilance: Our Shared Responsibility" is quite apt. Integrity as the word suggests is the synergy in thoughts and action. Indeed, no technology can be successful unless the human mind is nurtured and supported towards an honest way of life and, therefore, the CVC deserves appreciation for choosing this theme. A vigilant and participatory citizenship is the sine qua non for a nation to develop.

However, when it comes to corruption and malpractices, a common impediment is the reluctance of the public to report such wrongdoings. This reluctance stems from the fact that if they report such wrongdoings, they might be harmed in some way or the other. Indeed, there too have been instances when people who complained against wrongdoings by the high and mighty have been victimized and, therefore, this legitimate 'fear' is not something totally unwarranted. Moreover, the lack of requisite action on the complaints received too is demoralizing. The situation is far more demoralizing in Government undertakings where the outspoken and upright officers who point out the malpractices are harassed in varied ways.

To counter this, the CVC in 2004 with the approval of the Union Government has passed the landmark Public Interest Disclosure and Protection of the Informer (PIDPI) resolution. Under the PIDPI resolution, if anyone makes a complaint before the CVC, it takes the onus of keeping the name of the complainant confidential. All the complainant has to do is to give the text of his complaint without his name and address. A separate letter addressed to the Secretary, CVC should, however, be enclosed for the CVC to verify the credentials of the complainant as the CVC does not normally act on anonymous/pseudonymous complaints. The complaint should be in a closed/sealed envelope and mandatorily superscribed "Complaint under the Public Interest Disclosure" on the top left corner of the envelope for getting the required protection under the PIDPI resolution. The PIDPI resolution of the CVC is indeed a laudatory initiative and was long overdue.

The biggest advantage of the PIDPI resolution is that a Government employee too, if he notices some wrongdoings in his organization, can also approach the CVC and his name is kept confidential. Previously government servants who reported malpractices and corruption in their own organization were charged with violation of Office code and were victimised. But under the PIDPI resolution such whistle-blowers too receive their due protection. Till now several corrupt officers in central government undertakings

have been brought to book by upright officers from the same organization using the PIDPI resolution. Just like the Right to Information Act (RTI) which has gone a long way in weeding out corruption and ensuring transparency in government dealings, the PIDPI resolution of the CVC if harnessed properly will go a long way in bringing transparency in the functioning of several hitherto obscure and shoddy dealings in the Government undertakings especially public sector undertakings. And therefore the PIDPI resolution of the CVC deserves widespread publicity.

Having said this, there are certain other facets to the PIDPI resolution. Unlike the RTI, there is no scope for second appeal under the PIDPI resolution. Whenever CVC receives any complaint regarding an organization, it forwards the complaint to the Chief Vigilance Officer (CVO) of that organization and the report filed by the CVO is accepted by the CVC as final. There is no scope for second appeal. Secondly, the CVC clearly mentions that the Commission will take strong action against those who make vexatious/motivated complaints. This clause of the PIDPI resolution runs counter to the pronouncement of Supreme Court in the state of Haryana Vs Bhajan Lal case where the court inter alia has categorically stated that motive or intention behind a complaint is not important. If there is substantive evidence in the complaint the courts will take cognizance regardless of the antecedents of the complainant. One hopes that with the PIDPI resolution gaining maturity the CVC would address these issues.

Corruption is a vice and the fact that being vigilant can scale it down cannot be gainsaid. In 1983, Werner had, in fact, very correctly said, "Corruption may be controlled through alternatives in its character but most importantly, not destroyed." However, its incidence and effects can be minimised and being vigilant on the part if the citizenry is of utmost importance. For this to happen, the stakeholders must come forward and join hands in this shared responsibility. The people must get rid of the fear factor utilize the PIDPI resolution to the fullest. The CVC on its part too should try to address the above drawbacks in PIDPI resolution. CVC should try to do justice to the complaints it receives and ensure protection of the whistle-blowers. Only then we can envisage a corruption free and developed India where the citizens will be proactive to participate in vigilant activities and thus usher in the prosperity of the nation.

For the Central Government undertaking, the CVC has laid down a very unique set of guidelines while making various procurement deals. Often it is seen that there is some form of "kickbacks" in various purchase deals. Secondly, even if there is no discrepancy in the deal, a set of disgruntled parties just drag the matter to the court and bring it to a halt. To tackle this, CVC has outlined a procurement process where there would be an "Integrity Pact" with Independent External Monitors (IEM). This IEM policy is unfortunately, being flouted by most Central Government Undertakings and PSUs while making various procurements.

One hopes that in 2025 keeping in sync with the theme: Vigilance: Our Shared Responsibility, various central government undertakings lay adequate thrust on this IEM guideline all throughout the year and while observing Vigilance Awareness week harp on creating awareness among the masses regarding the Public Interest Disclosure and Protection of the Informer (PIDPI) resolution of the CVC as a key tool for ensuring transparency as well as eliminating corruption and malpractices. Only when all are well informed of the PIDPI resolution of the CVC — especially its safeguard mechanism to whistle-blowers — people will remain vigilant and consider it as their shared responsibility.

(Published on the occasion of Vigilance Awareness Week. The writer works with the Assam Gramin Bank. Views are personal)

cleansing our inner being. It is nature's quiet design; what we give with humility returns in grace. What we do for others, in the end, helps shape our inner selves into something closer to the divine, something more endearing to the omniscient God.

In times when the world is so badly sickened by intellectual pollution, such pieces become sanctuaries where we can truly find refuge. Thank you so much for the inspiring write-up, Kong Patricia.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Meghalaya's Sleepwalking Watchman

Editor,

I would like to refer to a news item "MSPCB flag violations of environmental norms by NHIDCL (ST - November 1, 2025). In this regard, I would like to state that the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) always tends to react to environmental violations and even devastations like a sleeping watchman who is jolted from deep slumber only after others have raised loud hues and cries. The latest instance is the MSPCB conducting inspections and issuing directives to the Project Monitoring Committee

of the National Highway Infrastructural Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) over environmental violations around the famed Umngot river only after our Hon'ble Lok Sabha MP, Mr. Ricky A.J. Syngkon sought the Central Government's help by petitioning the Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari and Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Bhupender Yadav complaining about severe environmental degradation and pollution of the once-pristine Umngot River due to construction activities of the Shillong - Dawki road project. The pertinent questions here are: Why did MSPCB only conduct its inspection and issue its directives to NHIDCL a day after our Lok Sabha MP took action? What was it doing prior to this? Did it open its eyes only now when environmental devastation around the Umngot River has been going on for several months?

This is not the only instance that reflects MSPCB's lackadaisical attitude towards its mandate. It may be recalled that MSPCB used to present rosy pictures about the air quality levels at the Export Promotion Industrial Park, Bynrihat and other places through its data regularly published in newspapers including yours. But, this was

abruptly stopped when reports emerged in the national and international press that Bynrihat has now been designated as the world's most polluted place by IQAir, a respected Swiss Air Technology Firm. This raises a question in one's mind: Were the Air Quality Data published all along misleading? Moreover, it was only soon after Bynrihat became infamous that MSPCB got busy and we came to know that it had started conducting inspections and imposing penalties against polluting industrial units of Bynrihat.

In conclusion, I would like to thank our Member of Parliament, Ricky A.J. Syngkon for taking the issue of environmental devastation of Umngot River seriously and for representing us well in general.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2.

Whose horn is it anyway

Editor,

Every day, our peaceful neighbourhood gets its daily reminder that time waits for no one, except, perhaps, government officials. At exactly 10 AM and again at 4 PM, a siren wails across our area exclusively, like the rest of Shillong does not need this

important air horn which blares for 2 minutes approximately. Yes, I counted it. This supposedly signals the start and end of the working day.

The rest of us freeze mid-bite, mid-chat, or mid-walk like someone yelled "Statue!" We wonder if we should take cover for an incoming (God forbid), stand up for a salute, or just continue chomping on kwait and sha saw (red tea) in respect. By 11 AM, the officials appear, fresh and punctual, by their own standards. By 2 PM, the offices empty out so fast, one could mistake it for a fire drill.

Rumour has it that the siren's true purpose is motivational, to remind the public that someone, somewhere, might be working for us. Or perhaps, maybe the authorities just enjoy reminding us, the mango citizens, that you can raise your volume on issues all you want, but remember who controls the volume button. Whatever the case, we have accepted it, like the rest of the issues we sweep under the rug, it is our city's unique alarm clock—two blasts a day to remind us who is in play.

Your's etc,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"I never dreamt of success. I worked for it."

— Estée Lauder

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 84 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2025

Whither Congress Revival

MEGHALAYA Congress Chief Vincent Pala's allegations that some Congress workers are trying to create an internal rift to remove him from the President's post and that the post he holds is not an elected but selected one demonstrates the Congress's dilemma. Can a political party do away with elections to the topmost post in the state? Why does the All India Congress Committee (AICC) not have enough faith in the ability of its Blocks and District heads to elect the right person to head the party at the state level? This undermines the state party workers who are better placed to elect their leader. Why does the AICC have the overriding authority to select the State Congress Chief and demean the democratic process within the Party? How can the Congress position itself as a beacon of democracy when it does not practise the same within its rank and file. The Congress in Meghalaya is reduced to a cipher and it actually needs to perk up its party workers and instil in them a sense of enthusiasm to reclaim lost spaces.

Unfortunately, it appears that the Congress never learns from past mistakes. One prime pitfall of the Congress rule in Meghalaya was the frequent change of chief ministers depending on the whims of the High Command. At one time senior MLAs aspiring for the chief minister's post would rush to Delhi and plead with the High Command to remove a sitting CM and appoint him instead. The late JD Rymbai, a gentleman politician was ruthlessly brought down because he did not grant clearance to cement companies to set up shop in Jaintia Hills at the cost of the environment. Rymbai was replaced by DD Lapang and the 7-8 cement companies were quickly granted clearances. It can only be assumed why the Congress High Command felt the urgency to grant those environmental clearances to cement companies in Meghalaya.

After being out of power for over 10 years the question remains as to whether the Congress Party has learnt any lesson from its past errors and whether it is ready to change tack in its manner of functioning. But judging from the decisions taken at the highest level of the AICC, it would appear that the Nehru-Gandhi family still has the last word. So, when will the Congress learn to practise inner-party democracy? Rahul Gandhi is still the most visible face of the Congress and the issues he has dared to pursue, especially the vote-chori campaign against the BJP are creditable and have won the Congress some traction. But whether Rahul Gandhi has the cutting-edge strategy needed to defeat the BJP - a ruthless foe intent on hitting below the belt and indulging in cantankerous name-calling is debatable. Mallikarjun Kharge is hardly in the limelight. It is always Rahul Gandhi who faces the heat; it is his actions and statements that the media focuses on. In effect therefore Kharge is just a figurehead. Unless the Congress Party is able to find a worthy and dynamic leader who is duly elected and not selected, outside of the Nehru-Gandhi family to lead it, chances of it ever returning to power nationally seem bleak. Meghalaya too faces a similar conundrum.

Muivah's Homecoming and the Unfinished Story of Nagalim

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Last week, Thuingaleng Muivah, general secretary of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) faction, the most powerful insurgent group in the North East, returned to his native village in Ukhrul district of Manipur. This was a homecoming five decades in the making. His visit comes at a very critical moment in the state. Technically, Manipur is still under the throes of a civil war, with the Meitei and the Kuki-Zomi locked in a bloody conflict that has resulted in more than 250 deaths and the displacement of over 60,000 people. The Nagas have not publicly supported either of the groups, against whom they have their own grievances. The Nagas claim that many of the areas where Kukis reside originally belonged to them, but these have now become overrun with illegal immigrants from Myanmar. On the other hand, the Kuki-Zomis claim that they have always been residing in those areas. This creates complications.

If one looks at the map of the proposed Nagalim, one can see that it includes areas outside Manipur and Nagaland. In Arunachal Pradesh, these are areas inhabited by the Konyaks, Nocte, and Wanchos, while in Assam, they include regions under present-day Karbi Anglong, presumably because of the Rengmas who live in certain parts of the district. But there are problems with such claims.

Although the Konyaks, Nocte, and Wanchos politically identify themselves as Nagas, they are not ethnically Nagas. These three groups belong to the larger Tibeto-Burman language family, but within that, they form a subgroup completely separate from the Nagas. They are part of the Sal group which, apart from them, also includes the Kok-Borok languages (spoken by the Bodo, Garo, Dimas, and Tripuri) and the Jingpho-Luish group, spoken by the Singpho in Arunachal Pradesh, known as Kachin in Myanmar. The Nagas, Meitei, and Kuki-Zomi belong to the Kuki-Chin-Naga language group, which means that not very long ago these three groups shared a common ancestor from whom they all diverged. They also share a distant common ancestry with the Konyak, Nocte, and Wanchos, but this connection is as far removed as the present-day Naga, Meitei, and Kuki-Zomi are from the Garo. I met a Konyak lady not long ago, who admitted that the Konyaks' cultural practices differ from other Naga groups and appear more similar to those of the

Garos and Bodos. At the same time, the NSCN-Khaplang faction remains one of the strongest Naga insurgent groups fighting against the Indian state.

The incorporation of groups that are not originally Naga into the Naga movement is evident in Manipur as well. One of the oldest indigenous groups in Manipur are the Anal, who are today considered part of the larger Naga group. According to their myth, a long time ago, two brothers emerged

to each other—much more closely than to any other group in the region—and this is not merely due to proximity.

Here comes the most interesting part. The Anal, though today considered part of the Naga family, were actually known as Old Kuki in colonial records. Linguistically, they are much closer to the Kuki-Zomi than to any Naga group, and this is precisely what the Kuki-Zomi have been claiming. The same is true of the Kom,



from a cave on Haubi Peak. The elder became the ancestor of the Anal, while the younger went down to the valley, became the Meitei, and ruled over the valley. Another version speaks of the Meitei, Anal, and Thadou (a Kuki-Chin-Mizo group) as the descendants of three men whose father was the son of Pakhangba, the mythical snake-man ancestor of the Manipuri royal family. These stories were recorded in the 2024 book 'How the World Was Born' by Lopamudra Maitra. While some may dispute the authenticity of these stories, there is a historical argument to be made.

The porosity of the boundary between the hill and the valley, and how one group would regularly merge with the other, was strongly argued by James C. Scott in his 2009 path-breaking book 'The Art of Not Being Governed'. According to this view, the hill people included those from the valley who fled to escape taxation, conscription, and other coercive measures undertaken by valley states. From time to time, however, people from the hills would descend to the valley to benefit from the resources available there. The distinction between hill and valley, therefore, is very thin. Thus, the story recounted by the Anal of their ancient connection with the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki-Zomi is not far-fetched. Linguistic evidence already proves that they are closely related

another group claimed by the Nagas as their own. When I was in Kangpokpi in Senapati district of Manipur—today the buffer between the Meitei and the Kuki—Mary Kom was celebrated as one of their own by the resident Kuki-Zomi community. If you ask a Kom, they would rather identify simply as Kom than align with any other group. But in a place where violence is widespread and weapons are easily available, it is safer to identify with whichever group is the strongest. Thus, the claim that many of the Kuki-Zomis are illegal immigrants may not stand up to scrutiny. The same allegation can just as easily be levelled against the Nagas.

The map of Nagalim also claims part of Karbi Anglong, since the Rengma Nagas reside there. But colonial records, such as the 1908 book 'The Mikir' by Charles Lyall, clearly mention that the Rengma Nagas were recent immigrants into what is today Karbi Anglong. They came from the eastern side of the Dhansiri River, from what is now Nagaland. Since the book was written in the early 20th century, the migration must have occurred within a century before that. To claim parts of Karbi Anglong as part of the proposed Nagalim, therefore, would be hypocritical if the Kuki-Zomi are being branded as illegal immigrants—especially when groups like the Biata (also part of the larger Kuki-Zomi group) residing

in the East Jaintia Hills have a much older history there than the Rengma in Karbi Anglong.

Dimapur, today part of Nagaland, itself bears testimony to a non-Naga past. The name reveals that it was a non-Naga area—it was the capital of the Dimasas Kingdom during the 13th century and remained their capital until it was captured by the Ahom ruler Suhungmung in 1526 CE. The Dimasas/Kacharis were, in fact, one of the main rivals of Hima Jaintiapur. It is therefore clear that at least until the 16th century, the area was inhabited by the Dimasas. There may have been groups that are today identified as Naga, but they were not present in large numbers at least until that time.

The return of Muivah is meant to keep the pressure on the Indian state, especially on the issue of the Naga flag and constitution. Even if the Indian state accedes to these demands, the problem will arise regarding the areas in which they are to be implemented. Will the Karbis and Dimasas allow it to be implemented in areas where the Nagas themselves are recent migrants—the same label they apply to the Kuki-Zomi? Will the Kuki-Zomi accept the land they consider their own to come under such an agreement? Will Arunachal Pradesh allow Nagalim to extend into territories inhabited by groups that are not Naga? Will the Meiteis allow Nagalim to be created in territory they claim as part of their own history? The road ahead for the Nagas to realise the final outcome of their decades-long struggle remains difficult.

The Nagas have suffered greatly through all these decades, and in my opinion, the destiny of the Naga people ought to be decided by the Nagas themselves. But there are other peoples, other histories, and other realities that have to be considered. Is it possible that there can be reconciliation where lasting peace can be found? I am sure there is, but concessions must be made by both the Indian state and the Nagas. If both are recalcitrant, it is the Indian state that will hold the advantage. They will simply bide their time until new leadership takes charge, and then play the delaying game, while the Nagas remain caught between the promise of a future that keeps receding and a present that holds no hope. That would be truly unfortunate.

(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)

Adani group's striking rise since 2014 sparks global speculation

US media report on govt link to steer the group may be a part of it

By Nantoo Banerjee

The majority government-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India's detailed rebuttal to The Washington Post report claiming that the government directed LIC to invest \$3.9 billion in the Adani group seems to lack the punch. A comparison of the Adani group with some of India's age-old business conglomerates such as the Tatas, Aditya Birla Enterprises, ITC, HDFC Bank and SBI in terms of LIC's wider corporate investments was probably avoidable, if not totally unnecessary.

All major corporate and institutional investment decisions are based on policies okayed by the board, after due diligence. No one questions the LIC board's standard desk work in defence of its latest investment decision in the Adani group. The issue is different. Could the investment decision have been influenced by the Government of India? It is unlikely that The Washington Post, the third largest US newspaper after The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, had put up a totally fake story on the Adani-government connect.

The Washington Post report was specific. It alleged that government officials "drafted and pushed through a proposal to direct about \$3.9 billion of LIC funds into Adani Group companies, in coordination with LIC and NITI Aayog - at a time when the Adani Group was dealing with rising debt and reduced access to major western banks. According to reports, as of mid-2025, the Adani Group's total debt was around Rs.2.6 lakh crore, a 20 percent rise in the 12 months ended June, last. A significant portion of this debt, roughly half, comes from domestic banks and financial institutions, mostly under the government control.

The Adani group's debt came only second to Reliance Industries (RIL), which reported gross debt of Rs. 3,47,530 crore. RIL's net debt was Rs.1,17,083 crore. The century old Tata group's total debt as of the current year could be much less, varying by company and reporting period. For instance, Tata Motors reported a total debt of Rs.62,499 crore as of March 2025, while Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) had a total debt of Rs.10,900 crore as of September 30, this year. Tata Steel reported a net debt of Rs.84,835 crore as of June 30, last.

Notably, the Adani Group has never defaulted on its debt servicing obligations. That could attract the attention of term investors, including LIC. Also, there seems to be nothing wrong if the government-controlled LIC (under the union finance ministry) management consults its principal stakeholders before making a big corporate investment. Key considerations before financial investors in an enterprise include risk tolerance, desired return, income needs and investment horizon. A combination of both equity and debt is often used to balance risk and return.

Incidentally, not all the Adani Group companies' credit ratings, which vary by rating agencies, appear to be very attractive. The Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone (APSEZ) debt enjoys a AAA credit rating from several domestic credit rating agencies although its international rating from agencies like S&P and Moody's is lower, seen as stable or improving outlooks. Ratings can be complex, and these are often influenced by the specific debt instrument, the financial performance of the subsidiary, and the strength of the parent company. Overall, a stable outlook is being reaffirmed by major agencies like S&P, Moody's, and Fitch for several key Adani entities.

However, it is the meteoric rise of the Adani group since the Narendra Modi government came to power at the Centre in May, 2014, that seems to attract the attention of the business as well as political circles across the country as also in some parts of the world. Interestingly, Adani's acquisitions of government projects are numer-

ous and span various sectors, including energy, airports, and ports.

Examples include winning bids for a 2,400 MW power plant in Bihar, acquiring stakes in airports through a government privatization initiative, and gaining a lease on land for a solar park in Rajasthan. Some acquisitions have been controversial, such as allegations of favourable land deals in Bihar and a single-bidder scenario for a coal block, while others were achieved through government tenders and policy changes, such as the port concession rules that allowed for equity divestment.

According to reports, Adani Power received a letter of intent for a 2,400 MW thermal power plant in Bihar, which includes a 1,050-acre land lease from the Bihar government for a nominal cost. The project has been criticized by the Bihar Congress for being a handout to the company. The Adani Group got ownership of the Gondabhera-Ujjaini coal block in 2022 as a sole bidder in the government's auction. The Rajasthan government leased 1,600 hectares of land to Adani Group for a 1,500 MW solar park.

The group acquired stakes in several airports, including Mumbai International Airport, during a government privatization initiative. A Shiv Sena-Congress-NCP government in Maharashtra handed over the Dighi port to Adani to develop a new gateway. The group was given a 49 percent stake in the Maharashtra Border Check Post Network. The Jharkhand government awarded Adani Group an SEZ (Special Economic Zone) covering over 425 hectares. Adani Power won a power supply contract from the Punjab government.

The group's expansion since 2014 has been enormous. In 2013, the Adani Group reportedly had a turnover of only Rs.47,000 crore. The Group's consolidated revenue for FY2025 was Rs.2,71,664 crore. In September 2013, the combined market capitalization of its three listed entities (Adani Enterprises, Adani Power, and Adani Port and Special Economic Zone) was Rs.51,573 crore. By May 2014, due to a stock rally that began in September 2013, the group had become the ninth most-valued corporate house in India.

The group's size and rapid expansion drew comparisons to the early growth phase of the Reliance group under Dhirubhai Ambani, which also attracted a lot of critical attention at home and abroad. Incidentally, the book 'The Polyester Prince: The Rise of Dhirubhai Ambani' by Hamish McDonald is effectively banned in India due to legal threats from the Ambani family who sought an injunction based on "anticipatory defamation". The book's Indian publisher, Harper Collins, withdrew the book before its official release in 1997, leading to it being unavailable in Indian bookshops.

Yet, the fact remains that an industry-government relationship, pleasant or hostile, is not unique to India. The Tata Iron and Steel Company, now a global entity and the world's eighth largest steel producer, was not allowed to expand by the government in the 1970s. It also faced a nationalisation threat from the government. In fact, the industry-government link is a global phenomenon. Throughout history and around the world, various forms of interaction, cooperation, and conflict have characterized the relationship between industry and government. The massive government bailout for Vodafone Idea through two major debt-to-equity conversions in 2023 and 2025, giving the Indian government a controlling stake of nearly 49 percent in the company, is designed to prevent the collapse of one of India's few remaining telecom players and preserve market competition. Few will contest the fact that a possible Adani-government link has proved to be beneficial to the country's much-needed infrastructure and power sector growth. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Ambiguities in the question paper of DSC Mairang Examination

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I wish to highlight a matter of great concern regarding the recently conducted District Selection Committee (DSC) Examination held in Mairang. Several candidates who appeared for the examination have raised serious complaints that many questions in the paper contained incorrect answer options, while some had no correct option at all. These errors caused confusion among examinees and may have unfairly impacted their results.

Whereas, many candidates have expressed disappointment and concern over several errors found in the question paper. It has been reported that a number of questions contained incorrect or missing answer options. Moreover, in the Mathemat-

ics section, one particular question was unrelated to the subject and appeared to be a General Knowledge question instead. This created confusion among examinees and affected their ability to perform fairly.

Some questions in the General Knowledge Section Eg Series-I Question no.52 - 22nd December (winter solstice) is: a) Longest day b) hottest day, c) Coldest day and d) Shortest night: This question was ambiguous because it did not specify the hemisphere being referred to. Scientifically, 22nd December marks the shortest day and longest night in the Northern Hemisphere, and the longest day and shortest night in the Southern Hemisphere. Another question on Chachai Falls asked its height but did not specify whether the measurement was in metres or feet thereby creating confusion. The lack of clarity rendered the question invalid.

Competitive examinations like those conducted by the DSC are meant to uphold merit and fairness. However, such mistakes undermine the credibility of the recruitment

process and the confidence of sincere candidates.

Therefore, I earnestly appeal to the concerned authorities to review the question papers and answer keys thoroughly and to take appropriate corrective measures to ensure justice and transparency for all candidates.

Yours etc.,
A concerned candidate,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Regional unity, not isolation

Editor,
The recent statement by Batskhem Marboh, spokesperson of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) rejecting the initiative of Pradyot Manikya Debbarma to bring together regional parties of the Northeast is deeply disappointing and short-sighted.

At a time when the indigenous peoples of the region face common challenges of political marginalisation, resource exploitation, and cultural erosion, unity among regional forces is not

a threat, but a necessity. The idea of a collective regional platform is not about surrendering one's identity or autonomy; it is about amplifying our voices together before the Government of India.

To dismiss this vision as "having no political sense" reflects a narrow understanding of regional politics. True leadership lies in building bridges, not walls. Every northeastern state has its own unique context but our shared struggles demand shared strength. No single party, however "genuine" it claims to be, can protect the interests of its people by isolating itself from its neighbours. The spirit of solidarity among the indigenous communities of the Northeast should rise above party boundaries and political ego.

History has shown that fragmentation weakens our cause. Cooperation strengthens it. The proposal for a regional forum deserves open-minded discussion, not rejection born of insecurity or political calculation.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Lyngdoh Rymbai,
Via email

Why destroy a rare green lung in the city?

Editor,
I write this letter with deep anguish and concern over the recent felling of numerous trees in the Children's Park under the Meghalaya Forest Department in Polo Bazar, Shillong. This green haven, nurtured over decades, has been razed reportedly to make way for a parking lot and shopping mall. This not only reflects administrative insensitivity but also raises serious legal and ethical questions. It is widely known that the Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court has imposed a ban on tree felling and even pruning in and around Shillong. How then could such large-scale destruction of forest cover be permitted in a public park under the Forest Department's care?

The loss of this green space is not merely aesthetic, it is ecological. The park was home to countless birds, insects, and small creatures, forming a delicate urban

ecosystem. The chopped branches strewn across the site now stand as mute testimony to human greed and disregard for nature. Is construction the only form of development we can envision? Could not an alternative site have been identified for the parking lot, sparing this vital green lung of the city?

To replace a children's park with concrete is to rob future generations of pure air and water. I urge the concerned authorities, including the Forest Department, Urban Affairs, and the Judiciary to kindly look into this matter urgently. Let us not wait until every tree is lost and every bird silenced.

I appeal to fellow citizens, civil society groups, and environmental advocates to raise their voices. The park must be revived—not just for our children, but for the soul of Shillong.

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

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

"Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after the other."

— Walter Elliot

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 85 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2025

Dynasty, meritocracy

SENIOR parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor has stated only the obvious — that dynastic political culture is a serious "threat" to democracy. Dynastic politics, he noted in a syndicated article, "prevails across a broad political spectrum; and it's high time the nation replaced dynasty with meritocracy." His take is also that this would require fundamental reforms, from imposing legally mandated time-limits (for those holding positions in party and government), and an effort to educate and empower the electorate to choose leaders based on merit. A problem is, those like Prime Minister Narendra Modi rarely showed an inclination or ability to reform the system, which is an urgent need of the hour. His baptism in the RSS makes him a status-quo-ist.

Clearly, what should matter in governance is leaders with merit. This merit, though, is a relative term. Good governance involves a synergy of talent, vision, education, a commitment to national causes and above all the courage to face situations squarely. Ideally, the one who leads the nation, or state, from the top should be having a clean image. However, it is hard to zero in on a leader who combines all these qualities in him or her. Democracy is incapable of throwing up the right kind of leaders. What is widely seen here is a phenomenon of loud-mouths fooling the ordinary masses — who form the bulk of the population — through their verbal acrobatics and winning elections. Voters are generally guided also by their sectarian interests based on caste, creed and even religion. These are sadly parts of electoral arithmetic.

Tharoor with his wide global exposure and parliamentary experience stated what's desirable. Only an enlightened electorate can think and act in a manner that would help elect leaders with the right qualifications. Those who are qualified are often sidelined as they may not necessarily be having the gift of the gab to carry a crowd with them. A run-of-the-mill, hand-in-the-honey-pot politician could do this wooing of the public in a more successful manner. Most politicians of today are mediocre but they make this up with street-smarts and muscle-power. Jawaharlal Nehru had the vision to transform India in modern ways. The present crop of politicians, many of whom are dynasts, lack the good qualities of a leader, but such crooks have in their blood the ability for manipulations to turn situations to their personal advantage. They woo the people with promises of doles, kits and freebies; and loot the exchequer after forming governments. Meritocracy is the ideal scenario, but dynasties are thriving with able backing from the media. Manipulators in politics know how to make everyone happy. In the end, such leaders and their families laugh their way into billionaire status, siphoning off their ill-gotten money to tax havens on foreign shores. They are a dime a dozen, and they are helping make the bureaucrats too more corrupt. Tharoor is no dynast, but his realization came only after his chances dimmed in the Congress party. Compared to the greedy lot, the Nehru family is a shade better, and still carries with them some conviction.

2025 & A Global Shift: In 2026, stage set for new Geopolitical Powerplay

By Venus Upadhyaya

US President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping have decided to cooperate to end the Ukraine war, with Trump saying that the topic had come up "very strongly" during their talks, according to the reports of their Oct. 30 meeting at Busan.

"He's going to help us, and we're going to work together on Ukraine," said Trump.

Before landing in Busan, Trump had made it clear that he'll seek Chinese help to end the Ukraine war. The European Union has also expressed the same wish last week and it's thus an important question as to why the US is seeking Chinese help which is the top purchaser of Russian oil and is hit by the just levied US sanctions on the top Russian oil companies but is pressurising and hitting at India for the same reasons.

India is the second largest purchaser of Russian oil after Beijing and has been under constant pressure from the US for ending its purchase which President Trump has said is helping President Vladimir Putin run his war economy. Trump hiked the tariffs on Indian exports to 50 percent just to pressurize India to stop purchasing oil from Moscow. The European Union has also continued to import gas from Russia though it has substantially decreased from 40 percent in 2021 to 11 percent in 2025 and has said it'll stop importing completely by the end of 2027.

On the sidelines of the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on Oct. 28, European Council President Antonio Costa in his meeting with China's Premier Li Qiang expressed the council's expectation that China will help end the Ukraine war.

"I also raised Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. I expressed the EU's expectation that China helps to put an end to the war," Costa said while adding that the war has created an existential threat for the European Union.

In this context, it's important to understand as to why both the US and EU want to seek China's help to end the war but want to pressurize India so that it stops purchasing the Russian oil to in turn pressurize Russia to end the war. Why did the US not

levied additional tariffs on China for purchasing the same Russian oil? Why was this factor used to hit the Indian MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium enterprises) which constitute 45 percent of India's overall exports and has an overall 70 percent share in the sectors hit hard by the US tariffs.

India defines MSMEs as a major player in its overall economic growth including its goal to become the third largest global economy by 2027.

Meanwhile the war, in Ukraine has continued and to make things worse the scheduled second in-person meeting between Trump and Putin in Budapest was also cancelled before Trump started his Asia trip. In its aftermath, the US treasury went beyond the 'tariff on trade' approach of Trump and on October 22 announced a new set of sanctions against the two biggest Russian oil firms—Rosneft and Lukoil.

With these sanctions the tug-of-war between India and US and US and China over the Russian oil has shifted from tensions between the governments and leaders to directly between the trading companies. The Indian and Chinese import of Russian oil is thus ending or at least substantially decreasing. Reliance Industries, India's biggest private purchaser of Russian oil has already issued a public statement that it's currently "accessing the implications including the new compliance requirements." Media reports said Reliance Industries is "re-calibrating."

US Wants No Hegemony to Dominate Eurasia

The US has always fought wars in two theatres—the Atlantic and the Pacific and this concentration of US power and focus has determined a lot of geopolitics in the world. Jonathan D.T. Ward writes in his new book, "The Decisive Decade—American Grand Strategy for Triumph Over China" that American strategists don't want any "hegemon" to dominate Eurasia.

"A world in which two primary theatres exist, Europe and Asia, is a world that American strategists have been able to manage for decades from a position of preponderant power. It is

also a world that America's enemies, when working together, have tried to exploit," writes Ward.

Fabian Zuleeg, the Chief Executive and Chief Economist at the European Policy Center wrote in an analysis titled "Russia Wants War" that Russian maneuvers go beyond the Ukrainian battlefield and the former is testing "Europe's and NATO's defences through airspace incursions by drones and fighter jets."

Thus it's quite visible why both the US and EU want an end to the war but why would they then seek China's help at ending it? Is it because Moscow and Beijing have a comprehensive strategic partnership which gives China more leverage over Russian leadership or is it because Beijing has some upperhand in negotiating with all the stakeholders? And by validating Beijing's leadership in Eurasia everyone has everything to gain including rare earths?

Trump agreed to reduce tariffs against China to 47 percent from 57 percent in a one-year deal after his meeting with Xi in Busan. Beijing reciprocated by resuming its import of US soybeans, continuing its exports of rare earths to the US and agreed to crack down on theentanyl trade. But please note the time frame of the one year deal!

They did this deal after many tug-of-wars for trade in 2025 including for rare earths on which Beijing has a monopoly? Trump had threatened 100 percent tariffs on Beijing for the new restrictions it has imposed on the exports of its rare earths and had even threatened to cancel his just happened meeting with Xi.

Last week's negotiations in Kuala Lumpur and the October 30th meeting happened just to resolve this stalemate and before Trump left for the Asia tour he made a loud statement about seeking Beijing's help to reach out to Russia. It appears more like an appeasing negotiatory move!

Ward describes four arenas of victory for Washington in its contest with Beijing in his book, "The Economic Arena, The Diplomatic Arena, The Military Arena and the Arena of Idea"

and said, "Without victory in one above all, the possibility of victory may never come to pass."

The developments between the US and China can very well be fathomed through this lens. Trump tariffs were to design America's victory arenas and the tug of wars denote China's negotiatory ability. In fact Beijing had started to prepare for it after Trump's victory in elections—the first thing they did was to de-escalate on the Indian border because they knew they would need to prepare and fully focus for Trumpian times.

So eventually Trump's protectionist policies have brought a lot of investments back home, a lot of rearranging of the world order has been achieved by just the American maneuvering and while this has happened the Chinese have continued to negotiate for their interests and their version of the global order.

However, as the year ends, there's status-quo across the Taiwan strait with Trump saying in Busan that Taiwan "never came up. That was not discussed actually." It not being discussed carries a louder message. Meanwhile India has almost halted its purchase of Russian oil from the sanctioned entities before the signing of its much awaited trade deal with the US which is expected to reduce the tariffs to 15 percent. Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), a state-owned oil and gas company said it'll continue to buy Russian oil but from non-sanctioned entities.

The year is coming to an end with a rearranged world order where America has amply messaged to the world including China and India that their economic rise isn't unchecked by the Americans.

Indians and Chinese on the other hand have continued their "active communication" on the border related issues of the western sector last week indicating that they are preparing for another year of geo-political uncertainties. The path for Russia has become narrower than before and the next two months could be the key—the US will use the Russian card to further negotiate with China and vice versa but in a different tone than it does with India. The 2026 stage, is all set for new geopolitical powerplays.

Corruption that boggles the mind: How to reform the bureaucracy

By Jagdish Rattanani

A Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police in Punjab has been arrested in a case of corruption that boggles the mind — audacious, obscene and grotesque all at the same time. That this officer could amass such loot and live a normal working life in the top echelons speaks of the extent of collapse and its normalisation within a bureaucracy that once was referred to as the "steel frame of India". The rapaciousness could not be unknown to his peers and to the government, revealing the extent to which deviant behaviour is accepted in the force. The case quickly turned complicated with a tussle between the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which effected the arrest on Oct. 16, and the State's Vigilance Bureau, for custody of the accused IPS officer, Harcharan Singh Bhullar.

The reported seizures in the case are eye popping — cash worth Rs 7.5 crore, a collection of luxury cars, gold jewellery weighing 2.5 kg, 26 luxury watches and documents on about 50 immovable properties in the names of family members and suspected benami entities. At one level, this is an open and shut case of loot and plunder, but at another, the CBI-State tussle points to a deeper rot, a complicated set of connections, and motives with political implications. Whatever emerges, the officer in question will be hard put to defend himself with all that the CBI has already got against him — including a voice call in which the accused discusses further steps about a bribe paid to his middleman.

The case here is unusual but not unique. The system protects many, but scandals emerge at regular intervals, sending periodic shocks that reveal to us that corruption is endemic in the Indian system and thrives in the bureaucracy. The disease is complex, given that it comes in various forms and flavours and is fuelled by patronage politics. Bribery is but one part of a larger canvas of corrupt practices that include (particularly in the current Indian context) cronyism, misuse of investigative agencies or that uniquely Indian coinage called "wilful default".

Yet, complexity is no reason for allowing the disease to continue unchecked. The late academic and founder of the Management Centre for Human Values at IIM Calcutta S K Chakraborty in a seminal paper in 1997 spoke of the difference between "gross corruption" and "subtle unethicality". Even if the latter is challenging to recognise and fight, the former is easily spotted and deserves to be guillotined. If corruption is a hydra-headed monster, then cutting the more visible head is more important than discussing which head to cut first. The reluctance to take strong steps breeds deep cynicism and a sense of helplessness. As Chakraborty put it: "Are we heading for a sick-and-cynical society? Will future generations be grateful for such a legacy, even if material prosperity were to increase?"

Material prosperity, of course, has not increased for most Indians. Some of the key arguments in favour of liberalisation — that the corrupt license-permit-Raj will be demolished and corruption will be checked automatically when the market takes over — have proven hollow. Gross corruption has stayed, and the nation has been burdened further by a subtler form of a business-political axis of corruption that plunders State resources and tilts the rules at the cost of the common man.

It is easy to argue that the case of the DIG in Punjab and the other sensational ones that keep emerging are a small part of a system that

otherwise works. But to buy that complacency is to shut the eyes to the devastation caused by what others have called the curse of Indian democracy. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) which recruits the nation's top ranked bureaucracy including the IAS and the IPS cadres, recently completed 100 years. The body would do well to reflect on the ask of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar from it: "The function of the public service commission is to choose people who are fit for public service".

Is the recruitment process wrong or does the system have a way of co-opting new candidates into its club and its instincts of self over the rest of India? Some of these are difficult questions that are not helped when the UPSC is more in a celebratory mood with a new logo rather than raising deep questions on the meaning of merit, how this merit is evaluated, or the meaningfulness of some of its old-world testing systems in a rapidly changing environment.

The terms of appointment of officers in themselves are cushy and non-demanding. They encourage the mentality of a life-long club membership from which it is difficult to be evicted. The tenure system at the outset encourages candidates who prefer the safety net of a life-long employment at the highest level in government, the perks that come with the appointments and a wide range of privileges rather than curiosity, creativity and the idea of public service that Dr. Ambedkar spoke of. It is possible to argue that the service attracts candidates for all the wrong reasons so that the pool itself is a kind of corruption.

While political interference is a valid reason for the decline, there is also the question of character of the bureaucracy as a whole when no voice is raised against such will violations as encounter killings, bulldozer justice or indeed the grave violations of the Election Commission alleged by the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi and independent observers like Yogendra Yadav. Instead, the IAS Officers Association thought it fit to come to the defence of the Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar while the body remained silent on the dissent of Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa, who in 2019 had opposed clearing the Prime Minister and Home Minister on charges of violating the model code of conduct during the elections, and saw his family members targeted with income tax notices. Lavasa was a rare officer with high integrity.

Independence and integrity have become myths. Bent spines are the norm. The oft-heard cry to stop political interference is a meaningless sidebar for a bunch whose signature call is to bend for self-preservation and exploit at the first opportunity. Experience confirms the rottenness that thrives. The failed system may be beyond reform. The bureaucrats who helped craft the Agni Veer programme so that soldiers leave after five years need to be told that such a programme must be applied to the IAS and the IPS. Instead, time scale promotions are the norm.

Babus must be held to account for their KPIs, not time spent or positions held. We may need many other shocks alongside to check the corrupt and demand performance in the mould that former prime minister V P Singh once saw it: "What have I to do with your so-called merit when you don't have a heart for the people you serve?"

(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

A call for syllabus clarity and fair evaluation

Editor, When the Department of Education and Research Training (DERT) issued its notification — Letter No. DERT/EDN/EXAM-IX/2025/37, dated 15th April 2025, on the Implementation of Uniform Syllabus and Evaluation Scheme for Classes VI to IX — it was seen as an appropriate and a timely step toward standardizing education.

The intention behind the circular was noble: to bring all schools under a uniform academic framework so that students across the state could learn and be evaluated on equal terms. However, as the academic year has progressed, and the Half-Yearly Examinations have already been conducted in MBOSE State Board schools, one important concern has surfaced among teachers and parents alike — how exactly should the final examination be conducted under this directive?

The DERT's letter, though comprehensive in its vision, did not clearly mention whether the syllabus was to be divided into two terms or if the Final Examination would again cover the entire syllabus. This lack of clarity has led to widespread confusion in schools. Teachers, who have already assessed students on the first term's syllabus, now wonder whether the same chapters

will need to be re-taught and re-tested.

Many educators believe this would be unfair and impractical. "We have already completed and tested the first half of the syllabus," says a teacher from West Garo Hills. "It would be unreasonable to expect students to go through the entire syllabus once more when even national boards like CBSE and ICSE follow a term-wise structure."

In many rural and semi-urban schools, where resources are limited and students rely solely on classroom teaching, the challenge is even greater. Revising the whole year's syllabus within a couple of months would not only overburden teachers but also create unnecessary stress among learners. Parents, too, have echoed this sentiment. "Our children need focus, not fatigue," remarked a parent from Tura.

The purpose of exams, after all, is to measure progress — not to test endurance. A term-wise syllabus division ensures that students can concentrate on smaller portions of content, understand it better, and perform with confidence. It also allows teachers to plan lessons more effectively and evaluate learning outcomes in a balanced manner.

What is now urgently needed is a clarified follow-up circular from DERT, specifying the exact syllabus for the Final Examination of 2025 for Classes VI to IX. This would not only bring uniformity across schools but also restore a sense of di-

rection among teachers and peace of mind to students and parents.

The DERT's effort through its Letter No. DERT/EDN/EXAM-IX/2025/37 is undoubtedly a step in the right direction — towards standardization and fairness. But without a clear roadmap for its implementation, the system risks creating confusion where clarity was intended.

To make this initiative truly successful, the department should now issue an addendum or clarification, stating in clear terms how the syllabus is to be divided between the Half-Yearly and Final terms.

Evaluation must be structured, but it must also be humane. For students, teachers, and parents across Meghalaya, a little clarity from DERT would go a long way in ensuring that fairness remains at the heart of our evaluation system.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Walking in another's shoes

Editor, The write-up authored by Patricia Mukhim on empathy recently was very educative and enjoyable to read. Going through the write-up took me back to my school/college days as a student where we read the poem, "Home they brought her warrior dead/ She nor swooned nor uttered cry/ All her maidens watching said/ She must weep or

she will die." That lady who was engulfed in shock at the sight of her dead husband's body could not express her emotions. She could neither weep nor show any feeling. There was no one there to tell her, "I am with you." Had somebody just sat with her and told her they are there for her, the lady would have been able to express her grief openly and got over her shock.

Empathy is about understanding and sharing the feelings of others. It is what moves humans as well as animals too. Empathy, not sympathy is what solves many ailments in our daily lives. Today's social media existence often takes an ugly turn. Empathy is often described as feeling with someone as opposed to simply feeling for them which is closer to sympathy.

Yours etc.,
Deepak Chhetry,
Tura

Crystal Clear Umngot buried

Editor, Umngot River, once nature's gift to Meghalaya, now a muddy broth of progress. Who needs transparent and clean rivers, which was one of the main tourist attractions in a Tourism dependent state, right? The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL), with its shiny machinery and unstoppable enthusiasm for dumping debris, has managed what centuries of nature

could not, turning our Meghalaya's pride into murky ecological disaster, so much for "Eco Tourism" huh! The video of Umngot river now, is truly heartbreaking to say the least, a true representation of human greed, negligence, and our relentless "talent" for destroying what we once called paradise.

Let's not forget the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB), now gallantly ordering the "immediate removal" of waste after the damage has been done. A polite bow, to the government officials supervising it all, the custodians of accountability who appear only after the headlines break, offline in print media and especially online. Even Byrnihat pollution got attention only when it made it to the National Headlines, "World's Worst Air" as deemed by The Indian Express dated March 13, 2025. Type in "Byrnihat" on google and you will find all data along with international news covering this. Our pride, our heart and soul has been polluted by greed and unsustainable development. Tour boatmen now paddle through silt instead of serenity, tourists squint to find the river under the mud, and the "eco-tourism dream" quietly drowns under construction waste of "development."

Perhaps next time, we can build a glass bridge and bungee jump over the ruins of responsibility. That way, everyone can cross safely without getting their boots and hands dirty. Let us bury our heads in concerts and broken roads while our

Meghalaya gets featured in "Most Polluted List" internationally.

So, who takes the onus? The contractors? The officials? The agencies? Or shall we blame the river itself for not being strong enough to withstand the weight of our "development"? When will we learn from the fall of Goa/Shimla tourism & the recent failed cloud seeding in Delhi, a desperate bid to pull curtains over the sky-rocketing AQI. Enough with the political blame game. We do not need statements, we need action. Restore what is left, and make sure this disaster never repeats itself ever again by putting in strict rules to be adhered with penalties.

I pray to the government with folded hand to please take action on a war footing, the restoration of our gem, our pride, our heart- Umngot River, before we go the Goa/ Shimla way, a point of no return. Yes, we all want development but at this cost? We all look towards you with hope in our eyes, please don't let your mango citizens down.

When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money - Alanis Obom-sawin.

Your's etc.,
Shivani P.,
Via email

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"For every good reason there is to lie, there is a better reason to tell the truth."
—Bo Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.86 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2025

Between Idealism & Scepticism

THE coming together of regional political parties comprising the Tipra Motha Party (TMP), the National Peoples' Party (NPP) and individuals representing strong voices in their respective states namely Mohnlumo Kikon a former minister in Nagaland and also former spokesperson of the BJP who has since left the Party and Daniel Langthasa, former member of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council has created ripples. However, this is not the first time that an attempt has been made to unite regional voices so that they can negotiate from a position of strength in the national capital where the seat of power resides. The scepticism from political observers is that both the Tipra Motha and the NPP are allies of the BJP in their respective states. Their views are that both these parties should first have the courage of conviction to walk out of the BJP alliance before attempting such an ambitious proposal.

There is also the question as to whether all the parties to this One North East (ONE) group have had extensive ground level consultations with their respective party workers which is a basic step in any democracy. After, all its the ground level supporters that add heft to any political party. The MLAs alone cannot decide on behalf of the voters when taking such a major decision. Now there are voices of dissent even within the NPP about Congress MLAs joining the Party and thereby depriving their own party members of tickets from several constituencies in the 2028 elections. This does not augur well for the NPP.

Also, the fact that other regional tribal political forces from Nagaland, Mizoram and even Assam such as the Bodo People's Front led by Hagrama Mohilary and the United Peoples' Party Liberal (UPPL) led by Pramod Boro are not with the new conglomerate makes it a tough call to bring about regional party unity. In many states regional parties have contested against one another. The fact that the UPPL and BPF in Bodoland are rival parties and in Meghalaya the Voice of Peoples Party (VPP) a strong contender in the next assembly election sees the NPP as a rival and has even given a call to all those supporting the present government to actually bring it down, would make any attempt at unity a desperate call.

It is not as if such calls for unity were not made in the past. The All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLIC) which spearheaded the Hill State Movement in the 1960s had included the Karbi people too. It was expected that the Karbis would be part of Meghalaya but halfway down the movement they backed out and the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo people were left to pick up the baton of the statehood movement. Hence the aspiration of ONE to unite all regional political parties under a single banner and to work unitedly for a common goal - to tell Delhi that the North East which is treated like a distant periphery can also organise itself into a force to be reckoned with, while admirable may fall short of its goal. Political idealism cannot disregard realpolitik.

The Blood: Hima Khyrim and the Jaintia people

By Dominick Dauni Roising Rymbai

History is always written by the victors of war and conquests with the assistance of the gatekeepers of knowledge and education and, of course, the controllers of trade and commerce. The atrocities and ruthlessness of the Allies during the colonial rule and in the two World Wars were either never researched or glossed over and documented. Till date, British school-children are not taught the adverse effects of colonialism. In spite of 78 years of freedom, India is still reeling under the Divide and Rule policy of the "civilising" Raj. Hopefully, with the spread of thinking power (realised from reading books, physical or electronic, and debates and discussions) and with Artificial Intelligence gaining ground, the well-hidden histories will just be brushed under the carpet (tepe-it miaw).

On August 18, 2025, this writer was tagged on Facebook (invited through social media) by the talented filmmaker Wanphrang Diengdoh for the special Shillong screening of his third film on Khasi Identity trilogy, *The Blood and The Border* on August 23, 2025 at the St Anthony's College auditorium. The film dwelt on the rituals of *Hima Khyrim*, encounters with missionaries and today's rising religious intolerance and polarisation. Over the past decade, I have watched his previous two films of the trilogy, *Where The Clouds End* (2015, on race, belonging and insider-outsider politics) at a private screening in Laitumkhrakh, Shillong and *Because We Did Not Choose* (2017, documenting the indigenous labourers, actually beasts of burden, from present-day independent India's North East at the battlegrounds of the white man's Great War of 1914-1918) screened at the Khasi National Durbar Hall, Mawkhrah. Like any school-boy awaiting new Christmas toys after a good performance in the final term exams, I waited eagerly and patiently (5 days only, or about 137 hours) for the date and time of screening of the film. The genius Wanphrang is well-respected and awarded too, for the extensive and intensive research, and aesthetics of his projects.

Till the late 1980s and 1990s, *Leu Smit* or the weekly market at Smit village, the headquarters of the *Hima Khyrim* (Khyrim Syiemship and one half of the erstwhile great Hima Shyllong) occupied prime importance in the weekly markets' economy of the *Bri U Hymniewtrep* (the indigenous lands of the Hymniewtrep people). Today, post the two COVID-induced lockdowns and on a daily basis, the thriving economic activities have shifted to Lad Smit (Smit village junction) on the National Highway

from Shillong to Jowai and Silchar, Mizoram and Tripura. On market days, irrespective of creed, small business owners and entrepreneurs from all over the Khasi-Jaintia Hills would converge at *Leu Smit* for business transactions and, also to pay homage to the reigning sibilings *Ka Mei Syiem Sad* and *U Pa'em Syiem Smit*, the custodians of the rituals and traditional practices of the reigning deity of *U Lei Shyllong* (importance of Shillong Peak is similar to the Sagarmatha in Nepali culture of Mount Everest) and other semi-divinities.

On a side note, if the metropolitan mega-cities of Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Bangalore could be renamed, why can't Shillong city be re-spelled officially and also pronounced correctly as the rightly worded-and-spelled *Shyllong*? Agreed,

"In independent and sovereign India and just before Meghalaya's statehood, my immediate family had converted to the Roman Catholic Christian faith and were practising it for close to 19 years but the indigenous cultural bonds and influences remained and still do. Culture is public, religion is private! And indigenous religious beliefs are clan-based."

the city is Meghalaya's capital and populated by varied ethnicities but majority by the Hymniewtrep people. The land on which the city stands, is in the Khasi Hills, part of the erstwhile great Hima Shyllong. Land and language are very dear to indigenous peoples around the world. Pride, respect and gratitude, anyone?

If memory serves me right, in 1989 (the year, not Kong Taylor's album), I was taken by my Beipoon (maternal granny) and *U Woh* (maternal grand-uncle and still a Niamtre adherent) to Smit for a traditional health check-up (*thuh dawai kynbar*) with prayers, rites, chanting of rituals and clarion call-outs to the ancestors, for *pyn-ehrgiew*, *pyn chkek-rngu*, *pyn-ehdaw* (literally warding off evil spirits including Satan himself and, also evil humans). In independent and sovereign India and just before Meghalaya's statehood, my immediate family had converted to the Roman Catholic Christian faith and were practising it for close to 19 years but the indigenous cultural bonds and influences remained and still do. Culture is public, religion is private! And indigenous religious beliefs are clan-based. Reputed traditional healers and indigenous knowledge-

keepers would set up stalls at *Leu Smit*; the concerned healer came all the way from War Pynursla area and most probably a fellow clansman (*kur*) from the Nongrum (or Nongrymbai) or Rumnong clan. Also, that time period coincided with the celebration of the Shad Pomblang festival of Hima Khyrim.

The trip was a 4-days 3-nights holiday. The colours, sights and sounds of Smit village, like the Behdienkhlam festivals of Raji Tuber, Raji Jowai and other Rajis of the Jaintia Hills, in that period will always remain carved in my hippocampus, guess till death do us part! Throughout that period, the music (no audio amplification tools were used) of the Khasi traditional drums (*ki ksing*), the flutes (*ki bisli*) and the duitara, a traditional stringed instrument played by the duhalia (performing musicians),

During the Jaintia Resistance of 1860-1863, "unofficially-sanctioned" contingents of fighting men and women from *Hima Khyrim* went out to help in the common struggle against the foreign (phareng) enemy. It will shock many; before, during and after the Resistance, like a typical occupying military force, there were grandma's oral stories of forced non-consensual sex, or worst gang-rapes of some of our Jaintia women by the "low-class" soldiers and "high-class" officers of the "civilised" British Crown. After the First War of Independence of 1857, to instil fear, the Crown's cruel treatment of the captured or surrendered freedom fighters was documented; in public squares, the leaders were tied to the cannons' mouths and blown off to pieces.

The horrors of the "little war of resistance" and the brutality of the victor in its aftermath is yet to be researched and documented. The legendary *U Woh Kiang Nangbah* was not hanged; he was murdered publicly to tame down the proud rebellious Jaintias. The people (*ki khun ki hajar*) of Hima Khyrim stood by and for the Jaintia people, then!

Khublei Shibum, Chihajaar Ngooh, Hima Khyrim. Interestingly, this year, the Christian All-Saints Day, All-Souls Day and World Sunday School Day and the Festival day fall within the same 8-days week of the Hymniewtrep people. And with all the talks of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), the erstwhile Hima Shyllong and the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom were well-known for their diversity, egalitarianism and inclusivity.

May this Shad Pomblang festival bless all the varied ethnicities that populate the jurisdictional areas of the great erstwhile Hima Shyllong and the great erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and 'Indians in general.

(Views expressed are strictly personal: Email: dauni.roising@gmail.com)

Fungi over poison: Reimagining farming in the Anthropocene

By Keshika Gajbhiye

Did you know - we are literally changing the planet, but probably for the worse? Anthropocene is defined as the period where human activity alters the planet more than any other force. Currently, we are at this age of the Anthropocene where our actions, from excessive greenhouse gas emissions to deforestation, transform natural systems. Population growth in recent years is a contemporary challenge which has amplified the consequences of these actions. It has put pressure on essential resources including habitable land, water and specifically food.

Global population is currently at 8 billion and is expected to reach nearly 10 billion by the year 2050. This means that agriculture, which is under a lot of strain already, must keep producing more, from lesser land and in a much harsher climate.

When a similar challenge was presented during the time of the Green Revolution, chemical fertilizers and pesticides were a quick, seemingly effective solution. They helped increase crop yields and curb famines but their excessive use has created a new kind of crisis. The numbers for global pesticide usage have doubled since the 1990s, indicating a dependency. In 2022, around 3.7 million tonnes of pesticides were used, with application per hectare increasing by more than 90 percent since the 1990s. These chemicals cause environmental distress; they harm bees and other pollinators and cause larger problems by degrading the soil biodiversity and also making their way into food chains. Currently around 64 percent of the world's cropland is at risk of pesticide pollution, with nearly a third facing dangerously high levels. For humans, the effects are equally alarming, an estimated 385 million cases of acute pesticide poisoning occur each year worldwide, causing about 11,000 deaths, while chronic exposure leads to respiratory diseases, neurological disorders and even cancer. Children are especially prone to these ill effects with studies reporting that up to 90% children exposed to pesticides in food carry detectable pesticide residues.

Additionally, fertilizers used in farming release nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas nearly 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide adding to climate change which in turn will affect agriculture. Without effective and broadly adopted alternatives, this vicious cycle will only jeopardise the future of the planet as millions still go hungry.

As a response to these challenges, many solutions have been put forward. On the biological front, improved crop varieties either bred through conventional methods or developed through genetic engineering have been designed to produce more yield and exhibit pest resistance. While technological interventions include precision agriculture using satellites, drones and sensors to efficiently incorporate water, fertilizers, and pesticides in the field. Different approaches such as organic farming altogether refrain from the use of synthetic chemicals and substitute them with compost, crop rotation, and natural pest control. Alongside, the application of micro-organisms such as bacteria and/or fungi is being explored to enhance plant growth and impart disease resistance.

Application of fungi in the fields as inoculants (solutions containing fungi) has been of particular interest in recent times. Many important fungi are being studied for their ability to form symbiotic relationships with plants to facilitate nutrient and water uptake and protection from harmful pests. Additionally, some fungi, referred to as endophytic fungi, live inside plants and impart tolerance to drought and salinity.

Many recent formulations are using these properties of fungi to create fungal inoculants which can be added to soils or seeds to support plant growth. This not only improves plant health holistically but also restores balance and is a better alternative to chemicals that simply add nutrients, kill pests but also cause major disruptions in the ecosystem. In summation, fungal inoculants can boost yields while reducing chemical dependence and improving soil health.

While the above-mentioned solutions exist, each of them carries certain limitations. Genetically engineered crops are often expensive to develop, require regulatory approvals and have previously attracted skepticism

and resistance from farmers and consumers. Precision agriculture, while being a solid concept, requires expensive equipment, infrastructure and technical expertise, making it inaccessible to small land holding farmers. Organic farming, while being environmentally friendly, does not match conventional farming practices in terms of yield and may not be effective to meet global food demand or farmer expectations.

Despite being an effective concept and an alternative approach, current fungal inoculants have a few open ends to resolve. In comparison to chemicals which are generally implemented as one size fits all, fungal strains are susceptible to factors such as soil type, climate, and crop variety. Also, fungal inoculants take time to come to effect as they need to establish themselves in the field to show benefits. Additionally, there are logistic challenges with transport and storage as fungi are living creatures and have a shorter shelf life as compared to chemicals. These restraints discourage farmers from making a shift from the use of chemicals to fungi-based products. Without clear and guaranteed results, farmers are hesitant to adopt these products, and rightly so because of the economic pressure to deliver reliable harvests. Another challenge with these inoculants is regulation and production. Unlike standard fertilizers or pesticides, microbial inoculants may differ in terms of active organism used and the preparation (liquid, powder, pellets). This makes quality control inconsistent across markets and may result in mass production of ineffective products. The regulations associated with registration of these products are also much more complicated and time consuming as compared to chemicals, which discourages manufacturers and creates a divide between the number of chemical-based products and microbial products available in the market.

Addressing these issues may require an inter-disciplinary approach. An initial starting point of understanding is to limit the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers as they produce ill effects that will only alleviate as the Anthropocene moves ahead with population growth in the coming years. A combination of technologies such as that of improved fungal inoculants with artificial intelligence (AI) to match specific fungal strains to soils, crops and climate may be a solution to these problems. Precision agriculture while still associated with the costs, when integrated with AI may have an increased effectiveness. Advances in genetic engineering may be used to create tailored fungal strains that are more resilient and stable with a longer shelf life and an enhanced production of relevant biological products.

Building farmer trust is equally important in parallel to these technical advancements. Training programs that can help farmers understand how fungi differ from chemicals and how they may be slower but are an environmentally sustainable solution. Additionally, involving important stakeholders to strengthen this approach may promote their better adoption to really bring about a change. To illustrate, policy support making fungal inoculants more accessible and affordable through incentives or subsidies may promote adoption.

Together these strategies may significantly reduce agriculture's dependence on chemical inputs and allow them to address food production challenges while not feeding into the concept of Anthropocene.

Meeting global food demand in the Anthropocene is not just about producing more food but is about doing so in ways that preserve ecosystems, human health and stabilize the climate. Synthetic shortcuts were a valued solution of yesterday but have created today's problems. Fungi as an alternative promotes synergy rather than dominion. By troubleshooting previous issues through modern technology such as AI and genetic engineering, we can create better fungal inoculants for a productive and sustainable agricultural system which can nourish the people and the planet.

Using the soil that's underneath our feet to work with nature and not against it can define the future of food.
(The author is PhD Scholar at Plaksha University, Mohali)

Letters to the Editor

Let me breathe!

Editor,
Recently there was an attempt at cloud seeding to produce artificial rain in Delhi in order to offset the air pollution in the national capital. The "Right to Breathe Clean Air" is an integral part of the "Fundamental Right to Life". The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change for 2025 offers a grim reckoning: over 1.7 million died in 2022 due to exposure to PM2.5 a deadly particulate pollutants.

The death toll is 38% higher than the corresponding figure in 2010. Fossil fuels were responsible for 44% of these deaths, with petrol use for road transport accounting for 2.69 lakh fatalities and coal from power plants causing nearly 3.94 lakh deaths. Mortality is not the only consequence of such poisoned air; the economic cost from this is staggering

too. The Lancet report mentions that premature mortality in 2022 due to outdoor air pollution in India translated into a financial loss of \$339.4 billion, or 9.5% of India's GDP. The wider global picture is just as disconcerting. Twelve of the 20 indicators tracking health threats linked to climate change - from extreme heat to food insecurity to air pollution have reached record highs.

It is observed that the government often reaches for cosmetic measures: New Delhi's experimentation with cloud-seeding instead of addressing the structural causes of environmental degradation is a case in point. Weak enforcement of laws and institutional complicity are not the only challenges though: the public indifference to poor air is shocking.

The report reveals that if the world were to consistently reduce fine particulate pollution (PM2.5) to align with the World Health Or-

ganisation's (WHO) guideline, the average human life expectancy could increase by an impressive 2.3 years. The WHO, in its wisdom, prescribes that PM2.5 concentrations should not exceed 5 µg/m³. Shockingly, this leaves 1.3 billion people of India living in perilously polluted environments. India bears the brunt of this crisis, emerging as the second-most polluted country trailing only behind Bangladesh.

While industrialisation and urbanisation play pivotal roles in exacerbating air pollution, it is the collective negligence that poses an even graver challenge. A glaring lack of sustainable urban planning, coupled with inadequate air quality data and standards, serves as a harbinger of disaster. One of the most concerning revelations of the report is the minimal focus on disseminating accurate air quality data by governments.

For a national cause all

should come forward to control pollution and address the issue head-on. The AQI report, although yet to undergo peer review, underscores an undeniable truth that particulate pollution, particularly PM2.5, remains the foremost external threat to human health worldwide. These tiny particles, measuring just 2.5 micrometres, can easily infiltrate our circulatory system, triggering myriads of health problems.

Each Diwali, there is massive collective endorsement for polluting crackers, their noxious impact notwithstanding. The rise of religious majoritarianism seems to have encouraged a dangerous prioritisation of polluting rituals over considerations to health and environment. India can no longer afford to treat climate-health losses as collateral damage. The government must integrate climate policy and the economic consequences of climate change with the principles

of governance and right to health, and undertake mitigatory actions across multiple fronts

With just 6.8 per cent and 3.7 per cent of Asian and African governments providing their citizens with open air quality data, respectively, it is evident that information is a rare commodity. Equally alarming is the dearth of air quality standards in these countries. This lack of transparency and uniformity perpetuates the crisis.

There is need for a deeper study on this issue to find ways to bring down air pollution. An even graver challenge is the glaring lack of sustainable urban planning, coupled with inadequate air quality data and standards, serves as a harbinger for disaster. To get results we should involve people who are fully dedicated to this cause. Here one must quote the example of Greta Thunberg of Sweden. Thunberg became well-known after she

protested outside the Swedish parliament in 2018, when she was 15. She held a sign saying "School Strike for Climate," to pressure the government to meet carbon emissions targets. Her small campaign had a global effect, inspiring thousands of young people across the world to organise their own strikes. By December 2018, more than 20,000 students - from the UK to Japan - had joined her by skipping school to protest.

A year later, she received the first of three Nobel Peace Prize nominations for climate activism. We need to find such dedicated persons to make the mission for fighting for cleaner air a successful one.

Yours etc.,
Yash-Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"Man can learn nothing except by going from the known to the unknown."

— Claude Bernard

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 87 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2025

Taming of Trump

THE installation of a new mayor for New York, the world's most high-profile city, need not necessarily attract global attention in normal course. Yet, the election of young, dapper Soham Mamdani as the nominee of the Democratic Party has created a sensation not just in the US but elsewhere too. The 34-year-old, whose mother is Indian-Punjabi origin film director Mira Nair and father an Ugandan academician, is the youngest mayor there in the past over a century. Significantly, his quote from Jawaharlal Nehru's celebrated 'tryst with destiny' speech heralding India's Independence in 1947, touched on the transition from "the old to the new" for a city of less than nine million people. With a progressive mindset, which made President Trump label him as a Communist anarchist, Mamdani is obviously a rebel, a social democrat as he put it — and looks at matters from refreshingly new ways. Mamdani's future growth in public life would be keenly watched. Yet, what gained more attention now is his half-Muslim origin, set against recent global tumults, terrorism, and in the backdrop of the Clash of Civilization theories.

Donald Trump has reason to feel more irritated at this electoral verdict widely seen as a vote against his rash administrative styles. Trump's reform measures are seen as whimsical and hurting the economic interests of a wide spectrum of society. Worse, house-rents are "unbearable" for those who hire apartments in New York. With pressure growing on the residents by the day, Republicans obviously bore the brunt. What came as an added advantage to the Mayor-elect was his religious orientation. A tenth of New York's population are Muslim settlers drawn mainly from countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan, Africa and elsewhere. Most taxi drivers in the mega city are Muslims, as also substantial segments of the low-paid workforce. A fourth of the Muslims in the US are living in New York. It would also appear that labour unions, carrying red flags, stood by Mamdani. Communists, failing to make a mark in the epicenter of capitalism since the party's arrival in the US a century ago, claim a membership of no more than 22,000. Yet, all these forces joined hands to ensure the defeat of the Republicans, sending strong signals to the Trump administration and by extension the Republicans. The icing on the victory cake was, perhaps, the firm Muslim backing for Mamdani.

Despite the surprise policy shifts aimed at strengthening the American economy, Trump would now be increasingly on the defensive. The defeat of the Republicans in the mayoral polls is bound to cause a chain reaction within the ruling establishment. In a matter of 10 months, Trump has antagonized many at home and many more nations abroad as well. Whether the United States can absorb the shocks from Trump's series of new policy formulations is worth a watch. The Democrats are waiting in the wings, but would require patience for three more years to dream of a return to power even as the public mood is visibly surcharged against the incumbent President.

Letters to the Editor

After loan closure, why should borrowers suffer on account of bank's delay?

Editor,
The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), through its directive dated 13th September 2023 (RBI/2023-24/60 DoR.MCS. REC.38/01.01.001/2023-24), has unequivocally mandated that all banks must return a borrower's original property documents within thirty days of full and final loan repayment. The same circular also stipulates that any delay beyond this period entitles the borrower to appropriate compensation. The intent behind this directive is clear — to safeguard borrowers from institutional indifference and to uphold transparency and accountability within the banking sector.

Yet, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Many borrowers, especially from smaller towns and remote regions, continue to be entangled in procedural delays, confusion, and avoidable inconvenience even after repaying their loans in full. I wish to recount my personal experience — not in grievance, but to highlight a systemic issue that demands urgent inspection.

After closing my home loan under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) scheme through the State Bank of India (SBI), Tura

branch, nearly four months ago, I anticipated a smooth handover of my original property documents. Instead, despite multiple visits to my home branch, the documents have not been released. Subsequently, I received a letter from SBI's RASMECCC, Shillong, directing me to collect my title deeds from their office within fifteen days, warning that a penalty of Rs 1,000 plus GST per quarter would be levied for any delay.

This directive is both unreasonable and distressing. My loan was sanctioned, serviced, and repaid entirely through the Tura branch. It defies logic and fairness to compel a borrower from the Garo Hills to travel more than 300 kilometers to Shillong — at personal cost and inconvenience — simply to retrieve documents that should have been automatically dispatched within the RBI's prescribed timeline.

The very essence of the RBI's directive lies in protecting borrowers from such institutional delays. When banks fail to release property documents promptly or shift responsibility between offices, they not only violate regulatory norms but also erode the public's faith in the efficiency and empathy of the banking system.

Borrowers who have demonstrated financial integrity and discipline by repaying every rupee of their loan deserve courtesy, not indifference; efficiency, not red tape. Therefore, one

must ask — why should a borrower suffer for a delay that clearly originates within the bank's own system? If the RBI mandates compensation for such lapses, it is only fair that banks uphold this accountability in both letter and spirit.

The State Bank of India, as the nation's largest public sector bank, must set a precedent by streamlining its post-loan procedures. Once a loan is closed, the borrower's documents should be seamlessly returned through the home branch within the stipulated thirty days — without imposing travel, expense, or mental stress upon the customer.

Financial inclusion is not merely about granting loans; it is about ensuring dignity and transparency at every stage of the banking experience — from the first signature to the final settlement. Rural and hill-region borrowers, who often face logistical and economic constraints, deserve to be treated with empathy and fairness, not as afterthoughts of an impersonal system.

Furthermore, I appeal to the concerned bank authorities to issue a clear statement regarding the subsidy component under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) scheme linked to my loan, as this remains unexplained even after full repayment. Transparency in this regard is vital to maintaining public trust in both government-supported schemes and the institutions

implementing them. In an era where digital banking and customer-centric policies are widely celebrated, such procedural lapses reveal a widening gap between principle and practice. It is time for major banks to bridge that gap — not through rhetoric, but through responsible action.

Borrowers have fulfilled their obligations with honesty and patience. It is now for the banks to reciprocate — with integrity, efficiency, and respect.

Yours etc.,

Jairaj,

Tura

The legacy of Wangala and Shad Nongkrem

Editor,
History has always been fascinating because it shines the light on the roots of our origins. Meghalaya's cultural heartbeat echoes through two grand harvest festivals, Wangala of the Garos and Shad Nongkrem of the Khasis. Both celebrate gratitude, harmony, and the sacred bond between humans and nature. The Wangala Festival, often called the 100 Drums Festival, honours Misi Saljong, the Sun God of fertility, marking the end of the arduous harvest season with rhythmic drumming, dance, and offerings. Meanwhile, Shad Nongkrem unfolds in Smit, the cultural heart of

the Khasi Hills, where rituals and dances give thanks to Ka Blei Synshar and the ancestors for prosperity and a bountiful harvest.

In stark contrast, the Umngot River, once known as Asia's cleanest, now faces an ecological crisis, a mirror to us humans, reflecting how far we have drifted from balance and sustainable long-term development. These festivals were never mere traditions; they were reminders to live in gratitude and alignment with Ka Mei Ramew (mother earth). Teaching the younger generation about these festivals is not just preserving culture, but reviving the wisdom our ancestors lived by, that harmony with nature is the truest form of progress.

Remembering the legend of U Lum Sohpet Bneng, lest we forget — 'Ka Tip Brieu Tip Blei' (know man, know God), 'Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha' (know kith and kin), and 'Kamai ia ka Hok' (earn with honesty).

Yours etc.,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

Unified regional platform deserves a fair chance

Editor,
The editorial "Between Idealism & Scepticism" (ST 6th November 2025) made interesting reading and this development is more than electoral. It is a narrative infrastructure experiment. If

enjoy land rights like other indigenous tribes in other states of India. In Tripura land is owned by the government. Pradyot has been negotiating that such land rights be returned to the tribals but in vain.

Negotiating with the Government of India is a slow and exhausting process as the Nagas will attest. The peace accord signed in 1997 and again ratified in 2015 in the form of the Framework Agreement have not made any progress. In 2015, TH Muivah the NSCN(IM) supreme has reportedly given up the sovereignty demand. Now back at his birthplace after over five decades, the NSCN (IM) leader has reiterated the sovereignty demand. Hence negotiating with Government of India is a case of one step forward, two steps backwards. The process leads to fatigue which perhaps bothers Pradyot and others in similar situations.

Hence the case for ONE is a strong one provided all stakeholders buy into this idea and support it wholeheartedly. There will be critics and antagonists for any new idea and as tribals we have some congenital behavioural problems which is to put down an idea even before it has taken shape.

Those who criticise unfortunately don't have better options to offer to strengthen regional party unity. The VPP is one such party that has launched scathing attacks on the NPP and even urged the MLAs supporting the NPP-led government to bring down the MDA-2 government. Granted that there are serious governance issues in some departments headed by those who use the government to further their business deals. This is where Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has to push the brakes on such attempts at personal aggrandisement at the cost of the people of Meghalaya. To Pradyot Manikya's credit he is not in politics to further his personal goals. This has been evident over the years.

As far as the VPP is concerned it should focus at providing good governance in the Khasi Hills District Council where it is duly elected to lead. Not much is visible on the ground as yet as far as eco-restoration of rivers and forests are concerned. The Umngot River is the brief of the KHADC. So it's important for leaders to be less critical and more open to new ideas. No single person is the repository of all wisdom. We live and learn!

successful it could reframe federalism through indigenous epistemologies, not just administrative decentralization. Most regional parties remain state-centric. Migration and demographic shifts have made "indigenity" a contested concept, complicating efforts to build a unified regional platform. With BJP dominant in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura and BJP led in Assam and the Congress declining, the proposed new party could emerge as a third pole targeting the 25 Lok Sabha seats in the region. However, past attempts at pan-Northeast unity have faltered due to linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity. The surface paradoxes are whether a party can unify sub-nationalist and pan-regional visions without eroding either? The purpose "To unify regional voices, protect indigenous rights and negotiate with the Centre from a position of collective strength" is practical. It may not be fair to write-off this development at this stage but observe how things unfold as politics is not static but dynamic. It is a living system, not a fixed structure. It breathes, shifts and evolves with every narrative, protest, policy and paradox.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

One North East: What Magic Wand Will Make It Tick

By Patricia Mukhim

Bodo People's Front led by Hagrama Mohilary and the United Peoples' Party Liberal (UPPL) led by Pramod Boro are not with the newly floated regional political assemblage poses a challenge to regional party unity. In many states regional parties have contested against one another. The fact that the UPPL and BPF in Bodoland are rival parties and in Meghalaya the Voice of Peoples Party (VPP) a strong contender in the next assembly election sees the NPP as a rival and has even given a call to all those supporting the present government to actually bring it down, would make any attempt at unity a desperate move. Also, Mhonlumo Kikon a key partner of ONE has not been able to negotiate with the Nationalist Peoples Progressive Party (NDPP) to get it to come on board. Today in Nagaland the NDPP is ruling the roost. Will Kikon manage to lure Neiphiu Rio to join the regional mahagat-bandhan?

The call for a united regional political alliance is however not a novelty. Attempts have been made in the past too by Purno A Sangma, the only north-easterner to have held the post of Speaker in the Lok Sabha. When he decided to be a contender for the post of President of India, he wanted to get in through the support of a united regional front but that attempt was scuttled by national political parties. It is not a politically naïve step to call for regional party unity if the objectives are clearly stated and people buy into the idea. Both Conrad Sangma and Pradyot Manikya have stated unambiguously that the attempt to unite regional voices comes from the need to negotiate with Delhi from a position of strength and not as subordinates of the national parties.

This synergy between regional parties also has its genesis in the slow implementation of the terms of the tripartite agreement signed on March 2, 2024, between the Government of India, the Government of Tripura, and the TIPRA Motha to address all issues related to the indigenous people of Tripura in a time-bound manner, which was seen by Pradyot Manikya as tardy and lacking commitment on the part of the Government of India. Pradyot is particularly anxious about the indigenous tribals of Tripura who do not

enjoy land rights like other indigenous tribes in other states of India. In Tripura land is owned by the government. Pradyot has been negotiating that such land rights be returned to the tribals but in vain.

Negotiating with the Government of India is a slow and exhausting process as the Nagas will attest. The peace accord signed in 1997 and again ratified in 2015 in the form of the Framework Agreement have not made any progress. In 2015, TH Muivah the NSCN(IM) supreme has reportedly given up the sovereignty demand. Now back at his birthplace after over five decades, the NSCN (IM) leader has reiterated the sovereignty demand. Hence negotiating with Government of India is a case of one step forward, two steps backwards. The process leads to fatigue which perhaps bothers Pradyot and others in similar situations.

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Batting for God...! And so our wonderful brave courageous girls won the World Cup for India. I am sure you saw the winning match. I am sure your living room echoed with cheers and whistles. But what I want to talk about today is the interview of Jemimah Rodrigues who with an unbeaten one hundred and twenty seven against the mighty Australians steered the Indian women's cricket team into the World Cup final. There she stood, tears cruising down a tired, yet radiant face, and instead of boasting about her shots or her timing, she kept repeating that all glory belonged to God. She even quoted scripture as she spoke. It was refreshing, like a cool sea breeze after a humid day.

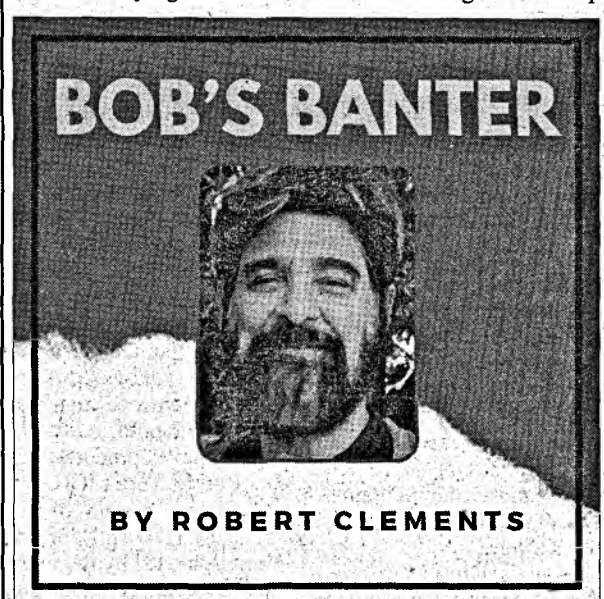
In a world where success often leads to arrogance, here was a young woman who remembered who really swung the bat. Yes, she was the one at the crease, but she knew there was another Power steadying her nerves,

sets you up for grace in the spotlight.

And where should gratitude be voiced. Only inside church walls. Only at the family table. Or out in the open where the marketplace can hear. Gratitude that ventures beyond a safe corner becomes a testimony. When you say, God helped me, in the wide public square, two things happen. Heaven smiles. And someone listening discovers that faith can stand tall in stadiums and boardrooms and television studios. Faith does not fear bright lights.

There is a warning here for the rest of us. If all you hear from a hero or a leader is I did it, then wait. The fall will come. You cannot plant pride and harvest peace. But if you hear, God helped me, and you see a life that reflects that confession, you can expect steady progress. Because God trusts those who will return the crown to Him.

So here is a suggestion for the coming week. Keep



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

guiding her judgment, and placing her strokes.

What a lesson for our achievers, politicians, and corporate captains. Imagine if our leaders, after a successful election or a quarter of good profits, were to say, I thank God for His grace, instead of, It was my strategy, my brilliance, my vision. Humility disarms pride. Gratitude opens the door to greater achievements.

Humility is not weakness. It is strength under control. It is knowing that even though you have talent, the spark that lights it came from above. Many a mighty leader has fallen not because of a clever opponent but because of his own swollen head. The moment you start thinking you are god, as many of our leaders appear to think, the countdown begins. Pride puffs up, reality pricks, and the fall follows.

Look around and you will see the signs. Our cities are filled with faces of men and women who believe they alone built the nation. Their pictures glare at us from billboards, brochures, and banners, as if a smile can fill a pothole or a grin can mend a broken bridge. If only they realised that beauty fades faster than the ink on those posters. Jemimah showed us what it means to be grounded while being lifted high. She taught us that you can hit a century and still bend your knee. That it is possible to be confident without being conceited. That joy can be wide and deep when it is shared with its Source. Her voice that day did not tremble from fear. It trembled from awe. She knew she had been used for something larger than herself. That is the sweetest kind of triumph.

Scripture says that whoever can be trusted with little can be trusted with much. That is not merely a verse to learn by heart. It is a way to live. Jemimah did not begin her gratitude with a century. She began when no camera looked her way. Thank you for another day. Thank you for strength to train. Thank you for a coach who corrects. Thank you for the chance to try again. Gratitude in the shadows

a small notebook. Each evening write three reasons to thank God. One may be big, like a target reached. One may be ordinary, like a warm cup of tea shared with a friend. One may be hidden, like a temptation resisted. At the end of the week read the list aloud. You will discover that gratitude changes your eyesight. You begin to notice mercy where earlier you noticed only noise. And as your gratitude grows, your courage grows with it.

Because courage and gratitude are cousins. Gratitude makes you brave in success, since praise goes upward and pride does not. Gratitude makes you brave in failure, since you remember past mercies and refuse to give up. Jemimah's interview held both kinds of courage. She refused the easy story of self glory, and she embraced the better story of God's grace.

Kudos to a young cricketer who batted for God. May more of us learn to play our innings the same way. With courage that does not swagger. With grace that does not fade. With gratitude that speaks plainly in private and in public. Because when you play for Him, you never truly get out. Even when the scoreboard says your time at the crease is over, your witness keeps scoring in hearts that heard you give thanks.

So when your next opportunity comes, whether it is a meeting room or a classroom or a quiet kitchen, pick up the bat that is yours. Prepare well. Work hard. Then look up and say, Help me Lord. And when the boundary arrives, look up again and say, Thank You Lord. If that becomes your rhythm, the field before you will feel wide, and the audience above will smile.

Bat for God, and you will discover the secret that Jemimah shared without a sermon. The game changes when gratitude takes strike...

You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobsbanter@gmail.com

"Master your craft, be nice and stay humble."

— Erick Morillo

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 88 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2025

Meghalaya's Extractive Economy

RECENT reports of the Justice (retired) BP Katakey one man committee that the state government has failed to recover Rs 5.30 crore from 15 coke oven plants and over Rs 1.71 crore from M/S Sakambari Ferro Alloy Pvt Ltd is a worn out narrative. Firstly, the state government is slack about recovering the fines imposed on these companies that have been penalised for polluting the environment and their continued operation of coke units despite the ban by the National Green Tribunal. In its 33rd interim report, the BP Katakey Committee said it has been apprised by the government-constituted Coal Audit Committee (CAC) about the completion of audit of source of coal utilised by the coke oven plants, ferro alloy plants and cement thermal power plants in East and West Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and South West Khasi Hills districts.

The CAC found 15 defaulting units which purchased 36,353 MT coal from illegal sources for which a penalty of Rs 5.30 crore was to be recovered and the recovery process has only just begun. As regards the ferro alloy plants, the CAC apprised that the audit of source of coal used by M/S Sakambari Ferro Alloy Pvt Ltd is completed and a fine of Rs 1.71 crore is levelled on the company towards royalty, cess on royalty, GST and MEPRF and the recovery process for the amount fined has started. From the BP Katakey report what emerges is an indictment of the use of locally dug coal despite the NGT ban since 2014. It points to the complete lack of monitoring of the illegal activities that carry on unabated in the coal mines of East Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. The reported disappearance of 4000 MT tonnes of coal recently and the flippant answer given by a minister of the government that it was washed away by rainwater shows that illegality is allowed to thrive in the state. This happens because profit has become more important than people and the planet. This extractive capitalism thrives on draining natural resources at the cost of causing harm to communities and ecosystems. This is a model that prioritizes short-term gains for the few at the expense of long-term sustainability for the many. Extractive capitalism is an economic model based on the aggressive extraction of natural resources to generate maximum profit. It prioritizes wealth accumulation for a small elite, at the expense of environmental health, social equity, and long-term sustainability. The system thrives on short-term gains by disregarding the irreversible damage it causes to ecosystems and communities.

At its very core, extractive capitalism exploits both nature and people to feed a profit-driven machine. This machine is working relentlessly and is managed by a mafia that believes it has the right to pollute because when caught it can get away by paying off the authorities. The question is whether money can compensate for environmental destruction. An extractive economy thrives under a political system that favours crony capitalists over the environment and people. The pattern under which these capitalists operate is to take as much as possible, give back as little as necessary. This model is destined to destroy our natural habitat. That a government can allow such depravity is itself a grave crime!

Letters to the Editor

A rap on the knuckles for murder?

Editor,

The news item "Environmental lapses: MSPCB imposes 15 lakh penalty on NHIDCL" (ST - Nov 7, 2025) seems to convey the message that NHIDCL is being punished enough for the pollution of the River Umngot. But without needing to dive deep into the issue, the amount of Rs. 15 lakh fixed appears to be hasty, arbitrary, random and lacking of any rational yardstick. Hence, these questions arise: What is the criteria adopted to determine the above amount of penalty, keeping in mind the scale of destruction caused to River Umngot and its surroundings? What is the monetary cost arrived at for environmental restoration of the Umngot and its surroundings? What is the quantum of present and projected future loss of income to the stakeholders during the time it will take the Umngot to recover before tourism returns, if at all it returns to its heydays? These are only a few questions from a lay person and I think experts from our universities, etc will be able to ask more incisive questions but will they stick their heads out?

Dishearteningly, representatives from the affected area have not exactly raised a storm or hellfire in light of the seriousness of the issue. Their responses have been tepid. What a shame! The stakeholders like Boatmen, Fishermen, Transport Operators, homestay owners and the general public who are bearing the full negative force of the destruction of their river and livelihoods

seem to be in disarray lacking committed leaders who can fight for fair compensation for present survival and restoration of the Umngot for the their own future well-being and the well-being of the future generations.

In conclusion, I am of the opinion that the said token penalty of 15 lakhs is like a rap on the knuckles for the murder of the environment.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Sweet
Shillong - 2

Bureaucrat's Gambit and Students' Convenience

Editor,

A majority of students from Meghalaya, both within and outside the state, depend on financial assistance from the Post Matric Scholarship of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA). This scheme, known locally as the Umbrella Post Matric Scholarship for ST students, is accessed through the National Scholarship Portal (NSP). While many students believe this is a state-sponsored scheme, the State Government contributes only 10% of the funds; the remaining 90% comes from MoTA.

The scheme's complexity lies in its disbursement process. MoTA releases funds to the states in multiple instalments (sometimes as many as four or five). The release of the next instalment is contingent upon the state submitting an expenditure report—showing the full spending of the previous instalment—and the availability of the Ministry's funds.

Previously, the State Gov-

Why BJP cannot Dump Nitish Kumar Yet

By Rajdeep Sardesai

"Bihar ki majboori hai, Nitish Kumar zaroori hai." (It is because of Bihar that Nitish Kumar is needed)

Ironically, I first heard that catchy slogan outside the BJP office in 2017 when Nitish Kumar decided to switch sides for the umpteenth time, dump the Yadav first family, rejoin a Narendra Modi-led BJP and stay on as Bihar chief minister. The return wasn't driven by any sudden rediscovery of friendship but purely by political convenience. Eight years later, little has changed. The BJP has no special love for Nitish babu — someone who was amongst the first to challenge Modi's prime-ministerial credentials in 2013 — but they don't have any option but to stick to him as the NDA's leadership face. A visibly ageing and unwell Nitish too, now in the sunset of his long career, has little choice but to quietly accept his subordinate role in the Modi-centric Dilli durbars.

In a sense, 2025 in Bihar is witnessing a Shakespearean-style tragedy playing out in front of a mass audience still unable to shake off a 35 year old fraught Mandalised legacy of backward caste assertion at the ballot box. This election could well be the last act of a long-running drama. The Brothers Bihar are chalk and cheese. Lalu Prasad, the original charismatic populist, is now physically too weak to even campaign and has ceded authority to his son Tejaswi, an energetic presence but lacking his father's authentic rustic touch. Nitish, perhaps the most refined product of the 1970s Jayprakash Narayan-led socialist student agitation, is also ailing, in his case suffering from a serious illness that debilitates the mind more than the body. The BJP has Modi as its unquestioned helmsman but the party doesn't have a local leadership of stature or pan-Bihar appeal. While a moth-eaten Congress is organizationally comatose and in no position to revive itself overnight. And then there is Prashant Kishore, a youthful anti-establishment debutante-challenger but still

searching for more space in a complex caste matrix.

Which brings one back to the original slogan on why Nitish Kumar, having been sworn in a record nine times and in line for a Olympic gold in political gymnastics, is still seen as a necessity despite his obvious limitations. Five years ago, the BJP attempted to cut Nitish down to size by propping up a gen-next Bihar politician in Chirag Paswan to consciously target the Janata Dal (United) vote. The strategy worked. Well, almost. A beleaguered JD (U) won just 43 seats

terms to subservient allies, the party cannot, at least in public, be seen to be humiliating the long-serving chief minister in any manner. Firstly, unlike in other Hindi heartland states, the BJP hasn't built a credible backward caste leadership of its own. The shadow of upper caste supremacy from a previous era still looms over the BJP's core in Bihar. On the one occasion when the BJP did fight an election on its own in Bihar in 2015, at the peak of the Modi wave, it wasn't able to resist the combined onslaught of the

"When he realized that the INDIA grouping wouldn't fuel his national ambitions, he chose to return to the NDA fold on the eve of the 2024 general elections. The leader who once claimed to represent morality in public life was now a despairing survivor, the politics of compromise replacing ideological conviction."

while the BJP was well ahead with 74 seats. The balance of power between the two allies had shifted dramatically and yet the BJP hesitated to replace Nitish as chief minister with their own nominee. An artful survivor, Nitish saw through the BJP power game: in 2022, fearing that the BJP might break his weakened party like it did with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, Nitish switched sides to become the key driver of the opposition-led INDIA alliance. When he realized that the INDIA grouping wouldn't fuel his national ambitions, he chose to return to the NDA fold on the eve of the 2024 general elections. The leader who once claimed to represent morality in public life was now a despairing survivor, the politics of compromise replacing ideological conviction.

Once the proud charioteer of a 'naya' Bihar, Nitish is now a mask, trapped in a 'chakravayuha' by a domineering BJP. And yet, while in many other states the BJP has managed to dictate

Lalu-Nitish caste duopoly. Secondly, the BJP's electoral reverses in the 2024 general elections has meant that the party has embraced a more flexible coalition dharma, one where every ally needs to be accommodated. In the circumstances, the BJP can ill-afford to jettison a Nitish at this stage with the next big national battle in 2029 still some distance away.

Finally, the BJP realizes that even a downsized Nitish Kumar still commands a solid double digit vote share. In competitive alliance politics like in Bihar even a small vote share can make a crucial difference: in 2020, the gap between the two main contenders was just a razor-thin 12,768 votes, with the JD U getting a decisive 15 per cent vote share. In almost every election since 2005, two key groups have generally backed Nitish Kumar: women and extremely backward castes. Long before national parties discovered the power of the woman vote, Nitish Kumar was projecting himself as a 'naari-samman' (women's

self-respect) neta. His soft spoken introverted persona, especially when contrasted with the rumbustious nature of his prime friend turned foe Lalu Yadav, makes him an appealing figure for the woman voter. With caste loyalties mostly unshaken, the Mahila or woman vote becomes a potential game-changer. The young girl who was given a cycle as an incentive to attend school when Nitish Kumar first came to power in 2005 is now an adult voter: it is that 'She' voter, the prime beneficiary of welfare schemes, who makes Nitish seemingly indispensable to any power arrangement in Bihar.

Which is also why prime minister Modi, not known to forgive or forget easily, has chosen to keep Nitish Kumar by his side. In a sense, the 'Nimo' Jodi is a Made in Bihar special package, one where past antagonisms are quickly forgotten in the desperate attempt to stay in power at all costs. There could well come a moment in the near future when the BJP, which has steadily infiltrated the JD (U) ranks at different levels, will be tempted to strike and do an Eknath Shinde-like coup in Bihar too. But for now Nitish Kumar remains the BJP's electoral 'majboori' (compulsion) even as the saffron brigade is the crutch that ensures Nitish isn't pushed into 'Marg-Darshak' retirement just yet.

Post-script: I remember interviewing Nitish Kumar when he chose to relinquish the chief minister's chair briefly in 2013 to protest Modi's elevation as the BJP prime ministerial choice. "I joined a Vajpayee-Advani-led BJP, not one that will be led by a communal dictator," he raged then. When I now see the same Nitish Kumar genuflecting before Mr Modi, I realize how nothing is permanent in politics. As interests and alliances shift, so does character and conscience.

(The writer is author and senior journalist. Mail: Rajdeep.sardesai52@gmail.com)

The Tale of Bah Bor from Sohra

By Salil Gewali

People across Meghalaya are visibly upbeat that tourism is about to receive an unprecedented boost. Sohra, long admired as a shy and weepy beauty, has finally been chosen to be crowned with the tiara of the Integrated Tourism Circuit under PM-DevINE.

Well, at the heart of this happy news is Chief Minister Conrad Sangma. His graceful acumen in speaking

even less. Some got just Rs 4000 or Rs 5000.

He was deeply worried for his parents and younger siblings, knowing he could hardly send anything home. Bor worked at the car-wash center for about one and a half years, never missing a day, not even during the biting cold of winter. He even picked up the bad habit of puffing "biri", for which I scolded him often. Later,

Let us hope these developments are done with care. The natural beauty and ecological balance must remain intact. Yes, many believe this project will open the doorway to extensive employment opportunities for those who remain jobless despite having academic degrees and practical skills. Nevertheless, I feel many are still unaware.

the language of the Centre often dwarfs Chief Ministers from many other states. Of course, he visits Delhi with solid plans and clear purpose. His sweet smile says, "Meghalaya matters and should not be ignored". Someone even quipped: "Our CM is clearly a perfect striker, able to send the ball straight into the goal post while the union ministries nod in cheerful agreement." The recent warm exchange of hugs and camaraderie between Conrad and Jyoti-radiya Scindia stands as a testimony.

Let us hope these developments are done with care. The natural beauty and ecological balance must remain intact. Yes, many believe this project will open the doorway to extensive employment opportunities for those who remain jobless despite having academic degrees and practical skills. Nevertheless, I feel many are still unaware. People from

he quit after I convinced him how tobacco products slowly kill one's lungs and heart. I was overjoyed. Very recently, I heard he got a new job at a shoe shop. It pays him Rs 8000. Still a modest amount, but for him, it feels like a step forward.

Does this not clearly speak of the gap between education and employment, between rosy dreams and daily survival? We harp on education as the sole path to prosperity. But in reality, it is downright absurd. And it reminds us why a series of projects like the Sohra Tourism Circuit must take root in Meghalaya as soon as possible. If thoughtfully implemented, and without hindrances, they can bring jobs home. Youths like Bor won't have to leave their hills and families to wash cars in distant towns. They can stay, work, and grow where their roots are.

I have cited Bor's story because what he went

I strongly feel that this widespread struggle should draw the considerate attention of the concerned authorities. It goes without saying that formal education these days has rather become a tool for an elite class of people to grow rich and richer, while the rest keep getting poorer. For this I blame the current academic framework.

this tourist hotspot, Sohra and nearby villages, come to Shillong and struggle to the bone just to hunt for a job. Let me share just one story. (Some details have been changed for privacy.)

Over two years ago, a young man named Bah Bor left his home in Sohra and came down to Shillong in search of a job. He had just completed his BA degree and carried with him a rosy hope of becoming great. His mother sold vegetables in the Sohra market. Bah Bor, along with his younger brother and sister, would help her while their father stayed home due to health issues. As the eldest of five siblings, the weight of the household had naturally fallen on Bor's shoulders. How their parents had managed to send all the children to school was another sob story. Needless to say, the poor village family had naively believed that educated children would become the stepping stone to a brighter future. But reality was far from that. The town, like many others, was already caught in an economic slowdown for various reasons.

After three months of running from pillar to post Bah Bor finally found work at a car/bike wash center, it was not his choice to work there. The pay was just RS 6000 a month. Despite being a BA graduate, scrubbing vehicles and the like for a wage that barely covered his meals and rent was deeply frustrating for the young man. Of course, he had shed many tears remembering his parents' hard struggle to send him to school, only to end up as a "labourer." He told me that other boys with similar qualifications earned

through is shared by "innumerable" other youths across the state. I strongly feel that this widespread struggle should draw the considerate attention of the concerned authorities. It goes without saying that formal education these days has rather become a tool for an elite class of people to grow rich and richer, while the rest keep getting poorer. For this I blame the current academic framework. We learnt "Book-Keeping," we mastered "Accountancy," only to become the servants of tycoons like Elon Musk; Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Ambani, Adani, Mittal, Jindal... -- men who count billions while we count coins. Are so many of our energetic boys, many with BAs and some pursuing Masters, not running across town on bikes and scooters, delivering an endless stream of parcels for a handful of capitalists such as Snapdeal, JioMart, Myntra, Flipkart, Meesho...? These few online shopping centers have kicked hard right on the "stomachs" of millions of small retailers. Is this not a serious issue? And yet this one issue is what the government has heartlessly ignored till the date.

Unless we teach the "language of empathy and humanity" and the glaring flaws of "economic disparity" to our children from early school days, we will keep churning out degrees and frustration in equal measure. Alas, how long will we continue to empower a privileged and smart few to lord over the struggling majority with no fear and with no mercy?

to stop—requiring students to remain patient and consistently track their application on the portal while following the full amount disbursement again—or they need to ask for a revamp of the entire disbursement process from the Ministry to the states.

Yours etc.,
Ribait Phawa,
Via email

Trump's shadow shapes America's polical shift

Editor,

Over and above what the editorial has mentioned in "Taming of Trump" (ST November 7, 2025) the key takeaways from the 2025 elections in the U.S. is that: Democrats won governorships in Virginia and New Jersey by double digit margin. Exit polls showed that most Virginia and New Jersey voters disapproved of Trump, and at least 9 in 10 of those people supported Democratic candidates for governor. In New Jersey, GOP candidate Jack Ciattarelli's alignment with Trump hurt his chances despite a strong campaign.

Zohran Mamdani, a democrat socialist, made history as New York City's first Muslim and Millennial mayor, defeating Andrew Cuomo who ran as an independent. Affordability was the top voter concern as the Exit polls showed that economic anxiety and cost of living were the dominant issues. Democratic candidates focused on affordability, housing and energy costs, while Republicans struggled to distance themselves from Trump. Trump's

influence backfired as many Republican candidates who embraced Trump lost favour with the public. Youth and diversity shaped outcomes as Mamdani's win were powered by young voters and college-educated urbanites, reflecting a generational shift in political engagement. His campaign emphasized economic justice, social media outreach and symbolic representation.

California's "Proposition 50" passed, allowing Democrats to redraw congressional maps ahead of the 2026 midterms countering Republican gerrymandering efforts. Why does this matter? These results reflect a growing discontentment with Trump's second term, especially among urban, younger and economically burdened voters. Democrats are leveraging this momentum to reshape congressional maps and build coalitions ahead of 2026.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

"Shillong's Faithful Beat: A Gospel Music Hope"

Editor,

Shillong, proudly known as the Rock Capital of India, has long been the heart of live music in the country. From legendary rock bands to international performers, the city has hosted an impressive lineup of artists who have ignited countless stages. Music here isn't just entertainment; it's part of the city's identity, a cultural rhythm that runs through its hills and homes.

Yet, despite the Christian

heritage of our beautiful state of Meghalaya, one thing seems to be missing. We have yet to welcome Christian artists to perform in our city. A paradox for a place where faith forms the foundation of community life. Many young people and elders alike have expressed their deep desire to experience gospel music in Shillong, music that uplifts the soul and brings people closer to God.

Our beloved city was founded on Christian values, guided by leaders of faith who built communities grounded in prayer and service. Over time, as the lights of concerts and festivals captured our attention, perhaps we lost sight of the deeper melody that once defined our purpose: the song of the Gospel.

It is time for us to remember who we are and what our faith means. Shillong needs the Gospel, not just as a belief, but as a living presence that restores unity, hope, and purpose among our people. Gospel music isn't just another genre it is a call to worship, a way to bring people together under one voice of praise and gratitude.

Let us pray for our state, our people, and our future. Let us invite Christ back into the heart of Shillong, not only in our churches but in our streets, schools, and stages. May we once again become a city that not only rocks the nation but that also glorifies God- The Rock of Ages that cleft for us all.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo
Shillong-02

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

For James Watson, DNA was his only 'gold rush'

James Dewey Watson was an American molecular biologist most known for co-winning the 1962 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine for discovering the structure of DNA and its significance in transferring information in living systems. The importance of this discovery cannot be overstated. It unlocked how genes work and gave birth to the fields of molecular biology and evolutionary phylogenetics. It has inspired and influenced my career as a scientist and as director of a bioinformatics and functional genomics research center.

Watson was also an outspoken and controversial figure who transformed the way science was communicated. He was the first high-profile Nobel laureate to give the general public a shockingly personal and unfiltered glimpse into the cutthroat and competitive world of scientific research. Watson died on Nov. 6, 2025 at age 97.

Watson's pursuit of the gene

Watson attended the University of Chicago at age 15, initially intending to become an ornithologist. After reading Erwin Schrödinger's book of collected public lectures on the chemistry and physics of how cells operate, "What is Life?" he became interested in finding out what genes are made of – the biggest question in biology at the time.

Chromosomes – a mixture of protein and DNA – were known to be the molecules of heredity. But most scientists were convinced that proteins, with 20 different building blocks, were the likely candidate as opposed to DNA with only four building blocks. When the 1944 Avery-MacLeod-McCarty experiment demonstrated that DNA was the carrier molecule of inheritance, the focus immediately shifted to understanding DNA.

Watson completed his doctorate in zoology at Indiana University in 1950, followed by a year in Copenhagen studying viruses. He met biophysicist Maurice Wilkins at a conference in 1951. During Wilkins' talk on the molecular structure of DNA, Watson saw preliminary X-ray photographs of DNA. This

prompted him to follow Wilkins to the Cavendish Laboratory at the University of Cambridge to pursue work into uncovering the structure of DNA. Here, Watson met physicist-turned-biologist Francis Crick and developed an immediate bond with him over their shared research interests.

Soon, Watson and Crick published their seminal findings on the structure of DNA in the journal *Nature* in 1953. Two other papers were also published in the same journal issue on the structure of DNA, one co-authored by Wilkins and the other co-authored by chemist and X-ray crystallographer Rosalind Franklin.

Franklin took the X-ray photographs of DNA crystals that contained the data necessary for solving the structure of DNA. Her work, taken together with the work of the Cavendish Laboratory members, led to the 1962 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine awarded to Watson, Crick and Wilkins.

The prize and the controversy

Although they were aware that Franklin's essential X-ray photographs circulated in an internal Cavendish Laboratory summary report, neither Watson nor Crick acknowledged her contributions in their now famous 1953 *Nature* paper. In 1968, Watson published a book recounting the events surrounding the discovery of the DNA structure as he experienced them, wherein he minimizes Franklin's contributions and refers to her in sexist language. In the book's epilogue, he does acknowledge Franklin's contributions but stops short of providing full credit for her role in the discovery.

Some historians have argued that part of the justification for not formally recognizing Franklin was that her work had not been published at the time and was "common knowledge" in the Cavendish Laboratory because researchers working on the DNA problem routinely shared data with one another. However, the co-opting of Franklin's data and its incorporation in a formal publication without attribution or



permission is now largely viewed as a well-known example of poor behavior both in science and in the treatment of female colleagues by their male counterparts in professional settings.

In the decades since the Nobel Prize was awarded to Watson, Crick and Wilkins, some have recast Rosalind Franklin as a feminist icon. Whether or not she would have endorsed this is uncertain, as it is unclear how she would have felt about being left out of a Nobel Prize and written about disparagingly in Watson's account of events. What has become clear is that her contribution was critical and essential, and she is now widely regarded as an equal contributor to the discov-

ery of the structure of DNA.

Future of science collaboration

How have attitudes and behaviors towards junior colleagues and collaborators changed in the years since Watson and Crick were recognized for the Nobel Prize?

In many cases, universities, research institutions, funding agencies and peer-reviewed journals have implemented formal policies to transparently identify and credit the work and contributions of all researchers involved in a project. While these policies don't always work, the scientific environment has changed for the better to be more inclusive. This evolution

may be due to recognizing that a single individual is rarely able to tackle and solve complex scientific problems by themselves. And when problems occur, there are more formal mechanisms for people to seek mitigation.

Frameworks for sorting disputes can be found in author guidelines from journals, professional associations and institutions. There is also a journal called *Accountability in Research* that is "devoted to the examination and critical analysis of practices and systems for promoting integrity in the conduct of research." Guidance for scientists, institutions and grant-funding agencies on how to structure author attribution and accountability rep-

resents a significant advancement in fairness and ethical procedures and standards.

I've had both positive and negative experiences in my own career. These range from being included on papers when I was an undergraduate to being written out of grants to having my contributions left in while I was dropped from authorship without my knowledge. It's important to note that most of my negative experiences occurred early in my career, likely because senior collaborators felt they could get away with it.

It's also likely that these negative experiences occur less often now that I am upfront and explicit with my expectations regarding co-authorship at the outset of a collaboration. I am prepared and can afford to turn down collaborations.

I suspect this mirrors experiences that others have had, and is very likely amplified for people from groups that are underrepresented in science. Unfortunately, poor behavior, including sexual harassment, is still happening in the field. Suffice it to say, science as a community still has a long way to go – as does society at large.

After co-discovering the structure of DNA, James Watson went on to study viruses at Harvard University and helm Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, reviving and substantially expanding its physical space, staff and worldwide reputation. When the Human Genome Project was in its infancy, Watson was an obvious choice to lead and drive it forward, later stepping aside after a protracted battle over whether the human genome and genes themselves could be patented – Watson was firmly against gene patents.

Despite all the immense good Watson did during his lifetime, his legacy is tarnished by his long history of racist and sexist public comments as well as his ongoing disparagement of Rosalind Franklin both personally and professionally. And it is regrettable that he and Crick chose not to acknowledge all those who contributed to their great discovery at the critical points. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 9, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle 150 degrees with Mercury on your solar return chart and gives fantastic results. You will be a person with a creative bent of mind. You will have new ideas and will be willing to execute them. You just need a favorable atmosphere to your liking, and your talent will come to the fore. You will be capable of implementing your ideas into practice. And you will also get full support from your bosses. You will remain loyal and faithful to your partner. And will have a very warm and fulfilling relationship. Boys and girls will get suitable marriage proposals. You need to keep some personal matters a secret. Lots of effort and hard work will be required in business and work. Your health will remain perfect. You will be applauded and praised all around for your efforts. Your elders will keep blessings you. You will make new friends.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Constructive connections with others can be made easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum. Your attitude towards life would be changing. You are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly regarding career. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time to get rid of bad habits. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) This phase brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for betterment and expansion. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're about. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) There will be harmonious relations in professional and personal life. Positive new relationships are formed. You are instinctively starting a new phase in your life. It is time to give your life a makeover, a time for new beginnings and fresh energy. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends and exploration. A new project begun has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. You must get yourself organized and work to build your resources.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) This period brings good financial returns as you communicate well and present cordial relations with co-workers. You are inspired and could even inspire others with your words. You think more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. You possess a strong artistic sensitivity, and you can express your feelings openly and candidly.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) This is a period of work and development and a boost to your self-confidence. It is a time to deal with practical matters, and it is not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to build your resources, keep busy. Your focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It is also a good time for expressing your creativity. Reach out but avoid scattering your energies.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Planetary configuration brings unusualness and curiosity to your relationships as you feel they are more important to you. You are more receptive and gentler on a romantic level and tend to be sentimental. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition to achieve it. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused this week. You are more

enthusiastic and ready for adventure. The way you present your ideas, certainly helping to smooth over differences in your personal relationships.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) New associations and beginnings as well as new opportunities and changes come your way. You would form new connections and relationships that enhance your spiritual and personal growth. Your popularity increases and efforts to smooth over challenges in partnerships are more likely to succeed. This is an excellent influence on negotiations, marriage, and business partnerships. You are likely to be actively involved with teamwork and collaboration with others. You are taking on new responsibilities but generally enjoy the challenges.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) You must get yourself organized, work to build your resources and keep busy. There are better financial returns. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You might find that you are very often encouraged and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Emotional security and being content in love will help to attract positive circumstances into your life. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. Advice - stand-alone, act, start afresh and express independence.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) New horizons in your romantic and love life open. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. This week, you're bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You have powerful, transformative energy at your disposal. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual. Much will depend on how you handle it. Channeled positively, you could move mountains when it comes to pushing your projects ahead. If mishandled, however, you could be argumentative, stressed, and hell-bent on having your way. Avoid taking extreme measures to make things happen your way and avoid people who might be doing the same. Deliberately trying to maneuver matters to get the upper hand will be a lesson in frustration. You need not over-analyze personal relationships but rather respond with your heart and deep feelings; as a new understanding and maturity with others around you at home and work.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) There will be mixed results in domestic life and people you care for. You are practical, realistic, and your judgment is especially sound – and you derive much satisfaction from practical accomplishment. The key to harnessing this wonderful energy is to identify and find pleasure in the simple things that make you happy. You might enjoy a favorable outcome when it comes to legal affairs and travel. Financial benefits come your way. You find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. It is time to express your feelings and ideas and share what you have learned through a variety of experiences in this life.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you this time. Surprises surrounding intimate matters, shared finances and resources and financial support will be in store. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends. You pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. Your attention turns to domestic matters for a large part of the time and building, decoration and purchase of households for your home figures strongly now.

Some US public schools to teach kids about gun safety

This school year, students in elementary, middle and high schools in some states will get a new lesson on safety: what to do if they find a firearm.

Arkansas, Tennessee and Utah are the first states to enact laws that require public schools to teach children as young as 5 the basics of gun safety and how to properly store guns in the home. Only Utah's law allows students to opt out of the lesson if requested by parents or guardians.

A similar law in Arizona was vetoed by the Democratic governor, and lawmakers in at least five other states have introduced such proposals, putting schools at the forefront of yet another debate about gun violence.

In Tennessee, lesson plans could include stickers, games, quizzes, or videos with music and colorful firearm illustrations, including a gun made out of Lego-style bricks and an explanation of what a muzzleloader is.

The reality is that many children in the US grow up around firearms.

At Berclair Elementary School in Memphis, a class of 16 fifth graders were asked how many had seen a real gun. Nearly all raised their hands.

"It just shows you how much a class like this is needed," said Tammie Chapman, a health and physical education instructor, who has been leading the lessons at this school.

"While there is some controversy around guns, there doesn't always have to be," said Emily Buck, director of public relations for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, which created a curriculum with the state Department of Education. "I think that having some education and foundational knowledge really can be beneficial in the long run."

The lessons are often adapted from hunting safety courses already administered by state hunting and wildlife agencies, but with key differences.

Hunter safety courses typically involve hands-on instruction and explanations of how to safely handle and fire a gun. These classroom lessons, on the other hand, emphasize that children should not touch a firearm.

In Tennessee, the legislation prohibits any use of actual firearms, but in Arkansas, the law allows parents to opt into alternative curriculums, such as an off-campus firearm safety course that could include live guns.

The main takeaway is a series of steps for when a child finds a gun: Stop, don't touch, leave quickly, tell an adult. This is consistent with instructions created by other organizations, including one from the National Rifle Association that features animated characters, videos and coloring pages.

At Berclair Elementary School, the faculty designed a relay-race game to keep students engaged. In the gym, students took turns running to buckets that had different photos. Students who found a picture of a gun then reported it to one of the adults. They also listened to a catchy jingle emphasising the steps.

Buck acknowledged that adults might be the ones responsible for creating unsafe situations at home and said children should be prepared if they find guns in unusual spots, like on shelves or under a mattress.

"We hope that maybe students will take some of what they learned back to their house, back to the parents and maybe they'll encourage their parents to adjust their storage method," said Buck.

Gun legislation is a partisan issue across the US, with Democratic-led states enacting more limits on access to guns and efforts to tighten gun laws often failing in Republican-controlled legislatures.

Republicans sponsored and supported the education bills in Arkansas, Tennessee and Utah. The legislation says the curriculum must have neutral viewpoints on any gun-related topics, such as gun ownership in general.

Voices for a Safer Tennessee, a nonpartisan non-profit created by parents after The Covenant School shooting in Nashville, supported the legislation. The organization supports gun ownership and advocates for policies like expanded background checks.

These lessons may encourage families to start necessary conversations, said Jessica Jaglois, director of communications for the organization.

"It could possibly prevent a firearm tragedy from occurring, because we know that a moment of access can lead to a lifetime of tragedy," said Jaglois.

In 2022, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that firearms were the leading cause of death among children and teens. Arkansas and Tennessee have rates of firearm deaths among children and teens that exceed the national average, according to an AP analysis. But some Democrats and gun control advocates argue this kind of legislation is the wrong approach to gun violence.

The states gave school districts some discretion on whether to use provided lesson plans or go with other instructions that adhere to the laws' language. The schools also can decide which faculty or staff will lead the lessons, or in some instances bring in police officers to talk about gun safety.

In Arkansas, schools might choose to incorporate the lessons as a part of annual safety training, such as when they are practicing fire safety or tornado drills, said Spencer Griffith, a deputy director with Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

"We hope they will interject this in a way that kind of helps to maybe prevent some of these accidents from occurring, but not in a way that puts a political focus or fear around that, because it's just not the place for that," said Griffith.

Berclair Principal Clint Davis said the issue of children getting hurt in firearm accidents is not new, even if this curriculum is.

"It's not something that's necessarily just become a modern issue. It's always been there," said Davis. "And I think we're just now really responding to the need to provide that sort of training in school." *(AP)*

"The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress."
—Charles Kettering

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.90 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2025

RSS, Bharat Mata

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has only reiterated a stand when he addressed the organisation's centenary event in Bengaluru — that the RSS is rooted in nationalism and not Brahminism. Famously, the RSS "sees all Hindus as one," and is willing to accommodate others too into its fold on condition that they "swear allegiance to Bharat Mata and do not subscribe to their religious identity." This is a periodic reaffirmation of the stand that it has been taking for long. RSS, however, is widely seen as an organisation of the Brahmins — who constitute less than five per cent of the population — due mainly to the fact that it has been led from the front by Brahmins, other than for a short term by Rajender Singh, a Thakur, in the late 1990s. The base of the RSS is in Nagpur, where physician Keshav Hegdewar, a Brahmin, founded it in 1925. The Hindu ethos it carries is alien to the large majority of the other laid-back, yet numerically large communities who are bracketed as Hindus yet are discriminated against within the higher echelons of the religion. Herein lies the crux of the issue. In order to be a mass-based entity, the RSS would reach nowhere if it professes an 'exclusivity' based on its Brahmin aura. More so in a democracy like India. The RSS think-tanks cleverly used the Ram Temple issue in Ayodhya to whip up collective Hindu sentiments in the 1990s, to successfully do political engineering and grab power from the Congress party. The pantheon of gods and goddesses in the Hindu religion belong to all segments of the wider religious order. Hence, the RSS skilfully hoisted the Ram temple "kamandal" issue to neutralize the surge of the backward communities in the political arena in the Hindi belt after VP Singh as prime minister exploded the "Mandal" bomb.

The Congress, after Indira Gandhi, had less-conditioned leaderships even in the form of Rajiv Gandhi. He was no politician when he took charge as general secretary of the party and later succeeded his mother as PM. Narasimha Rao and Sonia Gandhi had lesser understanding of the people's psyche in the Hindi belt. All these helped the RSS outwit the legendary Congress establishment. It is imperative for the RSS to keep all Hindus in one basket, and get backing from others too where possible — as in the north-east, Kashmir, Goa and Kerala. The camouflaging of the Hindutva in the Bharat Mata façade is seen by many as no more than a ploy to retain political power, without which it would be difficult for the RSS to retain its aura. Politics and religion are a lethal mix. More so in a secular nation like India where different religions coexist like a colourful mosaic. The Congress party had a way of accommodating all. Its decimation in a wider swathe of the political arena was due to its leadership's lack of alertness. The RSS seized the opportunity. Those leading the Modi administration from behind are a mass of RSS deputies that frame policies and dictate the course of governance.

A week earlier, yet another attempt was made to create a common platform for political groups from the North East in order to articulate their shared concerns to the Union Government. Speaking at the event, Conrad Sangma (Chief Minister of Meghalaya and President of National People's Party) lamented that for too long the same issues had been raised from different platforms. There was, therefore, a need for a collective voice. He stated that indigenous voices need to be heard and represented through a unified platform — the new regional initiative called "One Northeast."

Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, scion of the Tripura royal family and founder of the Tripura Motha Party (TMP), speaking after Conrad, expressed an angst that must have been weighing on him and many others from the region for a long time. He sarcastically noted that for years, people from the "mainland" (not his word, but mine) could not differentiate between one Northerner and another, and therefore it was time for the people of the North East to speak in a united voice. The racial stereotyping of Northerners as having similar facial features has long been a common trope among those in the mainland. But to be honest, having visited the mainland myself, I too have made the same mistake.

Recently, I congratulated the wrong person for a fascinating presentation on maps during a program at Asian Confluence, a think tank based in Shillong. I quickly realized my mistake and apologized. Since both presenters were from the Gangetic belt, they looked and sounded the same to me. So, I can understand people from the mainland making similar mistakes. Pradyot's angst reveals that there is a lot of personal baggage that comes with this attempt to form a united front — and that is perfectly fine.

"The personal is political" was a slogan made popular during second-wave feminism, highlighting how issues like domestic violence, workplace inequality, and relationships are not individual failings but the result of larger political and social structures. In short, personal motivations are the products of broader political systems that give them legitimacy and expression. When personal grievances are shared by a larger collective — which is naturally the case — political mobilization is required to

whom are Schools, teachers, students and the public supposed to address academic queries?

2. Why not allow teachers to set question papers while following the standard pattern provided by the concerned authorities? Teachers understand classroom realities, student capabilities, methods of teaching-learning, evaluation process (since there is no uniform evaluation procedure provided by the authorities) and the actual teaching-learning context better than any external agency. It may be mentioned that only question papers are to be set externally, however evaluation has to be done by individual schools. All these defeat the purpose of standardisation.

3. Why are only a few subjects selected for external question setting, leaving others to schools? This creates inconsistency and confusion.

4. Distributing question papers in soft copy is risky and impractical, especially for rural schools without printing facilities; not to mention the limited time frame very close to the date of Examination scheduled.

5. Why are Mission Schools exempted from following externally set question papers? Are they not

under the same board and evaluation framework?

6. It may be mentioned that Meghalaya still lacks a State School Curriculum Framework, which has resulted in fragmented and aimless educational reforms. Outdated syllabus and textbooks are merely rearranged rather than thoughtfully revised with purpose and vision.

All these changes and directives, issued frequently and without clarity, are causing confusion at every level — from administration to the classroom.

Recently, a senior and experienced teacher highlighted in a media outlet the presence of many incorrect answers in the CM-impact guide book published under the Chief Minister's Educational Programme, particularly in Economics. I wish to state that I too have personally come across similar inaccuracies in the same guide book, not only in Economics but also in other subjects. Such errors mislead students, confuse teachers and lower the academic credibility of the State's educational initiatives. Furthermore, the Social Science textbooks currently in use contain several outdated facts, figures and examples, some dating as far back as 2002-2003. Such outdated content hinders meaningful learning and defeats the purpose of effective education. I also have personal disagree-

ment with the best of 5 subjects' evaluation in the SSLC examination where students may fail in 2 subjects (such as Social Science, Mathematics or Science) and still pass the exams. This undermines the foundation and knowledge provided by these subjects and further lowers the level of learning among students which also makes it difficult for teachers to promote interest in the classrooms.

A State once celebrated as the educational hub of the North Eastern region now struggles at the bottom of national education rankings. This is deeply concerning.

We sincerely hope that the Government and concerned educational bodies will take meaningful steps to establish a clear, unified, deliberate and goal-oriented educational framework. Our children deserve a learning environment that is stable, progressive, up-to-date and at par with the rest of the country.

South Asia.

What is also interesting is that genetic evidence shows that Dalits and lower castes are primarily South Asian in origin, while upper castes have Steppe ancestry from Central Asia. While some sections of the indigenous population may have been assimilated favorably into the emerging varna system (the foundation of the caste system), many were relegated to the bottom. This mirrors patterns seen elsewhere in the world, where indigenous populations were marginalized and dispossessed of their lands and cultures. The attempt to impose Hindi as the national language is just another form of assimilation and erasure of indigenous identity and culture — a process that continues to this day. This is also why Hindi is vehemently opposed in the South, as the Dravidians are the oldest indigenous group in South Asia and are unwilling to let an older tradition be erased by that of later arrivals.

In the context of the North East, the idea of indigeneity becomes even more relevant when we look at the people who came together to create the "One Northeast" platform. The announcement brought together Conrad Sangma (and his brother), Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, Daniel Langthasa (founder of People's Party), and Mmhonlumo Kikon (former national spokesperson of BJP). Except for Kikon, all three belong to the larger Kok-Borok linguistic group, the second oldest group in the North East and probably in South Asia. The Kok-Borok (which includes the Garo, Tripuri, Bodo, Dimas, Koch, etc.) are among the oldest groups in the Brahmaputra valley.

The Khasis, an even older group, seemed to have avoided the swampy lowlands and settled in the highlands, which were less disease-ridden. So, when the Kok-Borok first arrived in the region, the highlands were already occupied by the Khasis, so they settled along the Brahmaputra valley. The original name of the Brahmaputra was most probably Dihang — "Di" in Bodo and Dimas means water or river. Hence, many rivers across Assam begin with "Di": Dihang, Dihing, Dikow, Dibang, Dikrong, etc. Similarly, just like place names like Lumding (in today's Hojai district) and Kamakhya or Ka-Mei-Kha point to a Khasi past, the river names also reflect a Kok-Borok influence. In fact,

during a personal conversation, Sonal Jain, noted artist and author from Shillong, told me that during her stay in Assam, she realized that caste Assamese were wary of the Brahmaputra, whereas the Bodos had a tradition of fishing with river dolphins. If we include the Konyak and Singpho as part of the larger Sal language group, to which Kok-Borok also belongs, they are arguably the most successful linguistic group in the North East. Thus, it is quite fitting that the three individuals from the Kok-Borok group — Conrad, Pradyot, and Daniel — along with Kikon (a Lotha Naga belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Naga language group, which includes Kuki-Zomi, Meitei, and Naga groups) have taken the mantle to create a common platform for Northeastern groups.

What is frustrating, however, is that there were no Khasis at that press conference. The Khasis are the oldest group in the North East and the second oldest in South Asia, and they should have been present at such a gathering. An angst I have often heard from Khasi intellectuals is that Khasis feel hemmed in by the incoming Tibeto-Burman groups. This, they argue, has led to a siege mentality and reluctance to join larger formations. But that is not entirely accurate. The Khasis belong to the larger Austroasiatic group, which includes communities in Central India such as the Mundas and others, whose combined population exceeds 10 million. In comparison, the Tibeto-Burman population (Kok-Borok, Kuki-Chin-Naga, Tani-Mishimi, Konyak, Tibetan) in India is about half that — around 5 million. After the Bodos, the Khasis are the second-largest single indigenous ethnic group in the North East. We are the most successful indigenous group in both South Asia and the North East, and it is time we cross Khanapara and explore beyond.

The crucial question now is whether the word 'indigenous', as used by Conrad Sangma and others, is meant to signify 'first settlers' — and whether they will stand up and fight for that idea. Many remain skeptical of this new formation, and rightly so. But personally, the idea of a common platform with indigeneity as its core principle is something I wholeheartedly welcome. We need this — and we need it now.

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

The Aftertaste of the MDA Reshuffle

By Risador M Makri

Something feels broken in Shillong — and it's not just the streetlights flickering out of rhythm. The government calls it a reshuffle. But what it's really done is reshuffle competence out of the picture.

We're told this was about "balance," about "fresh faces." But freshness without depth is just perfume on decay. Because let's be honest — this new lineup doesn't inspire confidence. It embarrasses it. These ministers aren't even half of what their predecessors were, in either capability or comprehension. You can't replace experience with enthusiasm and expect the system to run itself. Meghalaya doesn't need figureheads; it needs functioning heads.

Take the Power Department. Under A.T. Mondal, the city finally saw something that had eluded it for years — reliability. No power cuts. No sudden blackouts. No mysterious "technical faults" at 7 p.m. on a Friday night. It was smooth, efficient, and quietly

new cabinet doesn't have the weight or the wisdom of the one before. It's like watching a play where the lead actors have been replaced overnight by understudies still reading their lines. They stumble. They improvise. And the audience — us — are forced to pretend the performance hasn't collapsed.

If the old ministers represented experience, this new group represents experimentation. And the stakes are too high for experiments. We're talking about electricity, livelihoods, and an economy that breathes through tourism. These aren't rehearsal subjects; they're survival lines.

The MDA calls this a "strategic move." From where the public stands, it looks more like an institutional downgrade. There was a time when governance in Meghalaya had flashes of brilliance — now it's just flickering.

And yes, we notice. We notice the empty press conferences, the recycled state-

If the old ministers represented experience, this new group represents experimentation. And the stakes are too high for experiments. We're talking about electricity, livelihoods, and an economy that breathes through tourism. These aren't rehearsal subjects; they're survival lines. The MDA calls this a "strategic move." From where the public stands, it looks more like an institutional downgrade. There was a time when governance in Meghalaya had flashes of brilliance — now it's just flickering.

revolutionary. Mondal wasn't loud about his work; he just made the lights stay on. That was enough.

And now? The lights are back to flickering like old memories. The new minister, barely equipped to handle the complexities of a power grid, has turned one of the best-run departments into a daily guessing game. Some mornings there's power, some nights there's none. The city groans, the markets pause, the students curse under their breath as they sit beside uncharged laptops.

It's almost tragic. You can feel the difference between competence and confusion — it's the difference between light and dark. — both literally and metaphorically. The new minister seems overwhelmed, unsure, and unprepared. It's almost painful to watch. Shillong has gone back to its old routine: candles, generators, and the quiet curse of the working class whose day ends when the current does.

And tourism — well, that's an even bigger tragedy. Paul Lyngdoh didn't just run the department; he embodied it. You could feel his presence in every caption on his Instagram, every picture that told a story without trying too hard. A shot of rain on cobblestones. A sunset over Sohra. A Khasi song performed under a bamboo roof. That's what made him different — he understood that tourism is not infrastructure alone; it's imagination.

Under Paul, Meghalaya's story was being told beautifully — quietly but confidently — to the world. It wasn't about slogans or staged festivals. It was about feeling. And people felt it. You could sense it in the way visitors wrote about the state; they didn't just come here, they belonged here for a while.

Now, the storytelling has stopped. The minister is silent and reads from a script. The Khyndailad stretch, once meant to be our postcard of renewal, still looks weary and empty. The new minister, whoever thought he was ready, hasn't even started to understand the language Paul spoke fluently — the language of place, of people, of poetry.

The truth is simple: this

notice that the new ministers are not even half of what the old ones were — not in intellect, not in instinct, not in the sheer dignity of work.

But here's the bitter truth: this reshuffle had little to do with performance and everything to do with pressure. Word around the corridors is that certain groups within the party pushed for these changes — factions demanding visibility, allies demanding rewards. It's a classic case of politics cannibalizing progress.

And that's where it hurts most. Because when party interest outweighs public interest, when internal appeasement matters more than infrastructure, when positions are swapped not for merit but for management — the people lose. Every time.

What we're witnessing isn't governance; it's choreography. Every move calculated, not for impact, but for image. And in that performance, the very ministers who delivered real, visible change were quietly removed.

This isn't balance — it's betrayal.

The MDA government can call this strategic. But from where the public stands, it looks like a demolition of development. Meghalaya is too small, too fragile, too full of potential to be held hostage by internal politics.

We deserve a government that fights for power, not plays with it.

Because in the end, no matter what happens in party rooms or backdoor meetings — it's the ordinary citizens of Shillong who sit in the dark, both literally and figuratively, waiting for the lights — and leadership — to come back on.

It's embarrassing, not because the old were perfect, but because the new seem painfully unprepared to even try. The lights may come back on eventually. But for now, Meghalaya is learning the hard way that you can't reshuffle your way into competence. Some people earned their portfolios; others just inherited them.

And it shows — in every blackout, every stalled idea, every quiet evening where progress once stood proud.

Letters to the Editor

Concerns on the Present Education Scenario in Meghalaya

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I would like to draw your attention to the current situation of the education system in our State, which has increasingly become a matter of concern for teachers, students and parents alike. Furthermore related with this year's development and as students will be sitting for their Annual/Promotion Examinations

It may be mentioned that during the ongoing academic session, a revised syllabus for class VI - IX was published and it was announced that questions for the annual examination for Classes 6 to 9 would be set externally by the Directorate of Educational Research and Training (DERT), following a new question pattern. Then by October, another notification stated that questions for subjects such as Health Education, Information & Technology, and Tourism however could be set by respective schools.

On October 28, a notification came from the Director of School Education and Literacy (DSEL) detailing procedures for the exter-

nal question papers, which would be distributed in soft copy from the Directorate to DSEOs, then to all schools for printing. Schools, many of which lack proper printing facilities, are expected to maintain strict secrecy while collecting and printing these papers — a highly impractical expectation.

Adding further confusion, another notification on November 4, from the Commissioner and Secretary of Education, Government of Meghalaya informed that Mission Schools need not follow these external question papers. This raises several questions regarding uniformity and fairness in evaluation.

Earlier in January this year, the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) issued a rationalisation of chapters for Social Science and English in Classes 9 and 10. When viewed collectively, these repeated notifications appear inconsistent, uncoordinated and unclear.

With all these developments, I feel compelled to raise the following questions on behalf of teachers, students and parents:

1. Which authority is responsible for syllabus framing, textbook content, examination patterns and question paper setting? Is it DERT, MBOSE, DSEL, the Commissioner and Secretary? To

Blinkit occupying public footpath

Editor,
I am writing this letter through your esteemed publication to highlight the absence of public space in the

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Yours etc.,
Gracefulness Rymmai,
Via email

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

"Corrections are good, they keep us all humble."

— Cathie Wood

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 91 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2025

Universities In A Quandary

AT least two central universities in India's North East – the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and Tezpur University are in a state of suspended animation. In the case of NEHU, Shillong the Vice Chancellor, PS Shukla, is persona-non-grata in Meghalaya for his alleged acts of omission and commission and following a hunger strike by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) demanding his removal and replacement since November 2024. The student bodies and the NEHU Teachers' Association have been demanding that Shukla be replaced by a person worthy of occupying the post of Vice Chancellor since the post demands sensitivity to local sentiments. Shukla was also accused of arbitrary appointment of officials, including the registrar. He has been functioning from the NEHU Guest House in Guwahati and sometimes from Delhi for a year now, which is unprecedented.

In Tezpur University, the Tezpur University Teachers' Association (TUTA) had on September 25, this year, accused the Vice Chancellor, Shambhu Nath Singh of committing serious financial and administrative irregularities. They aver that these lapses have eroded the academic and institutional integrity of the University. One major grouse against the Tezpur VC is his insensitivity towards Assam singing sensation, Zubeen Garg who passed away in Singapore on September 19, 2025. Besides, the University Finance Department is run by an officer enjoying extended tenure without regular appointment and the abolition of the Pro-VC position. What has happened with all universities is that Vice Chancellors are appointed according to the diktat of the Rashtriya Swayam-Sevak Sangh (RSS) the alter ego of the BJP which has been in the seat of power since 2014. From the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Delhi which was known for its liberal eco-system promoting free-thinking, to every other government-run educational institution, the RSS now has a stranglehold over them. The idea is to promote the Hindutva ideology which negates everything that has held this country together for over six decades. The educational curriculum today is sought to be rewritten. The spirit of scientific enquiry is being subverted by alluding to myths as truths. History is being rewritten with the intent of pushing an agenda where Muslims are demonised.

While universities are supposed to engage in internationalisation efforts and collaborate with leading universities thereby fostering global partnerships and exchange programmes with universities around the world, most Indian universities today are involved in internal politicking which has muddled the academic environment. Indian universities are no longer free and independent. They are harangued by a complex regulatory framework characterised by a bureaucratic red tape, overbearing political interference and lack of institutional autonomy. In such a circumscribed environment how can it be expected that Indian universities would compete with their counterparts elsewhere. While appointing Vice Chancellors there is complete lack of transparency in the selection process. Merit is given a go by while political affiliation takes precedence. No wonder then that out of 70 universities that are ranked in both 2023 and 2024, 33 have gone up while 37 have plummeted and the number of Indian universities in the top 100 has dropped from four to one. This calls for a serious national debate.

A Contemporary Antidote to the Non-Permanent Staff saga

By Melarbor L Thabab

I would like to profusely thank The Shillong Times for publishing my op-ed dated June 30, 2025 on the topic Abrogation of Ad-hoc Rules in Perpetuity. It is not known whether the top bureaucrats saw this op-ed or whether it was just mere coincidence which led them to take decisive action on the issue concerning Ad-hoc appointments which greatly affects my thought process. Nonetheless, I am ecstatic that action has been taken. However, one condition has to be met to assuage the genuine concerns of all parties and the Ad-hocs. I will also be addressing the issue of Casual, Daily Wage and Muster Roll staff here.

Ad-hoc Issue: I resolutely support the Government on termination of all Ad-hoc staff bar none, only with the condition that "All those Ad-hoc staff who fail in the competitive examinations to be conducted in this one-year span by the DSC / MPSC / Recruitment Boards have to be assured in writing that they will get an alternative job as casual basis workers depending on their years of service in that Ad-hoc post which they had occupies as either Unskilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled, Highly Skilled Casual Basis staff for which they can work till the age of 60 years". By undertaking this "all-important one-time exercise", the government would have shown its "humane side" of not taking away food from their table, ensuring that families of Ad-hoc employees have a decent livelihood and not allowing them to fall into poverty especially when the Ad-hoc staff is a single parent provider and the sole breadwinner of the family. By ensuring that the failed Ad-hocs do not remain jobless but employed as casual staff, the government will remove all forms of opposition since those who oppose are upset the failed Ad-hoc staff will become jobless thus falling into poverty.

The question of unfairness and the use and discard principle after extracting benefits from the Ad-hoc staffers have become null and void since when carried out by the government, the failed Ad-hoc staff will now be employed as casual staff to work till the age of 60 years. Further, the most senior Ad-hoc employee would have served from 2008 to 2025 which is only 17 years and the lesser senior Ad-hoc staff would have served way less than 17 or 10 years for which they all got these vacant sanctioned posts through nepotism and favouritism. All the Ad-hoc employees who had served for 2 decades or more have all been absorbed as regular

staff via Department of Personnel Notification Dated 21.12.2022. The question of serving 2 decades or more does not arise. The government has done right by absorbing all the people who had worked from the 1980s, 1990s extending up to 2007 which is mid 2000s. The government should not abandon its stated aims at any cost since it is doing the right thing and is on the right side of history standing for the 2-3 lakh educated unemployed youths. At the same time, it should assuage the concerns of all those who had opposed this move by employing all the failed Ad-hocs as casual staff of varying hierarchy depending on their years of service. A few suggestions from my side which I had also contributed to The Shillong Times is attached herewith.

Highly Skilled Casual Basis staff for which they can work till the age of 60 years". By undertaking this "all-important one-time exercise", the government would have shown its "humane side" of not taking away food from their table, ensuring that families of Ad-hoc employees have a decent livelihood and not allowing them to fall into poverty especially when the Ad-hoc staff is a single parent provider and the sole breadwinner of the family.

over 1500 vacant sanctioned posts currently occupied by the Ad-hocs will be a pro-youth policy and highly appreciative move by the government which will be a monumental blessing to the 2-3 lakh educated unemployed youth who had completed their graduation and post graduate degrees in professional and non - professional courses. The highly educated unemployed youth will be able to apply and compete for these posts along with the Ad-hoc staff. This gives a ray of hope for the educated unemployed youth who have lost hope when it pertains to applying for all job advertisements. A legislative mechanism has to be employed to ensure swift advertisement of vacant sanctioned posts and to ensure a complete abrogation of Ad-hoc and its associated notifications, office memorandums and rules in perpetuity.

Ad-hoc is a very unique post when compared to casual, contractual, daily wage and muster roll because unlike the latter, the Ad-hoc is a recipient of scale pay, TA/DA, and substantial yearly

increments as a permanent staff who has to pass the written and viva exams and also Ad-hoc (Regular) can also be regularised after completing 10 years of service and can get promotions as permanent staff do. This is an ethical crime and is the antithesis to hard work. It in fact rewards free lunch sans hard work, diligence and perseverance.

The Government needs to abrogate all notifications / office memorandums/rules if present, pertaining to Ad-hoc Regular, Adhoc 2F and Ad-hoc 3F if any; to prevent the Government Order from being successfully challenged in the High Court on the SOP of the Personnel Department. This is very important since the High Court will ask the government whether the "terms Ad-hoc and their associated rules" are still present and if present, the government has a lot of po-

who are struggling with mental health problems which affects not only them but their entire family. Those who oppose when the failed Ad-hocs have been granted highly skilled casual jobs will be on the wrong side of history.

Casual Workers Issue: Modification of the Meghalaya Regular Casual Workers Scheme, 1996 whereby a Regular Casual Employee who had served more than 10 years without any break of service cannot fill a vacant sanctioned Group D post. Only and exclusively candidates who passed the written open competitive exams should get the vacant sanctioned Group D post.

Casual Basis, Daily Wage Basis and Muster Roll Workers Issue: There are too many classifications when it comes to non-permanent staff. Many might have not even heard of the term "Daily Wage Basis." Casual Basis and Daily Wage Basis must be combined with the rules combined as one since both follow the same Labour Payment and Classification (Unskilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled, Highly Skilled), Rules, Muster Roll may also be combined as Casual Basis. By condensing all the three as one, it will enable rationalization and synchronization instead of complicating the issue of having too many types of non-permanent posts.

Conclusion: It is my unyielding belief that there should be only two types of non-permanent posts that is Casual Basis and Contractual Basis; the two Cs of non-permanent posts and that Daily Wage basis must be converted / renamed as Casual Basis and if possible Muster Roll to be all renamed / converted under a single umbrella which is Casual Basis. The government should modify the Meghalaya Regular Casual Workers Scheme, 1996 into a statute for non-permanent posts from advertisement to their mode of recruitment which will subsume all Office Memos, Notifications, Rules, SOPs making them redundant after subsumption. Whether the government decides to rename / convert the Daily Wage and Muster Roll into Casual Posts, there is no doubt and no question that these non-permanent employees should have the basic fundamental rights to having 15 days casual leave, 15 days earned leave, 6 months maternity leave for the first two children and 3 months maternity leave for the third child and employees provident fund (EPF) so that they can have something to live on post-retirement. An organization that employs 15 people or more should grant EPF to its employees.

Shillong: 99 right actions and 1 wrongdoing

By B Nengnong

Different strokes for different folks. People will always have different views and opinions. Some will fall into the category of, "You can silence 50 scholars with 1 fact," while some will fall into, "you can't silence 1 fool with 50 facts." That is what our city has become, it seems. The former will never take hasty actions, while the latter are quick to bark without waiting for facts.

The same people who would praise the police department for doing their job, catching criminals, cracking the nation's sensational case, are the same people who give a dog a bad name and hang them.

From: "Great job @meghalayapolice more power to you all", "Meghalaya police – the true heroes", "We the people of Meghalaya are

not let emotions get in the way of work and remain impartial, but that doesn't make them less of a human, or that they don't care about the community, just because they don't show it doesn't mean it isn't there.

Not everyone has it easy, our jobs differ from one another, we all have our own hardships in our workplace. We all work in different fields, we are not aware of the hardships faced by an officer, a lawyer, a teacher, a business owner, a sales person, a content writer, a construction worker, a cleaner, and vice versa... except our own, hence, making it easier to judge others just by the outward job description.

An Officer, faces high stress, long hours, decision making process, and accountability.

A Lawyer, faces long

You want to be protected by the law, doing things according to the law, and when the police do it, you are all criticizing them and instead, want to take things into your own hands. When they don't take things into account, you're criticizing them for being useless and when they do, they're still being criticized.

really proud of our police department."

To: "We don't need the Meghalaya police." "They are faking news because they couldn't catch the culprit," "The Meghalaya police are well stuffed with cash." This disparity highlights a deeper issue, that people would ignore the 99 right actions by them but imprint "THAT" 1 wrong doing.

When the police follow law and order, they're often criticized for being too strict. Yet, when they don't take action, they're criticized for being ineffective. It's a no-win situation. Do they know that mandatory steps are to be taken in doing their job?

You want to be protected by the law, doing things according to the law, and when the police do it, you are all criticizing them and instead, want to take things into your own hands. When they don't take things into account, you're criticizing them for being useless and

hours of study and court appearances, high stakes in cases, and dealing with complex legal issues.

A Teacher, managing classroom dynamics, meeting diverse student needs, grading, and dealing with curriculum changes and parental expectations.

A Business owner, faces early morning shifts, physical labour, meeting customer demands, and maintaining quality.

A Salesperson, meeting sales targets, dealing with rejection, building and maintaining customer relationships.

A Content writer, meeting deadlines, researching topics, creating engaging content, and adapting different styles.

A Construction worker, faces physical labour, working in challenging weather conditions, safety, risk, and meeting project deadlines.

A Cleaner, faces physical labour, working in various

As we navigate the complexities of law enforcement, let us strive for empathy and understanding. Instead of consistently nitpicking the police department, perhaps we should try to understand the challenges they too face and try to appreciate their efforts and recognize that their job isn't always rainbows and roses, instead of throwing stones.

when they do, they're still being criticized.

A recent incident involving physical assault of drug addicts illustrates this. You were told to refrain from such acts because you would then be the one breaking the law. Yet, some say the police are biased towards addicts, when in reality, they're trying to maintain law and order.

People with such a mindset don't know what it's like to be in their shoes and do their work. You think it is a piece of cake? If so, what is stopping you from joining the police department? Instead of barking and criticizing, you could be the heroes that you all try to act, and fight all crimes within a day.

I'm not trying to be biased here, but these are facts. Have you ever wondered that they too have rules and regulations to abide by? They can't just do whatever they want whenever they want? I'm sure they hear the public's cries, anger and frustration, but at times they are left with no choice but to follow the protocol that's being assigned to them.

Hence, this makes them an enemy to the ordinary eye. They are trained to

environments, dealing with dirt and hazardous materials, and maintaining cleanliness standards.

Each profession comes with its unique set of challenges, whether physical, emotional, or mental and also with its own set of rules and protocols to follow.

As we navigate the complexities of law enforcement, let us strive for empathy and understanding. Instead of consistently nitpicking the police department, perhaps we should try to understand the challenges they too face and try to appreciate their efforts and recognize that their job isn't always rainbows and roses, instead of throwing stones. By working together, we can build trust and create a safer community. Rather than focusing on the 1 wrongdoing, let's recognize the 99 right actions. Together, we can foster a more supportive environment for those who serve to protect us.

*Not everyone will agree with this article. It may not align with every reader's perspective, but it aims to provide an honest look at some ground realities. If it causes offense, I must stress that it is not intended to be inflammatory or hurtful.

Letters to the Editor

Upholding culture through reason, not emotions

Editor,
The recent action of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) in compelling the closure of banks, post offices and other central government offices during the Nongkrem Dance Festival is a matter of concern. The festival is a sacred and proud celebration of our heritage, yet enforcing a state holiday upon central institutions extends beyond legal and administrative limits. Central offices function under national laws and cannot be compelled to close unless officially notified by the Centre.

What is more troubling is that such incidents have been happening repeatedly, yet there seems to be little or no firm response from the authorities. This trend must be put to an end. The police and district administration must act decisively to uphold the rule of law and protect essential services from unlawful interference.

As an educated student body, the KSU is expected to lead with wisdom and reason, not emotion. Cultural pride gains true strength when expressed through understanding, dialogue and lawful means not through force or disruption. Respecting our traditions is important, but equally important is respecting the Constitution that safeguards those very traditions.

Let our actions reflect both our cultural depth and our maturity as a society.

Yours etc.,
Thomas J Wahlang
Via email

Educated but Unemployed

Editor,
In reference to a touching article, "The Tale of Bah Bor from Sohra" by Salil Gwali, published in your esteemed daily on Nov 8, 2025, I wish to appreciate the writer for highlighting the harsh realities faced by our youths today. The story of Bah Bor is not just one man's struggle. As Gwali rightly points out, it reflects the suffering of young people across the

country. Every word in the article deeply touched me personally. Despite earning college degrees like B.A, BBA, B.Tech and M.A., educated youths are unable to find employment worthy of their qualifications. The job market is shrinking, and vacancies are few. As a result, many are forced to accept low-paying jobs just to survive like washing cars, working as salesmen, assisting plumbers and electricians, or doing manual labour at construction sites and motor garages. These jobs are often far below their qualifications, but they have no option.

The ongoing economic slowdown has made things worse. Even employers are struggling and unable to offer good salaries. Poor families invest everything they have to educate their children, hoping for a better future. But when those dreams are met with disappointment, it leaves the parents even more distressed. Due to continuous frustration, youths also indulge in drugs, burglaries, and other illicit activities. We hope the government understands the real plight of the youth and takes meaningful

action, not just offering hollow rhetoric.

Yours etc.,
V. Sharma
Via email

Noble name of RSS under a cloud!

Editor,
Shockingly, it was in the month of October this year that one 26-year-old Anandu Aji, a software engineer, was found dead inside a hotel room in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, with a suicide note for reason of being sexually abused consistently by the RSS members! He claimed that such harrowing ordeals had haunted him ad nauseam after joining the RSS disciplinary camp in his childhood days when he was merely 3 or 4 years of age thereby leading him to unimaginable mental health disorders / distress. Subsequently he was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) consequent to physical abuse. Furthermore, the star-crossed Aji has reportedly scripted in his suicide note, thus, "I'm

committing suicide not because of any girl, love affair, debt, or anything like that. I'm doing this because of my anxiety and depressive episodes. Also because of my medicines. I can't concentrate on my work." Such harrowing and torturing experiences were literally breathing down his neck times without number, turning him into a walking hell with no beckoning light of hope at hand whatsoever! Without mincing words, the victim had also alleged, "Never befriended an RSS member. Not only friends, even if it is your family..... They carry so much venom. They are the real abusers."

In the context of children joining RSS camp, he warned "I know nobody would believe me as I don't have any proof. But my life itself is my proof. I'm doing this as I don't want another child to go through what I suffered."

In the wake of the aforesaid tragic episode, the incumbent President of the Indian Youth Congress Uday Bhanu Chib couldn't have been more right when he befittingly commented that, "RSS has become a den of

exploitation"

Co-incidentally, nearer home, one can definitely never forget how two gullible village boys one from Lyndem, East Khasi Hills and the other from Nongstoin, West Khasi Hills while pursuing their study in an alleged RSS run institution in Karnataka had tragically died owing to food poisoning after consuming contaminated eatable leftovers from the Holi festivals celebrated elsewhere. Additionally, several co-students from our land of Hynhewtrep were also victims of the same incident but fortunately they managed to survive post hospitalization. Such horrific narratives ought to serve as a warning to all and sundry to be aware of the organisation they associate with and weigh the pros and cons before jumping in mindlessly.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

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"Humble souls are fearful of their own strength."

— William Gurnall

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXVIII No. 92 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2025

Terror strikes again

WITH a deadly hit in the capital, the spectre of terror is back to haunt the nation. A radical group of doctors and many of their associates are believed to have carried out the car bomb blast that killed around 10 persons and injured many more. Investigators also say the terrorists belonged to the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed. The Jaish apparently indoctrinated the doctors, including Umar who loaded his car with the explosives and blasted it near the Red Fort Metro Station. A manhunt is on to arrest those who participated in this heinous act. Home minister Amit Shah has said the security agencies would use their full force to nail the culprits. Having failed to avert the disaster, this now is the only way forward; and this needs no over-emphasizing. Admittedly, the security forces have done a good job in detecting and extricating stocks of over 3000kg of explosives from terrorist dens in Faridabad, Haryana, not far from the national capital. Here too, a big question is, how the militants could organise such huge quantities of explosives and execute their operations without the intelligence agencies getting any hint of the gang's operations so far.

Notably, Jaish-e-Mohammed leader Masood Azhar, who has been organising several deadly terrorist attacks on Indian soil in recent decades, has not learnt a lesson from Operation Sindoor. His sister and her family members were decimated in the Indian military's operations in May last, while he himself was safely escorted out of his den elsewhere by the Pakistani military brass. The advance information that India provided, perhaps foolishly, to the Pakistani government and military — that "we are coming, and would target only the terrorists" — at that crucial outset of the operations proved to be a disaster. It is safe to assume that this helped in the escape of Azhar and other top terror masterminds to safe locations. Now that the Jaish threat to India's peace has resurfaced, the Modi government will have a lot to explain as to what purpose Operation Sindoor served, and why it had to be halted midway through its deadly and successful phase.

The Modi-led central establishment had been successful in warding off regular terrorist threats in recent times. Except for some deadly hits outside Kashmir Valley, the Islamic terrorists were generally kept at bay. There has been perceptible improvement in the law order situation in Jammu and Kashmir itself. The security agencies as also the political establishment in Delhi deserve a pat on their back for this positive turn, despite strong actions like the abrogation of special status for Kashmir. All said, the fight against terrorism is a long-drawn endeavour. Mature, yet hard-edged actions, at multiple levels are necessary to ensure maintenance of peace. There cannot be any compromise with those who support terror or encourage it through their actions. At the same time, the gains that the security forces achieved for the nation so far should not be squandered through whimsical political decisions.

Who Made Our Youth Incompetent — And Why Aren't We Asking?

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

They tell us the Secretariat is the heart of our state. But whose blood does it pump?

Walk through the corridors of power in Shillong, and you'll notice something peculiar. The same faces. The same names on different doors. Men—and they are mostly men—who have already drunk deep from the well of government service, who have received their gold watches and farewell speeches, who have collected their retirement benefits, now sit again in air-conditioned offices. Contractual, they call it. Consultants, they say. As if new titles can disguise old hunger.

people work on projects that get help from outside sources. What else? The Chief Minister said that general projects were chosen through a "transparent tendering process." Only 26 of them are local consultants.

Let that sink in like monsoon rain through a tin roof. In a state where unemployment bleeds the youth dry, where every household has at least one graduate without work, only 26 of 124 consultants are from Meghalaya. The others come bearing degrees from distant universities, experience from

portfolios. Ask how many departments are understaffed while retired officers occupy consultant chairs. The data exists. The truth is there, dusty and inconvenient, waiting for someone to demand it.

This isn't efficiency; it's administrative acrobatics performed by a government that would rather overburden the few than employ the many. And when these overburdened officers fail—when projects delay, when schemes collapse, when files gather dust—who pays? Not them.

there's always money for contractual appointments of those who've already been paid?

Why do we celebrate "consultants bringing expertise" when they're brought from outside to solve problems they don't understand for people they'll never meet?

If Meghalaya's youth truly lack competence, why hasn't the government declared an education emergency? Why aren't we overhauling schools and colleges instead of over-paying outsiders?

When an officer handles three departments and fails at all three, why isn't anyone held accountable?



The government's own order from October 2023 makes it clear that retired officers can be hired back and paid "equal to last pay drawn minus pension" or even more. They do work. They earn money. And here's the beautiful math of privilege: their pensions are waiting for them, on hold but not given up, ready to be claimed as soon as they decide they've had enough of double-dipping. Please tell me if this is a policy or theft.

Numbers don't lie, even when governments do.

Seventy thousand young people in Meghalaya become eligible for work every year. Every single year. The government—our government, the one we elect, the one that speaks of development and youth empowerment—provides 2,000 to 2,500 jobs. Do the mathematics. That leaves 67,500 young men and women staring at closed doors. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma admitted this in the Assembly in September 2025, his words clinical and careful, as if speaking about surplus crop production rather than surplus human beings.

Where do these 67,500 go? Into the informal economy, if they're lucky. Into depression, if they're not. Into the exodus—Bangalore, Delhi, Guwahati—anywhere but here. And while they pack their bags, a retired IAS officer somewhere in the Secretariat signs a fresh contract, his third or fourth extension approved without debate, without advertisement, without even the pretense of competition.

Is this governance or geriatric boarding?

The government admitted in September 2023 that it had hired 124 consultants in different departments and paid them a total of Rs 22.56 crore in that financial year alone. Fifty-nine

other states, expertise in everything except the one thing that matters: understanding the people they're supposed to serve.

They don't speak Khasi. They can't understand Garo. Jaintia? Forget it. They arrive with PowerPoint presentations and best practices from Pune or Patna, and we're supposed to be grateful. They draft policies for communities whose names they mispronounce, design programs for villages they'll never visit, and collect fees that could employ ten local graduates.

The government defends this. "Technical experts," the Chief Minister calls them. "Capacity building," he assures us. But here's a question nobody wants to answer: if our own youth aren't competent enough, who made them incompetent? Who ran the education system for the past fifty years? Who promised quality schools and delivered crumbling buildings? Who sent teachers who never showed up, who created universities that produce degrees but not skills?

If our children aren't ready, whose failure is that?

There's another scandal hiding in plain sight, one that the Right to Information Act could illuminate if anyone cared to file the query.

Officers in Meghalaya routinely handle more than one department. Sometimes two. Sometimes three. A bureaucrat meant to focus on health also manages education. Someone responsible for tourism also oversees urban affairs. They sit in meetings for Department A in the morning, Department B in the afternoon, and by evening they're too exhausted to deliver for either.

Go ahead. File an RTI. Ask how many officers are currently holding multiple

Us. The citizens. The youth are still waiting.

India's relationship with post-retirement appointments isn't new. After Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru's government faced similar questions: should colonial-era officers be re-employed? Should the Raj's bureaucrats be given new life in free India? The debate was fierce. Some argued for institutional knowledge. Others warned against recycling a system built to extract, not serve. We chose a middle path—sometimes wise, often weak. The Assam Government's 1968 order (which Meghalaya inherited) set 55 as the limit for re-employment, with exceptional cases extending to 58. The spirit was clear: make room for new blood. The practice, as always, has been something else entirely.

In 2018, the central government clarified there's no mandatory "cooling off period" for retired officers seeking re-employment. Translation: retire on Friday, return on Monday, if the connections are right. Pension? It waits. Power? It never left.

Eduardo Galeano wrote of Latin America's veins being opened and drained by those who claimed to develop it. He wrote of systems designed not to distribute wealth but to concentrate it, not to empower the many but to enrich the few. Substitute geography with opportunity, and the metaphor fits Meghalaya perfectly.

Our veins, too, are open. But the blood flowing out is young. So let's dispense with diplomacy. Let's abandon the sugar-coated language of press releases and official statements. Why does a retired officer deserve a second salary more than a fresh graduate deserves a first? Why are we told there's no money for permanent positions, but somehow

And here's the uncomfortable one: are we running a government or an old boys' club? I'm not suggesting all retired officers are corrupt or all consultants are useless. Some bring genuine expertise. Some serve with integrity. But systems aren't built on exceptions; they're built on rules. And our rules increasingly favor those who've already fed over those still hungry.

The tragedy isn't just in the 67,500 unemployed youth. It's in what that number represents: a future postponed, talent wasted, hope bureaucratized into oblivion. It's in the young woman with an engineering degree working at a call center. It's in the young man with a master's in economics driving a taxi. It's in the parents who sold land to educate their children, only to watch them leave because staying means suffocating.

Meghalaya is not lacking in talent. Visit any college, any coaching center where aspirants prepare for UPSC or banking exams. The hunger for opportunity is palpable, almost physical. What we lack is a government willing to prioritize future over familiarity, potential over pedigree.

The doors of the Secretariat remain closed to most. But they swing wide—always, conveniently wide—for those who've already walked through. Until we change that, every speech about youth empowerment is just noise. Every promise of job creation is just air. And every retired officer who signs a new contract is another nail in the coffin of someone else's dream.

Sixty-seven thousand, five hundred nails. Every year. Tell me that doesn't keep you awake at night.

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

From Opportunism to Renewal

Why Zenith Sangma's Return Matters for Meghalaya's Future

By Lang Kupar Kharpuri War

Zenith Sangma's return to the Congress is more than a political act—it signals a chance for Meghalaya's politics to turn away from opportunism and return to first principles: integrity, accountability, and public service. At a time when politics across the state has grown increasingly transactional, when trust between citizens and institutions has thinned, his decision to return to the Congress calls for reflection. It feels both personal and political, but it also signals something larger—a call to reclaim integrity from the cynicism of opportunism.

To grasp the significance of Zenith's return, one must revisit the experiment that preceded it—the brief and turbulent journey of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in Meghalaya. From the start, the TMC's entry into the state was marred by contradictions. Even with the formidable leadership of Dr. Mukul Sangma and the experienced Charles Pynogrope, who despite his long political career could not steer the party or establish its presence in the state, the party's presence was built not on ideology or moral clarity but on ambition. It came promising change, but it lacked the empathy, patience, and understanding needed to take root in Meghalaya's unique political soil. Like many projects driven by the thirst for power rather than the desire to serve, it crumbled once its immediate goals went unmet.

The TMC's leadership—both in Bengal and in Meghalaya—approached politics as a transaction, not as a relationship. When power proved elusive, purpose vanished. The party's defeat was therefore not accidental but inevitable. The "Bengal model," with its history of political violence, factionalism, and populist aggression, never appealed to the people of Meghalaya. Here, politics moves to a gentler rhythm—through community dialogue and through slow consensus rather than confrontation. The combative style that defined Bengal's politics felt alien to Meghalaya's temperament. Voters saw through the performance. The TMC was not simply an outsider—it carried an outsider's temperament.

For many in the Garo Hills, there were other, more rooted choices. The National People's Party (NPP), despite its compromises and growing closeness to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), still embodied something recognisably local. It offered familiarity, pride of place, and the comfort of leadership drawn from within. Even as the Congress struggled with defections and fatigue, it retained deep roots—an organisational memory and moral familiarity that the TMC could not replicate. The TMC's failure was thus not just electoral—it was moral and cultural, a lesson in how politics collapses when divorced from belonging.

It is within this landscape that Zenith Sangma's return to the Congress gains its full meaning. His admission that the Congress is where he "truly belongs" is not merely sentiment—it is an act of reflection. His critique of the NPP-led government—of corruption, institutional decay, and the weakening of essential sectors like education, health, and law and order—echoes what many citizens feel. In a state where people are losing faith in their government, his return is not a matter of tactics but of conscience—a recognition where people are losing faith in their government, his return is not a matter of tactics but of conscience—a recognition that when politics loses its principles, democracy begins to decay. At a time when the Congress is fighting to reassert itself in Meghalaya, Zenith's return bolsters both its base in the Garo Hills and its broader moral claim—to represent renewal and integrity in public life. The Congress, despite its internal flaws, remains the only national party that has spoken consistently against the authoritarian drift of the BJP-RSS combine. Through campaigns like Bharat Jodo Yatra and Vote Chori, Rahul Gandhi and others have tried to restore the moral vocabulary of Indian politics—to re-

mind citizens that democracy is not only about victory but about values, not just about power but about purpose. The Congress, for all its wear and tear, still stands for the sanctity of the Constitution at a time when its spirit is being hollowed out.

Leaders like Zenith Sangma, having witnessed the erosion of both state and national institutions, seem to understand that the only real counter to the NPP-BJP juggernaut is a revitalised Congress. The fight is not merely about elections; it is about defending the Republic's soul. The BJP-RSS ecosystem has worked steadily to weaken democratic institutions, erode federalism, and replace civic reasoning with ideological obedience. Beneath its rhetoric of regional autonomy, the NPP practises a politics of expediency—one that trades loyalty for power, corrodes institutions through corruption and defections, and survives in symbiosis with its master at the Centre, the BJP. It has become less a voice of the people than a broker of power. To resist this, Meghalaya needs not just regional assertion but a national moral alliance—one that binds the defence of local identity with the protection of constitutional integrity. The Congress, with its historic reach and democratic imagination, remains best equipped to carry that torch.

At the same time, the rise of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) captures the restlessness of Meghalaya's electorate. Its anti-corruption message and youthful appeal have struck a chord, particularly in the Khasi Hills. Yet its strength also exposes its limits. Rooted in Khasi regionalism, the VPP struggles to reach beyond its cultural base. Meghalaya's political fabric—woven from Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo identities—demands a broader, more inclusive vision. The VPP may clean part of the system, but it cannot rebuild the whole. The moral renewal of the state will depend on a politics that unites rather than divides—one that can speak to Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo alike, instead of retreating into narrow identities.

That is where the Congress's enduring relevance lies. For all its challenges, it remains the only party capable of bridging regional aspiration with national purpose. It carries within it the legacy of the freedom movement, the institutional experience to uphold democracy, and the moral vocabulary to counter the creeping authoritarianism of the NPP-BJP alliance. Meghalaya, burdened by joblessness, addiction, and a struggling health system, needs less spectacle and more sincerity—a form of governance rooted in empathy, responsibility, and everyday realities.

Zenith Sangma's return, then, should be seen as more than nostalgia—it is an invitation to renewal. But renewal demands courage: the courage to rebuild a party, to restore trust, and to inspire a new generation. Alongside younger leaders like Saleng Sangma, Zenith has the opportunity to help the Congress rise above the confines of party politics and the pursuit of power—to become a genuine civic movement that rebuilds trust, encourages citizens to question and care, and nurtures empathy and moral imagination in the making of a more just and compassionate Meghalaya.

What should Zenith Sangma's return mean for the classroom, for civil society, for the youth of Meghalaya? Perhaps it is a reminder that democracy begins in how we teach, how we listen, and how we imagine the common good. If the Congress and its leaders can use this moment to revive trust and moral purpose, it could mark a turning point—not only for the party, but for the state's democratic soul. If, instead, it remains a strategic move in the chessboard of power, then the deeper crisis will persist—the crisis of how we live, and how we teach the fragile art of democracy itself.

(The author is Assistant Professor Department of English NEHU, Shillong. langkuperwar@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

When rape becomes a child's crime

Editor,
A shocking piece of news from Hamirpur in Himachal Pradesh sparked widespread outrage just days ago. A woman aged forty lost her life in a manner too painful to put into words. Her attacker was not a hardened criminal, but a boy of fourteen from Class 8, a child too young to understand the consequences of his own actions. Armed with a sickle and a stick, he inflicted grievous injuries when the woman resisted his brutal sexual assault.

The woman was later found in critical condition and rushed to the nearby hospital, where she succumbed to her injuries. The brutality of the attack has deeply shaken the local community and sparked widespread uproar. What does it mean when a child, still of an age to call her "mother," turns

into her sexual assaulter and killer? I strongly feel that this is not merely a crime, it is a collapse of our moral conscience.

An elderly gentleman commented, "The woman died not just of wounds, but of a society's silence on the rampant outrageous stuff in mobile phones in the form of reels and videos on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, which our school children are exposed to." He aptly pointed out how we've turned a blind eye to what's creeping into young minds these days.

Another heartbreaking tale came to light from Ghasera village in Haryana. It was brought to the notice of the local police just over a week ago. A girl of fifteen, now seven months pregnant, was repeatedly raped by a boy of the same age, fourteen. How do we process such incidents in rapid succession? Are they not incidents that should make us more serious and more decisive? Are they not

symptoms of a deeper malaise, a moral fever that burns quietly beneath the surface of our modern lives?

We must ask, what are we feeding the minds of our children? When mobile phones open up gateways to "insane vulgarity," and entertainment plays up outrageous aggression, can sex education from class 6, as many claim is a must, cleanse their minds and thoughts? Let's not be hypocritical. Let us not be deluded. It is the question of our younger generation. It is the question of the death of their tenderness and the rise of their bestiality!

Yours etc.,
Sali Gewali,
Shillong

A Ray of Hope Amid Rising Cancer Cases

Editor,
At a time when cancer has become a painful reality for countless families, the recent

report in The Shillong Times (Nov 11, 2025), "Research unlocks anticancer properties of endangered M'laya plant", comes as a heartening ray of hope.

The discovery by researchers from Nagaland University and Assam Down Town University that Goniothalamus simonsii—an endangered plant found in our Meghalaya's forests—contains strong anticancer properties offers both scientific promise and emotional comfort. For those who have seen loved ones suffer from this dreaded disease, such news feels like a gentle reassurance that nature still holds the power to heal.

This finding is not only about medicine but also about rediscovering the value of our land and traditions. For generations, local communities have trusted the curative powers of plants. It is inspiring to see science now confirming that ancient wisdom. Yet, it is deeply worrying that this very plant is on the brink of

extinction. We must realise that conserving our natural wealth is not just about protecting trees—it is about protecting life itself. Meghalaya's forests are living pharmacies, silently holding cures that humanity may need tomorrow. Let us protect them with awareness and gratitude.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Issue with the LDA, District Selection Committee (DSC) Exam

Editor,
This piece of writing is specifically related to the LDA cum Typist exam conducted by the District Selection Committee (DSC) on November 8, 2025 where I was allotted an examination centre in one of the schools

in Shillong (I don't want to mention the name of the school as it will bring bad repute to the school), where to our utter surprise we were not allowed to take along with us the question booklet; at least in my room. I really don't know if the same procedure was followed in other rooms of the same school, as other aspirants in other examination centres were allowed to take along with them the question booklet. At the end of the examination, I could see several policemen and Executive Magistrates at the campus of the test centre. I don't know what the reason for that was as there was a sudden rush of these officials to enter the premises of the school campus.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Education in a crisis

CHIEF Minister, Conrad Sangma has reiterated that Meghalaya is staring at a crisis as far as education is concerned. He stated at a public function that Meghalaya currently has 206 schools with zero enrolment and 2,269 schools with single-digit enrolment. This has not happened under the watch of the MDA government. It has been a chronic ailment dating back to several decades but one that did not receive due attention. It is only when the educational outcomes in Meghalaya were reviewed by external agencies that the malaise is now out in the open. This abysmal status of education should not have been allowed to continue but for the fact that successive governments lacked the political will to take necessary action. Most of these rural schools were started without weighing their survivability. They stand testimony to the political opportunism of the times when even teachers were political appointees, many of whom sub-contracted their teaching jobs to others.

The investment in these schools which were allowed to function simply because no government dared to shut them down for fear of political ramifications and the prospect of losing the next elections, have resulted in zero outcomes. No MLA ever cared for the fate of students or bothered to find out why students were not enrolled in these schools and how so many teachers were appointed in the absence of students. Now the onus is upon the MDA-2 government to take corrective action and rationalise the different categories of schools including closing many of these schools. The Chief Minister voiced his concern about not hampering the livelihoods of teachers but the question here is whether the livelihoods of teachers in non-functional schools are more important than the students. No one has ever consulted students and asked them why they prefer to stay out of the classroom than inside it. Some hard and decisive actions need to follow now. The Government has to admit that education in Meghalaya is in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The focus should shift from Shillong to the rural hamlets immediately. That's where the problems are embedded. The Education Commission that recently submitted its report relied on secondary data because getting primary data is time consuming. Yet Meghalaya needs the latest drop-out figures at every level of education and ask why the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) is falling as student progress to higher classes. Government is investing a lot on several programmes but very little in data collection. Without robust data how can any meaningful intervention happen?

Government must also accept that the outdated curriculum written by authors with no knowledge of the state and its eco-system is rejected by students because it is irrelevant to their way of life. The curriculum simply does not address the needs of students in rural Meghalaya. Also, the directive by the Education Department that no child shall be held back in any class till the completion of elementary education is problematic. How can a student who has not grasped the basics in Class 8 be promoted to Class 9? That student will then fail in the SSLC exams and drop out. Educational reforms are warranted but after extensive consultations and pragmatic analysis.

AI and the Death of Boredom

By Angad Singh

I was travelling in the Delhi metro last week, amidst the millions of daily commuters when I noticed something strange. There was not one single person around me whose eyes weren't glued to their phone. Strangely, nothing unusual about that, one might say. But what was unsettling for me was the speed at which they were scrolling. Thumb flicks every second. Like they were searching for something they would never find. Aimlessly consuming more and more, faster and faster, through an endless stream of content that didn't seem to satisfy them.

Then I slid my phone out and caught myself doing the very same thing.

We have built a world around us where boredom has become almost impossible to experience. Within seconds of feeling under stimulated, we can summon infinite entertainment, answers, and companionship. The technology promises efficiency, connection, and unlimited creative output. Yet something feels fundamentally wrong about this bargain we have made.

The question is not so much about quantifying the productivity of these tools. Everyone knows what they do. The question is rather about losing something essential in the process. something that only takes form in the pause between thoughts and in my case, in the deafening silence on a train ride full of strangers on a slow afternoon.

Boredom used to be a fundamental part of human existence. Everyone waited days for the letters. There was an eagerness to hear the phone ring. Long lines of people without anything to distract them except their own thoughts. These moments were not always fun. Often, they caused deep discomfort. But they were also the very moments when minds wandered into unexpected territory. And each mind had its own freedom to wander without an individually curated but universally accessible social media feed seeping into everyone's subconscious. Neuroscience suggests that boredom is key in activating the default mode network in our brains.

This is the very network associated with daydreaming, self-reflection, and creative problem solving, according to Eastwood. In breaks from external stimuli,

the brain begins making connections between disparate ideas. It manufactures future scenarios. It processes unresolved and non-discrete emotions. This mode of thinking seems unproductive because nothing tangible is being produced. However, it may be precisely where the innovation begins.

Consider how many breakthrough ideas emerged during moments of enforced idleness. Archimedes in his bath. Newton was watching an apple fall while his mind wandered. Poincaré described how mathematical solutions came to him during aimless walks rather than focused study sessions. These stories have become clichés. But they all point to something real about how human cognition works. The mind needs slack in the system. It needs time to consolidate, wander, and take unexpected leaps.

AI gets rid of that slack. Every question is answered immediately. Each moment of potential boredom is filled with algorithmically optimized content. Eventually, we lose the conditions under which certain kinds of thinking are made possible.

There is a difference between having tools that augment our thinking and having tools that replace it. The calculator did not make us worse at mathematics. We still had to understand and decide what calculation needs to be inputted and whether the answer was correlated to the problem. Distinctly, AI does not just calculate, it generates, suggests, and pretends to offer a complete solution. It anticipates what we want to say before we have fully worked it out ourselves.

When one asks an AI to help brainstorm ideas, it vomits a list within seconds. The thoughts are often good, sometimes excellent, but often garbage. And on looking closely one notices something troubling. The thought process feels very similar across different sessions. The ideas and thoughts are of someone who may be well read but thinks lazily and shallowly.

This may be a limitation of current AI capabilities as future versions could possibly generate genuine novel ideas. But there is a deeper concern here about the pipeline itself which is

that offloading ideation to machines deteriorates the muscle of generative thinking over time.

Scholars who use AI to write their essays may produce quantitatively more work in the short term, but they may also be depriving themselves of the struggle through which thinking develops. AI accelerates this change by wiping away the struggle of going through a difficult text, line by line. Why sit scratching your heads when you can demand immediate clarity? The loss is that we don't fully recognize the significance of confusion; it is often where understanding begins. The struggle to articulate half formed thoughts is how those thoughts become fully formed.

The argument that the abundance of having access to more information, entertainment, and creative content than any previous generation makes us more creative, informed and capable stands true in very few contexts. Most people report feeling overwhelmed, paralyzed by options, and unable to commit to any single pursuit long enough to develop real expertise. This is termed as “decision paralysis” by Barry Schwartz in the Paradox of Choice.

AI worsens this problem by seemingly equalizing the accessibility of otherwise diverse and distinct actions. Want to learn piano? An AI tutor can get you started. Want to write a novel? AI can generate plot outlines and character descriptions. Want to paint? AI can create images from text prompts. These tools remarkably lower barriers to entry. This sounds democratic and promising, but also steals away the human effort that is used to force commitment and remain committed.

Human attention remains finite despite the grand evolution of mankind. We have roughly sixteen waking hours each day and a fairly small fraction of that time can be spent in focused concentration. Every minute spent consuming AI generated content or interacting with AI systems buys into the next minute not spent engaging with real thoughts and ideas.

The content is not necessarily bad, and thus, the

problem is not the nature of the content. Much of it is entertaining, and some even educational. The problem is its relentlessness; its endlessness. There is no natural point at which it stops. The feed and suggestions are infinite. You finish one video, and three more are queued. You close one chat, and another notification pops up.

The most unsettling aspect of AI's rise is most definitely how it changes humans' relationship with uncertainty. Our species has always held space for unanswered questions, unsolved mysteries, and ambiguities in life. While this uncertainty was uncomfortable, it was very importantly generative. It kept us curious while enabling a sense of ease without knowing.

The danger is that we become intellectually passive and mentally lazy. Why use your own cognitive abilities when the AI can do it for you? Why sit with confusion when clarity is a prompt away? Why read the long original thinkers when the AI can summarize all of humanities philosophers? There's a good reason to use each of these shortcuts independently. However, collectively, they add up to a fundamental shift in how we engage with knowledge.

One way to end this would be with recommendations like delete the apps, take walks, embrace discomfort. But who hasn't heard that before, and here you still are, reading, scrolling, consuming. We all are.

Perhaps the real question isn't how to reclaim boredom. It is whether we have the capacity to want it back. Whether we can be with ourselves when no one and no screen is watching. Whether we remember what our thoughts sound like when they're uninterrupted, incorrect, and incomplete, not tampered with by an algorithm.

The only one way to find out requires doing the one thing that has become almost impossible: stopping. Not replacing this article with another. Not switching apps. Not asking an AI what it thinks about what you just read. Simply stopping.

The space after this final period is yours. What will you fill it with?

(The writer is a 4th Year B Tech Student at Plaksha University, Mohali)

The Human Face Behind the Ad-hoc “Saga”

By Andrew Suiam

I read with interest the recent op-ed by Melarbor L. Thabab titled “A Contemporary Antidote to the Non-Permanent Staff Saga,” (ST Nov 10, 2025). The piece raises valid administrative concerns about ad-hoc appointments, sanctioned posts, and the process of regularisation. While some of his observations deserve reflection, I feel compelled—not only as a concerned citizen but as one who believes in the human dimension of public service—to offer a gentle yet firm counter-view.

My conviction is simple: the men and women who serve in ad-hoc capacities are not the government's slaves to be used at will and discarded when inconvenient. They are fellow human beings—public servants in every sense—whose dedication, loyalty, and sacrifice deserve recognition, not rejection.

1. The Ancient Lesson We Must Not Forget

There's an old image worth recalling: “In ancient Egypt, honey would be applied on the servants so the flies would land on them and not on the Pharaoh.”

If we look honestly at our present system, that metaphor feels uncomfortably familiar. Those at the lower end of government service often absorb the hardship, the blame, and the insecurity so that the higher echelons remain untouched. The ad-hoc employees have become, in effect, the honey-coated servants of a modern bureaucracy.

This is not poetic exaggeration—it's a moral warning. When the State uses ad-hoc employees as a cushion of convenience, only to cast them aside later, the metaphor turns from wisdom to indictment. It is not gratitude; it is exploitation disguised as policy.

2. The Human Dimension of Ad-hoc Service

Thabab's article discusses the structural side of the issue—notifications, exams, categories—but it rarely steps into the shoes of the people living that reality.

Every “ad-hoc” worker is a person with a family, hopes, and commitments. They are not abstract policy entries—they are the ones who kept offices running, taught children, treated patients, managed emergencies, and held our system together.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these same ad-hoc workers were the ones who stayed on the frontlines. They took risks when others stayed home. They were called heroes then; it would be unjust to call them temporary now.

Let us remember: these individuals didn't choose instability. The State asked them to serve, and they did—often for years, sometimes decades, without the dignity of security. To treat them as temporary after a lifetime of service is not just unkind—it is unjust.

3. Reality vs. Label: Appointed Against Sanctioned Posts

One major misconception is the assumption that “ad-hoc” equals “casual” or “non-essential.” But in many cases, these employees were appointed against sanctioned or newly sanctioned posts, performing duties that are regular, recurring, and necessary.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly clarified this. In *Dharam Singh & Others vs. State of U.P.*, the Court held that the State cannot hide behind the label of “temporary” when workers perform essential duties for years. Prolonged ad-hoc employment for permanent functions offends Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before law.

When a person works for the State continuously, against a sanctioned post, the moral and constitutional contract between the two cannot be reduced to a word like “temporary.”

4. The State's Duty as a Constitutional Employer

Thabab's piece rightly calls for administrative reform—but it underplays the constitutional responsibility of the government as an employer. The State is not an ordinary employer; it is a constitutional employer, bound by Articles 14, 16, and 21—equality, fair opportunity, and the right to a dignified life. As the Supreme Court once stated: “The State cannot balance its budgets on the backs of those who perform its most basic and recurring functions.”

This principle is crucial. When ad-hoc employees carry out the same tasks as regular staff, often for years, the State's

duty is not only administrative—it is moral. To keep them in perpetual insecurity is to violate the spirit of fairness that the Constitution demands.

5. Exams, Fairness, and the Need for Justice

Of course, open recruitment and exams are vital for fairness. No one disputes that. The Uma Devi judgment (2006) emphasized that illegal backdoor entries cannot be legitimized. Yet, the same jurisprudence also acknowledges that when recruitment was transparent, the work is perennial, and the employee has served faithfully for long periods, justice requires regularisation or a fair pathway to it.

So yes, let exams exist—but with compassion and context. Let those who have already served 10 or 20 years not be forced into the same uncertainty as fresh applicants. Merit and humanity are not opposites; the system can uphold both.

6. The Pandemic and the Debt We Owe

During the pandemic, when hospitals were overwhelmed and fear gripped society, it was not policy papers but people who held the line. Ad-hoc nurses, sanitary staff, drivers, and clerks stood where many dared not. They were called “frontline heroes.” But heroes, once the crisis is over, should not be treated as dispensable labour. If we truly believe in service, then post-pandemic justice demands that these same individuals be recognised, not forgotten. The government cannot have it both ways—to celebrate them in headlines and abandon them in policy.

7. The Throw-Away Culture Must End

Thabab's solution leans heavily on technical streamlining—rules, categories, and competitive exams. But behind that neat language lurks a deeper problem: the “throw-away” mindset. To repeatedly re-appoint a person year after year, then call them temporary, is not administration—it is moral hypocrisy. This cycle breeds despair. It corrodes trust. It tells our youth that service to society brings only uncertainty. The Court has warned against this, noting that “long-term extraction of regular labour under temporary labels corrodes public confidence and offends equality.” We cannot build a just system on the pain of the patient worker.

8. A Fairer Way Forward

There are practical, humane solutions: Transparent Service Audit: Each department should disclose how many ad-hoc employees have served for 5, 10, or 15+ years, and under what conditions. Numbers reveal truths that words conceal.

Time-Bound Regularisation Policy: If a post is permanent in nature, the process to convert it should be automatic within a set period.

Fair Exams with Credit for Service: Length of service must count. Offer age relaxations and bonus marks for those who have already served long and well.

Parity in Basic Benefits: Until regularised, ad-hoc employees doing the same work should get comparable pay, leave, and respect.

Dignified Exit: When a role truly ends, give proper notice, not abrupt dismissal.

Media Recognition: Newspapers like The Shillong Times can continue to share the human side of these stories—so public discourse never forgets that behind every “ad-hoc” label stands a life.

9. Conclusion: Honouring Service, Restoring Dignity

Administrative reform is essential, but reform without compassion becomes bureaucracy without soul. The question is not whether the ad-hoc employees deserve regularisation; the real question is whether we, as a society, deserve their continued trust. As the old saying goes, honey was applied on the servants so the flies would land on them instead of the Pharaoh. We must ensure that history does not repeat itself in our own institutions. If honey must be applied, let it be the honey of fairness, not the honey of exploitation. To every ad-hoc worker who continues to serve: You are not temporary in worth, even if your post is temporary in title.

Thank you, Editor, for keeping this conversation alive. I trust that The Shillong Times will continue to be a space for balanced, humane dialogue that values every servant of the public, permanent or otherwise.

Letters to the Editor

Fading spirit of neighbourliness

Editor,
We often take pride in the cultural practice of ka sngi kylliang ka nongkylliang, one of the noble tenets of Niamtre, our indigenous faith. It teaches that neighbours must stand by one another in times of need, sharing not only labour and food, but also comfort and compassion. Yet today, this beautiful principle seems to be observed only on certain occasions, particularly during Linam, when members of Sein Raij Niamtre visit a bereaved family to offer prayers and words of consolation.

Outside such moments of loss, the spirit of sngi kylliang nongkylliang is seldom seen in daily life. Modernity, individualism, and the pace of urban living have quietly weakened our sense of community. The willingness to look out for one another once the heart of our society is being replaced by indifference and isolation.

It is time to reflect deeply on whether we are still living by the values our ancestors held sacred. Ka sngi kylliang ka nongkylliang was never meant to be a ritual bound to mourning alone; it is a way of life meant to guide us every day in joy, in hardship, and in the quiet struggles of those around us.

Let us revive this spirit of neighbourliness before it fades away completely, for in doing so, we reaffirm not only our humanity but also the living essence of Niamtre itself.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Conserving and restoring Heritage Buildings

Editor,

Apropos of the news article, “State Govt. set to demolish iconic Laban Circuit House” (ST Nov 10, 2025), it is really sad that the government is planning to demolish yet another iconic structure in the city just to pave the way for a new concrete building. First it was the re-development plan of the PWD complex at Barik Point, followed by the demolition of the St. Anthony's School Building and now this. Why can't we retain heritage buildings by restoring them? Why must the price of development always be so ugly? The said Circuit House isn't just a heritage building but it has historical significance due to its association with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the second Chief Minister of West Bengal and a renowned physician. His family owned the house at Kench's Trace Laban which later was converted to the Circuit House.

For those who have lived and grown up in Laban, the Circuit House has been an iconic landmark and the thought of it being taken down is in itself painful. Through your esteemed daily I will like to urge the concerned authorities to give it a second thought and think of ways to restore these buildings instead of replacing them with concrete structures. The charm of Shillong as it is has been dwindling fast with buildings replacing the old Assam type houses and adding this to the growing list is not a wise decision.

Yours etc.,
Anubrata Choudhury,
New Delhi

Teenage pregnancy, a curse

Editor,

With deep concern and hope, I wish to express my feelings on the news report of November 11 about the Meghalaya government's proposal for a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) under the POCSO Act and on the issue of early marriages. This step deserves recognition. It shows a will to act where silence has reigned for too long. Behind every statistic of abuse or early motherhood, there is a frightened child who never had a choice. When we protect them, we protect the very soul of our society.

Early marriage, though not officially accepted, continues quietly in many villages. It robs children of their innocence and replaces it with fear and responsibility far beyond their years. Poverty and ignorance often stand behind these stories, but so does our collective failure to speak up. It is time we replaced silence with understanding and punishment with prevention.

It is encouraging that the government is involving villagers, churches, NGOs, and traditional institutions in this effort. Real change begins when people are spoken to in their own language and with respect. Awareness must reach every village, every home, where a young girl's tears still go unseen. But laws alone are not enough. A child who has suffered needs more than justice—she needs care, compassion, and the chance to heal. True progress is when every child sleeps without

fear and awakes to a future of dignity.

If Meghalaya can turn this policy into a people's mission, it will set an example for the whole country—that humanity, when guided by conscience, can protect what is most sacred: a child's right to a safe and loving world.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Need to revive indigenous trees and plants

Editor,

The news report, “Guv warns of serious ecological imbalances due to monoculture” (ST November 11, 2025) made interesting reading. Three centuries ago, the Khasi Hills were dominated by dense subtropical forests rich in endemic and sacred species, including Khasi Holly (Ilex khasiana), Castanopsis, Quercus, and various lauraceae and Rhododendron species. These thrived in sacred groves and montane ecosystems shaped by indigenous conservation. A detailed breakdown of tree species that likely thrived in Khasi Hills around three hundred years ago based on ecological continuity and indigenous memory:

1. Khasi Holly (Ilex khasiana)
- Status: Endemic and evolutionarily distinct
- Habitat: Montane subtropical forests, especially sacred groves
- Cultural Role: Considered sacred; protected by taboos and rituals
- Current Status: Critically endangered due to habitat loss

2. Castanopsis spp.

- Family: Fagaceae
- Traits: Evergreen, nut-bearing trees
- Ecological Role: Keystone species in mid-elevation forests

- Use: Timber, food, and shade in traditional agroforestry

3. Quercus spp. (Oaks)
- Family: Fagaceae
- Traits: Hardy, slow-growing, canopy-forming

- Role: Soil stabilizers and biodiversity anchors

- Presence: Likely abundant in higher elevations and sacred groves

4. Lauraceae Family (e.g., Litsea, Cinnamomum)
- Traits: Aromatic trees and shrubs

- Use: Medicinal, ritual, and culinary

- Ecological Role: Understorey and mid-canopy species in moist forests

5. Rhododendron arboreum
- Traits: Flowering tree with vibrant red blossoms

- Habitat: Thrives in higher altitudes

- Cultural Role: Used in rituals and folk medicine

6. Schima wallichii
- Common Name: Needle wood

- Use: Timber and firewood

- Presence: Common in mixed forests and village peripheries

Governor Vijayashankar rightly noted that nearly 90% of the sacred hills areas are now covered by pine trees and this pained him as pine trees do not belong to this land. He has rightly called to look back “100, 200, or even 300 years to identify what trees or plant species existed here and work to bring them back.” Pine trees can be hazardous to the environment when planted in excess or outside their native range as they reduce

biodiversity, dry up water sources and even contribute to air pollution. Pine replaces diverse native forests with single-species stands, leading to sharp decline in plant and animal diversity. In regions like Khasi Hills, pine has displaced native climax species like Castanopsis, Quercus and Ksh Blei (God's tree) botanical name Taxus Baccata. Pine trees have dense root systems and needle-like leaves called pine needles reduce soil moisture and intercept rainfall.

Studies in Nepal and Northeast India show that pine-dominated landscapes are linked to drying springs and reduced groundwater recharge. Pine emits volatile organic compounds (VOCs) like isoprene and monoterpenes. These VOCs react with human-made pollutants for aerosols and smog, contributing to poor air quality and climate change. Pine needles are highly flammable and their accumulation on forest floors increases the risk of wildfires. In dry seasons, pine forests become fire-prone landscapes, especially in areas with declining ritual maintenance or grazing. The slow decomposition of pine needles releases acidic compounds which can lower soil pH and inhibit the growth of under-story plants. Pines become problematic when introduced as exotics in non-native ecosystems, used in large-scale monoculture plantations, displace sacred groves or climax forests and are managed without traditional ecological knowledge.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"Nothing can make you more humble than pain."

— Larry Flynt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.94 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2025

Response to terror

AVAILABLE evidence points to a direct involvement of the Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist group in the Red Fort blast while there was suspected involvement of a Kashmir-based terror outfit too. Planning was suspected to be done by these outfits and Pakistani agents at meetings in Turkey and elsewhere. They were in the works for a long time and aimed at staging lethal blasts in key locations 'across India'. A Hyderabad-based doctor arrested with lethal material in Gujarat was aiming at mass killings through unconventional chemical or biological means. All these go to show that terrorist sleeper cells are active in India despite the high vigil by the Modi-led central government. This presents a deeply worrisome scenario.

The lull in terrorist activity in this country in recent years was deceptive. By the very nature of Islamic terrorism, it can surface anywhere and at any time. A large set of indoctrinated youths are willing to go any length to target their collective enemy. More so in a nation like India, where Muslims form a large number. What the government can do is to remain on a constant vigil. In all fairness, the Modi establishment, through its three consecutive terms in power, accorded top priority to tackling this danger. There can be no let-up in this vigil as long as the Pakistani political and military establishments, more so the latter, are bent on playing one mischief after another. Kashmir is just an excuse for them to keep bleeding India. Curiously, several victims of this terrorist mayhem are Indian Muslims as was also evident in the Red Fort blast. Pahalgam was the only exception when Hindu tourists were singled out and shot down.

The Modi government's assertion yet again that it would seek out and punish the perpetrators of the Red Fort blast and the gangs that planned nationwide attacks is seen in the right spirit. However, action should follow with all seriousness. The Operation Sindoor was a lost opportunity to nail the terror outfits that have been targeting India for decades. The military operation's abrupt end left many Indians aghast, as questions arose whether the purpose of the hard-edged engagement was achieved, or an available opportunity squandered. The Modi establishment is yet to provide clarity to the whole operations, the losses thereof, and the results. Modi's warning that any further terror attacks on Indian soil from Pakistani outfits would be tantamount to a war. The casualties in the Red Fort blast was high at 12 — against 26 in Pahalgam. Strong steps are required to avoid its recurrence. Pakistan's bluff must be called. Now that the US was directly involved in a ceasefire in May, and Chinese support was evident in the Pakistani counter-offensive, the issue no more limits itself to the subcontinent. Though the prime minister has sought to build a new bonhomie with Xi Jinping, India cannot trust China in any event. All these present a complex scenario.

Calling the Church to Account

By Patricia Mukhim

The church (and I use the singular here because it includes all churches) has existed in Meghalaya for over a century yet there are no social reforms of any significance that merit mention. Corruption and poor governance continue to rob citizens of their rights yet the church maintains a conspiratorial silence. In Meghalaya we have had social problems that have reduced several families to poverty. One persistent problem in Meghalaya is teenage pregnancy leading to the girl-child being abandoned by her partner. She then not only has to mother the child but also look for work to feed herself and the child since she herself comes from a poor family. The only saving grace is that such a teenage mother is allowed to continue to stay in her parental home.

It is a given that teenagers in our tribal societies as in any other society, have the propensity to experiment with sex. But as always, when the girl gets pregnant her boyfriend/partner abandons her because he has no means of livelihood and was never ready to shoulder the responsibility of being a father when he is still looking to enjoy his youth. In such cases why is it a taboo to tell teenagers to use condoms when they have sex? Why is sex such a hush-hush word when people are indulging in it so freely? Why is the church against the idea of condom use?

Sadly, the church also refuses to endorse even the spacing of children so that there is enough gap between one pregnancy and the next one and children are better looked after. The reason for high school drop-out rates at the elementary level and of non-enrolment is because of poverty. Free and compulsory education does not include free uniforms. The only educational institution that gives out free uniforms and books at the beginning of every school year is Ramakrishna Mission. No church-run school gives free uniforms or dispenses with the school fees for very poor children.

The church is expected to be the beacon for social change. It is expected to be the arbiter between the government and the people. But the church stays away from engaging in such people-centric issues and prefers to

remain a 'once in a week' social club where people come to pray, sing, meet fellow congregation members and return home without ever taking a firm decision to do something to change the lives of people. The church congregation comprises well-connected people, bureaucrats, technocrats, politicians et al. The church knows the antecedents of each of these dignitaries but will never confront them on corruption even if they are well aware of the antecedents of each church member and how much tithe they pay.

It is the bounden duty of the church envisaged by Jesus Christ to leverage its influence and engage in governance issues and push for policy changes that align with social justice principles. Why do churches shy away from harsh sermons that challenge the members to take a stand on issues such as poor roads that could result in miscarriages for women in the early stages of pregnancy? Why can't the church start a movement when those responsible for making those horribly cheap roads are held to account and asked to explain why they use substandard materials and where did the money for the quality road that was sanctioned has gone?

Look at the condition of the Civil Hospital Shillong and other PHCs, CHCs and sub-centres. Don't churchgoers know the kind of third-rate treatment being meted out to the sick who are forced to seek treatment there because they cannot afford private hospitals? The church has very educated members who can raise questions and seek accountability through the RTI route but they would never do it because it does not affect them personally. Yet the church never dares challenge its members to take up these true Christian duties. Remember how Christ engaged with real issues during his lifetime? So why are his followers today looking for easy cop-outs? They see the poor in their churches but are not moved. What then is the point of coming to church if the heart remains hardened and unwilling to feel the pain of the poor?

The truth is that the church is still a beacon that has a moral voice which carries

weight. If the church has the courage of conviction to lead a movement against deforestation; against illegal coal mining; against indiscriminate quarrying; against land sharks who are on a buying spree of more and more land, leaving nothing for other fellow tribals. How can the church remain blind to these inequities?

Many who are in the category of the downtrodden come to church but have no voice. Is it not the duty of the church to give them a voice? The church has the onus to uplift those who are at the margins. It has a duty to be with drug addicts to counsel them and give them solace so that they can come out of the addiction. When I say the church I am not alluding to an impersonal entity but to the members, many of whom mean well but are not part of a solidarity group. It is the church that can bring together such people with empathy and the goodwill to lend a helping hand to reach out to others in need.

Churches have the resources to provide a set of skills to its members because it has a wide range of members with different skill sets. Many of our women here need to understand financial literacy. They could be enabled to start some small scale business and hand-held for sometime until they can stand on their own feet. Every time we think of empowerment, we think of the government or NGOs when the church is best placed to demonstrate what empowering its own members actually means. Empowerment is not doing one-time charity. It's giving people the tools they need to improve their lives and get out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Why is it that the churches in our villages are not moved by the sight of young boys shepherding cows and sheep instead of being in school? Why are no interventions made by church members to counsel families that make their kids work and earn their food at such a tender age? Why cannot part of the church collection be used to send these drop-out kids for skills training and basic education?

Perhaps pastors are afraid of touching the conscience of the congregation lest

they stop coming to church and the tithe dwindles. That would affect their salaries and make life a little difficult for them. Frankly speaking, the sermons we need today should be about addressing teenage pregnancy; about protected sex and about planning for a family instead of just blindly walking into parenthood and regretting it later when the man decides to leave. The church should also have been in the forefront of addressing the issue of single parenthood and its proliferation in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The church can argue that its members are advocates of social justice and other philanthropic work but that's an easy escape. Members of the church using its platform to reach out and be advocates for economic empowerment of women; for addressing teenage pregnancies etc would have more impact since people 'still' respect the church.

The church also runs educational institutions. Can those church-run schools become beacons of change and start discussions on issues that are most pertinent such as growing poverty, single parenthood, landlessness, corruption etc., and how those impinge on families? The church should itself be the platform for dialogues on contentious issues instead of skirting away from them. Social justice issues often spark strong opinions and heated debates. The church can provide a safe space for open and honest dialogue, where people can express their views without fear of judgment. This platform can help bridge divides and encourage understanding across political or social lines. Churches can host town halls, discussion panels, or forums that allow congregants to talk through difficult issues like the congenital hatred for the "dkhar," and sometimes even contentious issues like why Meghalaya, Khasi-Jaintia hills in particular need the railways racial. Engaging in respectful conversations opens the door for collective action and helps people see each other's humanity in the midst of complex issues.

If the church is unable to effect social and economic change here and now, what is the point of its existence? What is the point of being a church member other than the sense of belonging to a social club with zero outcomes?

Red Fort, Conscience & Atonement

By Jaideep Saikia

Alongside the fact that India is one of the most terror afflicted countries in the world, there are a few interesting ailments that are adding to the torture that the common men and women of an otherwise great nation are being forced to endure.

I don't wish to go back too far into history. An undemanding revisitation of how

destroying the sinister terror nests inside Pakistan. I saluted Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. I felt avenged.

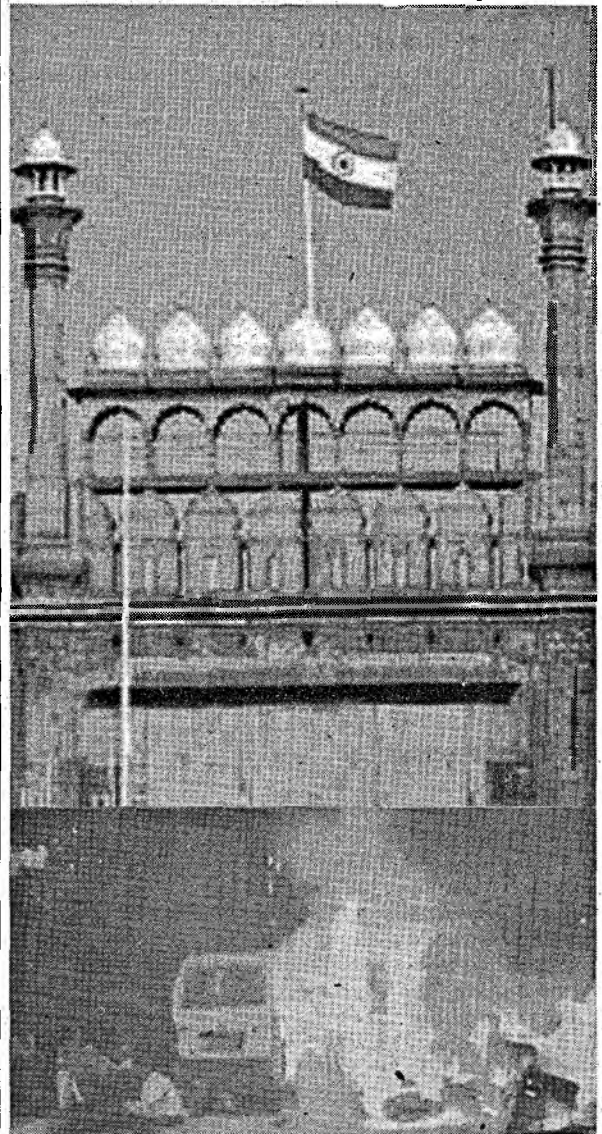
But I knew; having read history anecdotally, that Pakistan would not be deterred or dissuaded by even a robust operation such as Sindoor. The failed state's sole reason for existence is its anti-India innards. I knew

"I can go to lengths and write about how Op Sindoor was not a "dissuasion" for our arch enemy. But it had to be undertaken for better or for worse. Indeed, I laud Modi for the intrepid action that he bade the Bravehearts of the Indian armed onto."

a joyous group of happy people's dream transformed into a nightmare in the meadows of Baisaran would suffice for now. It was un-adulterated tragedy. India's political leadership (I underline political leadership) responded befittingly. Gratefully, there is an unsullied apparatus in India by way of its courageous armed forces which clinically carried out that forceful political mandate.

that once the insouciance dust of India's arrogant internal intelligence had settled, the jackals would return. It is the way of the vulpine. Indeed, I had cautioned against complacency in my myriad articles post Sindoor. But I was not heeded - what does a person who begs for his living know about national security?

In fact, the person who



Indeed, as far as I am concerned, it is the only arm in India that not only continues to be efficient and steered by integrity, but one which puts country and its pride above all else.

It saddens me that the other limbs of this great nation of ours, primarily the

failed his countrymen the most in Pahalgam, and now in Delhi was promoted by way of giving him an extension. One can countenance failure once, but not again and again, especially when innocent lives are lost and families are uprooted.

"The failed state's sole reason for existence is its anti-India innards. I knew that once the insouciance dust of India's arrogant internal intelligence had settled, the jackals would return. It is the way of the vulpine. Indeed, I had cautioned against complacency in my myriad articles post Sindoor."

internal intelligence set-up, have become mere lotus eaters:

I can go to lengths and write about how Op Sindoor was not a "dissuasion" for our arch enemy. But it had to be undertaken for better or for worse. Indeed, I laud Modi for the intrepid action that he bade the Bravehearts of the Indian armed onto.

A failed cadet who had joined the Rashtriya Indian Military College, Dehradun in 1978 to don the proud olive green uniform (only to be found medically unfit after having successfully passed the requisite written UPSC examination and a rigorous three day Services Selection Board interview in Bhopal). I felt a surge of adrenalin being pumped into my veins when I learnt about my "comrades in arms"

Lal Bahadur Shastri resigned from his post of Minister of Railways because innocent people had died in two back-to-back train accidents. That was moral uprightness in its Sunday best. What does the present internal intelligence head of India has to say about that lofty ideal and legacy. Has he heard of Lal Bahadur Shastri? Is he bowing his head in shame when he hears the wails of the families that have been destroyed? Does he have even an ounce of conscience in him? Or, is he merely clinging onto a position because of the barefaced, brazen and brash power that it gives him?

(Jaideep Saikia is an internationally recognised and renowned strategist and thinker. He is also a celebrated, bestselling author)

Letters to the Editor

HNYP'S ultimatum raises questions on Legal Authority and Governance

Editor,

I am writing to express concern over the recent news item, "HNYP ultimatum to GS Road shops operating with expired licences" (The Shillong Times, November 12, 2025). While it is important for every business to maintain valid documents, the manner in which this issue is being handled raises serious questions of legality, fairness, and administrative propriety.

As per the report, the Hynniewtrep National Youth Front (HNYP), along with Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) officials and police personnel, conducted inspection of shops on GS Road and has now issued a 15-day ultimatum to shopkeepers to renew their license or face closure. It is alarming that a non-governmental organisation can issue directives or "ultimatums" to lawful business owners, as this authority lies solely with government agencies — not with pressure groups.

Moreover, many of the shops along GS Road fall under the jurisdiction of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), not the Shillong Municipal Board. If so, demanding additional licences from SMB amounts to overlapping authority and needless harassment, particularly of non-tribal traders who

have already complied with KHADC regulations. This dual control creates confusion and discourages genuine non-tribal traders who have been doing their trade lawfully for decades.

The Government of Meghalaya and both local bodies — KHADC and SMB — must urgently clarify their respective jurisdictions and ensure that enforcement remains within legal boundaries. If there are lapses in licence renewal, proper notices should be issued by the competent authority, not by any NGO or non-official group.

Given the government's continued inaction and its historical reluctance to address issues affecting non-tribal traders, it may now be essential for the shopkeepers' Association or affected business owners to approach the High Court. A judicial interpretation of jurisdiction is urgently needed to end overlapping authority, prevent discrimination and protect the livelihoods of law-abiding traders.

While maintaining regulatory compliance is necessary, intimidation of business owners is unacceptable in a democracy. Authorities should instead focus on transparent, single-window systems for trade licenses that treat all citizens equally.

I appeal to the concerned authorities to take note of this issue and prevent further harassment of non-tribal traders who contribute significantly to Shillong's economy and employment.

Yours etc.,
Homnath Gautam
Shillong-2

Not my circus, not my monkey

Editor,

"Not my circus, not my monkey," this phrase perfectly sums up any kind of repair or development work in Meghalaya. Every few months, one department decides to dig up roads in the name of development like laying pipes and cables and repairs etc. Of course, we mango citizens appreciate the work, but once they are done, they leave behind ruins that look like a war zone. One department fixes their part and walks away, leaving the mess for another department to deal with. How considerate of them, after all unfinished work keeps everyone employed.

Of course, it is not their department's job to fix the dug-up roads but how about informing the one responsible, that a stretch has been dug up and now needs urgent repairs. It is a never-ending loop of chaos, a system built on miscommunication and mutual denial. Why is there no foresight in planning before development or repairs are taken up? No coordination, no accountability; just endless digging, dumping, and disappearing. It is almost poetic how synchronized their incompetence is. You would think after decades of doing this, they would at least learn to talk to each other, but no. The charade continues.

The stretch from Rhino Museum to Upper Shillong feels like a durability test on your spine, lungs, eyes,

allergies and to test if your car's clutch plate is tough enough to endure human indifference. Then there are the random craters that appear overnight in every locality which are left without repairs. Ask who dug them up, and you will get the classic Indian shrug of nonchalance - Chalta hai bro. We, the poor mango citizens, have quietly adapted with the "Chalta hai bro" attitude.

We just adapt, to the incompetence, to the dust, to the government breadcrumbing us with shiny schemes and love-bombing us with concerts to distract from the mess. Umngot's plight is not any different. I ask the higher ups in power currently, — "Don't your hearts break upon witnessing the state of Umngot now? In Hindi, there's a phrase — "Kaan mein joon na rengna" — meaning complete indifference. With power in your hands, granted by us, the common people, how can you still choose not to act?

Being an army kid and having travelled extensively across India, I can tell you with full confidence that no state's natural beauty matches the beauty of Meghalaya, its culture, its food and its people. The concert economy is thriving, no doubt, but how about also consider nurturing the gifts nature has already bestowed upon Meghalaya and uplift the grassroots workers. Recently, Nirmala Sitharaman and Jyotiraditya Scindia appreciated what we have; I wonder what their thoughts will be if they see Umngot River now.

I and many of us, thank MP Ricky Syngkon for first

flagging the Umngot River Crisis. We respectfully urge others to also give a push to get this crisis averted at the earliest.

We mango citizens ask for basics like clean water, proper roads, and a system that works without us having to beg for the bare minimum. Most of us aren't chasing mansions or millions. After all, we can't transfer our bank balance to the next life, can we?

Yours etc.,
Shivani Pde
Via email

300 Crore Tourism Project

Editor,

A Rs 300 crore funding can significantly boost sustainable tourism if directed towards comprehensive, community-driven, and environmentally-conscious initiatives. Successful models demonstrate that such investments should focus on infrastructure, livelihood generation, ecological preservation, public-private partnerships, and innovative experiences to achieve long-term impacts.

Government Ministries and State Government pooled funds for promoting Tourism sector in Meghalaya, however there will have a positive impact on all unemployed youths as well as discovery of hitherto undiscovered tourism spots if Government undertakes such an exercise in Sohra where land is owned by the locals indigenous tribes and which

are not publicly known. This will allow tourists to explore more of what the state has to offer considering the also the rich flora and fauna which are rich potential resources.

Meghalaya should promote ecotourism and green infrastructure, cultural and heritage conservation and also sustainability-focused campaigns to raise visitor awareness, such as not leaving traces of footfalls which are local stewardship programs. What Meghalaya needs are challenge-based project selection, where innovative operators pitch sustainable tourism ideas for funding allocation from PRIME Meghalaya or under the CM Elevate Tourism sector scheme.

Tour operators should work at minimizing waste generation by promoting recycling, composting, and reducing single-use plastics. Hotels, restaurants and home stays should be told to use natural and biodegradable products. Tour operators should hire and train local staff, and source goods from local businesses at fair rates. Tour operators should also invest in restoring heritage sites and sharing their stories responsibly even when they are recommending hotels, restaurants, and tour agencies with eco-certification. These are basic safety initiatives to be communicated by the Government to all tourists.

Yours etc.,
Archie Rymbai,
Via email

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"You have to be humble and learn from the players around you."

— Raphael Varane

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.95 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2025

NDA wins Bihar

AMIDST the mud-slinging by the Congress Party during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process of the Bihar electoral rolls, the NDA which political observers predicted might not have smooth sailing this time around, surprised all with its massive win in the Bihar Assembly polls. An upbeat Prime Minister Modi stated on Friday that the victory has given a new 'MY-Mahila Youth' formula since people have destroyed the "communal MY formula of the jungle raj people," alluding to Lalu Yadav's era. Modi went a step further and took a swipe at the Congress Party saying that the Party would soon witness a big split. Referring to the Nehru-Gandhi family, Modi said the 'naamdars' are drowning everyone with them. The poor performance of the Congress Party was certainly not expected. The Bihar results point toward the persistent decline of the Congress in the state. In the 2020 assembly polls, as part of the Mahagathbandhan, Congress had fielded candidates in 70 constituencies. It eventually won 19, polling a mere 9.6 per cent votes. It was blamed for overstating its social and geographical reach, to secure a disproportionate number of constituencies as part of the seat-sharing deal, and pulling the opposition alliance down.

Apart from the fact that the Congress is battling a resources crunch since fighting elections today involves the use of money as a bait for garnering votes, it is also afflicted by poor organisational setbacks. That money and freebies win votes is undeniable. It is simplistic to expect poor, destitute voters to come to the polling booth and cast their votes based on the appeal of a political party. Just before the elections were announced, Nitish Kumar, backed by PM Modi announced the Rs 10,000 scheme for 1.3 crore women. This solidified his women voter base and contributed to a record women voter of over 71 per cent. What also helped the NDA win big was the free electricity given to all domestic consumers up to 125 units. This was a game-changer in villages where people found it difficult to pay their electricity bills.

Many poll observers had written off Nitish Kumar at the early stages of the campaign but he has proven them wrong. So what makes Nitish Kumar such an unshakable force in Bihar? He is a master player as far as elections are concerned and understands voter behaviour in his home state more than his rivals. He has united the economically backward class, Mahadalits and non-Yadav OBCs. Above all he still enjoys the goodwill of women voters who have not forgotten his liquor prohibition policy. They have backed him for two decades. Meanwhile the reaction of the Congress Party to the loss was predictable. Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera blamed Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar Gupta, who they have been campaigning against for what they call the "vote chori business." While Rahul Gandhi's campaign against the CEC and its alleged large-scale manipulation of the voter's list at first seemed to yield dividends; in the final analysis it gained nothing. However, it merits being watchful of the Election Commission of India. There is no knowing what level of politics the power holders can stoop to.

India BLOC must take proper lessons from big jolt in Bihar Assembly Polls

Rejuvenated BJP's next target is four state assembly polls next year

By Nitya Chakraborty

The NDA led by the BJP has swept the assembly polls in Bihar stunning the RJD and the other constituents of the INDIA Bloc by the extent of the win of the NDA constituents in the 243 member state assembly. The initial results till this afternoon indicate that the NDA has got 202 seats as against 35 received by Mahagathbandhan and six by others. This 2025 verdict can be taken as a disaster for the INDIA Bloc in Bihar led by RJD as in 2020 assembly elections, the MGB was nearly scraping through with a majority. The NDA got 122 seats as against 114 by MGB while others got seven seats. The RJD emerged as the single largest party in 2020 with 75 seats as against 74 by the BJP. The JD(U) was the third party five years back.

At a time when the MGB was gripped with big optimism after the projection of Tejashwi Yadav as the potential chief minister of the MGB and Rahul Gandhi led movement against SIR took the character of a massive movement against the Election Commission as also centre, what went wrong in the strategy and poll campaign of the MGB? This has to be assessed by the leaders of INDIA Bloc and their think tank after the full results are out, but a few indicators are available which have to be studied carefully by the MGB leadership.

First, Nitish Kumar is no push over. This 2025 election has rehabilitated the chief minister. He has proverbial nine lives. The BJP has got the largest number of seats singly at 92 as against 82 received by JD(U), but Nitish Kumar is due to be administered the oath with full powers and the state BJP leadership has to wait for long as long as the JD(U) supremo keeps physically fit.

Secondly, the women's support has certainly gone mostly in favour of NDA due to Nitish Kumar. The announcement of additional funds for the women just a few days before the elections had its big impact. Nitish Kumar could get the first advantage of such revids as he was in power. The RJD leader's follow up announcement failed to garner that impact. In fact women participation in the polls and their assertion of voting rights aggressively are the outcome of the various women centric schemes including cash transfer to women. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has shown in Bengal how effectively it can be implemented in the state to get political mileage.

Thirdly, Rahul Gandhi's movement against SIR did

not have the expected effect on the electorate. Even in dalit and poor agricultural labour bases, the NDA candidates fared better compared to the 2020 polls. The strategy on SIR has to be assessed properly by the INDIA Bloc as a whole. Rahul Gandhi is certainly a senior leader but he should not be allowed to hijack INDIA Bloc agenda on his own terms. Congress got only 4 seats—this should determine the organisational stature of the Congress in Bihar which continuously bargained for more seats from RJD.

RJD was the leader of MGB. So it got the maximum hit from the NDA sweep. But the details of voting figures indicate that the RJD might have got more votes than the BJP. RJD has the potential and it is the party which can stage a comeback after assessing its fault lines in the 2025 poll campaign. Similarly, the CPI(ML)-L which lost heavily has to assess that its 2020 base has been lost to some extent. The Party worked hard for its candidates as also for other MGB nominees. The CPI(ML)-L general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya has to go deep into the low performance of his party as well as the MGB in the 2025 polls.

It is clear that the Jan Suraj Party of Prashant Kishor and AIMIM of Owaisi cut the MGB votes, especially the votes of RJD. These things happen in a parliamentary democracy in elections. But the real big jolt to the MGB came from Chirag Paswan's Party LJP(RV) which could transfer its dalit votes to the NDA candidates. The BJP and JD(U) benefitted immensely from their alliance with Chirag's party. With 21 seats, Chirag Paswan has become powerful in both state and central politics. The MGB leadership has to go into all the factors that contributed to the defeat of many of its candidates in their strongholds including the role of Chirag Paswan's party.

While the INDIA Bloc and MGB leaderships are expected to do introspection on the factors responsible for the defeat of the MGB, for BJP, it is their moment of glory. Though, the central leaders were talking of sure win by NDA in Bihar, in private, they were worried. The movement against SIR got both Narendra Modi and Amit Shah panicky. But they are great strategists and they know how to get out of a crisis situation. They did that. Amit Shah will certainly take credit for the victory of his strategy in Bihar elections. His next focus is now on showing a better performance in the next round of state assembly elections in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and Puducherry.

Herein lies the big task of the INDIA Bloc to take proper lessons from the Bihar election debacle and prepare unitedly to meet the challenge in the next round of state assembly polls scheduled in April/May 2026. Only four months are left.

So the INDIA Bloc constituents have no time left, they should start their work in the concerned states. The BJP central leadership will do all their utmost to topple the opposition governments in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Their focus will be fully on these two states. In Kerala, the fight is between CPI(M) led LDF and the Congress led UDF, BJP can at best secure two/three seats. The new government will be led by any of the INDIA Bloc partners CPI(M) or the Congress.

Similarly in West Bengal, in Mamata Banerjee, the INDIA Bloc has got a political strategist who can take on the BJP at the state level in the 2026 assembly elections. All indications suggest that whatever efforts Home Minister Amit Shah may make, the BJP is not organizationally in a position to fare better. But still, the central leadership of the BJP will make use of all its cards to see that their objective is achieved. Trinamool Congress supremo is aware of this and she and her party are ready.

For the INDIA Bloc, there is some reason for getting worried at the recent developments in Tamil Nadu on the eve of the 2026 assembly

elections. The film star Vijay is making waves and he is getting massive response from youth and women. His political party has not yet decided to take a position on alliance. But if Vijay takes a position aligning with the AIADMK-BJP alliance, that might pose a threat to the Stalin led DMK and the INDIA Bloc constituents who are jointly contesting the assembly polls. The political situation in Tamil Nadu in 2025 is a bit different from the 2021 polls. The DMK led front should take the challenge seriously and make massive preparations to take on any joint threat posed by the state opposition.

In Assam, BJP is confident of retaining power in the state. The central party has faith in the chief minister Himanta Biswa Sharma's strategy of delinking Bengali speaking Muslims from the Assamese speaking Muslims and campaigning on Hindutva lines to gain favour with Assamese Hindus. In Assam, at last the INDIA bloc parties have arrived at a sort of unity for the 2026 elections under the leadership of the Congress Party which is the leading INDIA Bloc party in Assam. Assam has 35 per cent people of minorities mainly Muslims. AIUDF is the party mainly looking after the interests of Bengali speaking Muslims for a long time. The Congress has problems in having an electoral front with this party. But if AIUDF fights separately that will help BJP in many constituencies. The Congress may take lessons from the strategic alliance of Chirag Paswan with NDA in Bihar and how it benefitted the NDA. The opposition front can have electoral understanding with the objective of not dividing anti-BJP votes, even though not making AIUDF a part of the opposition front. If the INDIA Bloc wants to defeat BJP in 2026 elections in Assam, there can not be any division of anti-BJP votes.

Each state election needs a different poll strategy. For Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the electoral scenario is set, but in Assam, it is still fluid. Only one step has been taken forward, a few more steps are needed for the final victory of INDIA Bloc in Assam which is possible with a proper poll strategy. INDIA Bloc leaders have to meet, do painstaking analysis and take steps for the April/ May 2026 state assembly elections. One more assembly election battle in 2025 after Delhi has been won by the BJP. But for the 2026 battles, INDIA Bloc can not afford to lose any. (IPA Service)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

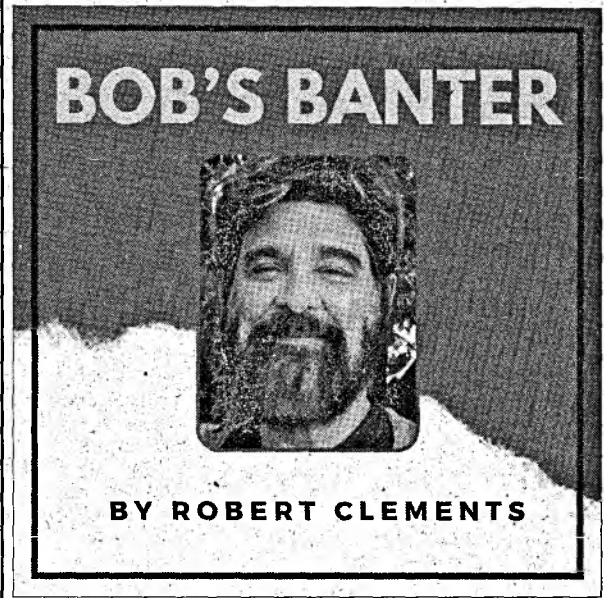
Standing United Against Terror...

Terror has raised its ugly head again, and with it comes the same dark questions that have haunted humanity for decades. Why do men choose to destroy instead of build? Why do they believe that spilling blood will prove a point? Terrorism is not courage. It is cowardice. It is the act of those who cannot argue with logic, cannot persuade with reason, and cannot live with the peace that civilization demands. And the only way to face it, the only weapon that truly works, is unity.

I remember the night when terror struck Mumbai. I was hardly five hundred feet away, having dinner at the Press Club. It had been a normal evening, filled with chatter and laughter, until the first message came in that firing had started at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

mity. We need not think alike to stand together. We can disagree on politics, on ideology, on belief, yet still stand shoulder to shoulder when humanity is attacked. That is what makes democracy strong. Terrorists hate unity in diversity because they cannot control it. They want the world divided into simple categories, us and them, believer and infidel, right and wrong. The best revenge against terror is to refuse that simplicity and celebrate our complexity.

We must also understand that unity is not weakness. It is not surrender. It is the most strategic form of strength. A nation that argues but never breaks apart, that debates but never descends into hatred, that mourns but never stops moving, that is a nation no terrorist can defeat. When we stand together, bullets lose their meaning and bombs lose



Terminus. Within minutes, more reports followed. The Cama Hospital. The lane outside. The sound of sirens filled the air. Some of us tried to make calls, others prayed. All of us sat still, knowing the city we loved was under siege.

But, in the midst of tragedy, I saw courage. The constable who ran toward the sound of bullets. The young nurse at the hospital who, though trembling, refused to leave her patients. The ordinary citizen who offered water to those fleeing the scene. There, in those small acts, was the spirit of India, defiant, compassionate, unbreakable. Terrorists can destroy buildings, but they cannot destroy a people bound together by shared pain and purpose.

But here is the truth we must face. Unity cannot be a word we remember only after a bomb explodes. It must be a way of life before it happens. Because if we are divided in peace, we are weak in war. Terrorism feeds on discord. It thrives in the gaps between communities, in the whispers of mistrust, in the speeches that inflame and the policies that discriminate. When our leaders use words as weapons, they unknowingly, or sometimes knowingly, build the very foundation on which terrorism stands. There are two kinds of terror in our land today, one from the gun and one from the tongue.

The first kills the body, the second kills the spirit. The first can be fought with force, the second must be fought with conscience. What use is fighting external enemies when internal hatred burns brighter than our patriotism? The terror of unfair words, of humiliation, of silencing, of injustice, these are what create angry young men ready to be brainwashed. When society is divided and justice uneven, the extremist finds recruits easily.

Now is the time for our leaders to stop posturing. Now is the time for the loud voices of hate to be silenced and for the soft voices of wisdom to be heard.

During that long night at the Press Club, I realized something profound. Unity does not require unifor-

their purpose. Look at the countries that have fallen into endless cycles of violence, all because unity was replaced by suspicion. Let us not go down that road. Let us not let petty politics divide our resolve. It is time to remember that we are first and foremost Indians, not Hindus, Muslims, Christians, or Sikhs. When bullets fly, they do not ask for religion. When blood spills, it is red everywhere.

Our first fight must be against the terror of words. Let our politicians learn that speeches can heal or destroy. Let social media users learn that what they type can unite or divide. Let television debates stop being shouting matches and start being bridges of understanding. The day we conquer the terror of our own speech is the day we will weaken the terror of the gun.

In the end, the war on terror is not fought by armies alone. It is fought by citizens who choose peace, by teachers who teach tolerance, by religious leaders who preach compassion, by journalists who speak truth without fear, by mothers who raise their children not to hate. It is fought every time we choose empathy over apathy, fairness over favour, humanity over prejudice.

So today, when the threat of terror looms again, let us silence the homegrown bully who spreads fear through division. Let us teach our children that the real heroes are those who build bridges, not walls.

The bullet and the bomb will always try to break us. But if we remain united, if we protect justice and kindness as fiercely as we protect our borders, then terrorism will find no ground to grow. We will have built a fortress far stronger than steel, the fortress of a united people.

Let us choose wisely, between the bomb and the bully, between hate and harmony, between fear and faith. Let us stand together. For that is the only way to fight terror.

You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Terror blasts that bleed humanity

Editor,
On the evening of November 10, 2025, Delhi's historic Red Fort area turned into a nightmare. At 6:52 pm, a Hyundai i20 suddenly blew up in the bustling market, killing 13 people and injuring over two dozen. The impact of the blast was so fierce that buildings nearby had their windows shattered, and several vehicles caught fire.

Behind the wheel of the explosion was Dr Umar Un Nabi, a doctor from Pulwama in Kashmir who taught at Al Falah University in Faridabad. What has unfolded is that Dr Umar was not acting alone. He was part of a formidable terror network made up of educated doctors who had been allegedly plotting multiple attacks across India for nearly two years.

Surprisingly, the truth began emerging just one day before the blast. Police raided properties in Faridabad and found about 2,900 kilograms of explosives, lethal weapons, and bomb making materials. Imagine what would have hap-

pened if 2,900 kilograms of explosives had detonated. Give a serious thought on this. These safe household properties belonged to Dr Muzammil Shakeel, another doctor from Pulwama who worked with Dr Umar. When authorities arrested Dr Muzammil and his colleague Dr Adeel Rather, the tremor of panic spread through the network. What investigators uncovered was deeply disturbing — both men were directly connected to Jaish e Mohammed, a dreaded terrorist group based in Pakistan. Another doctor from Hyderabad, Dr Ahmed Mohiyuddin Saiyed, was arrested by the Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad after they found an alleged plot to prepare the extremely poisonous compound "ricin."

What shocked the nation most was the profile of the attackers. These were not naive extremists but highly qualified professionals. In addition, Dr Shaheen Sayeed from Lucknow had been recruited to lead Jamaat ul Mominaat, the first women's wing of Jaish e Mohammed, established in October 2025. Further investigation is only bringing to light more shocking skeletons from the cupboard.

Many influential Muslim

organizations and leaders have also come forward to vociferously condemn the terror blast. Lt Gen Zameer Uddin Shah (Retd), highly admired for his integrity and wisdom, denounced the Delhi blast as a barbaric act and called for unity and justice; he described the heinous assault on our nation and the shared heritage that belongs to every Indian as deeply deplorable.

Here is the billion-dollar question: the doctors who have taken a vow to nurse and heal have now grievously wounded the nation. How does knowledge meant to stitch life together with empathy become the thread of demonic devastation? What makes the educated so deeply indoctrinated to hate the nation? Why can we not pinpoint the root causes? I think no one should blame any particular religion that otherwise unfailingly teaches the sermons of compassion and service to the needy. Needless to say, terror and compassion do not co-exist together.

What one feels is that we now need to stand up with one voice to condemn hatred in any form or disguise. No joking, but what if IAS officers, Generals, Admirals, or Brigadiers... were also

indoctrinated like the doctors above tomorrow? Humanity must no longer be bled by the onslaught of insane terrorism. Complacency today could cost humanity tomorrow.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Prescription to the Ad-hoc Quagmire

Editor,
I vociferously support our estimated 4 Lakhs beloved Educated Unemployed Youths of Meghalaya who have passed from Matriculation to PhD eligible to apply for the 1,514 vacant sanctioned Group D to Group A posts versus the 1,514 "Back Door" Vacant Sanctioned Posts occupied by Ad-hocs thereby preventing these posts from being advertised so that our eligible youths can apply. Illegality through nepotism, favouritism and other acts such as not sending posts to be advertised for clandestine appointments which has been going on for 50 years should never ever be condoned and rewarded. There is no such thing as a

free lunch. We have to earn through hard work, perseverance and dedication.

The open competitive exams for all 1,514 vacant posts bar none, must be firmly held as decided. No concessional head start or compromises must be awarded to the Ad-hocs, no matter the age and they will all have to fight fairly; the right way.

I wholeheartedly support conferring Unskilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled and Highly Skilled/Casual Basis jobs to back door Ad-hocs who will fail the open competitive exams, to work till they are 60 years old so that they will have gainful employment, repay the loans that they may have and "justice" as per the constitution in recognition for their 17 years and less of their service. At present, highly skilled Ad-hocs get paid 750 per day and this will increase from 2027. The government cannot endlessly keep on regularizing and rewarding illegal acts of failure to advertise these vacant sanctioned posts.

A Cut Off date has been set at 31.12.2007 which must never ever be extended nor compromised no matter what the reasons are. Extending this illegality will encourage failure to advertise vacant sanctioned posts with

clandestine appointments against our youths who are suffering silently from joblessness. Before the back door Ad-hocs choose to go to court, all OMs, Notifications and Rules if present, containing the terms Ad-hocs Regular / 2F / 3F must all be completely abrogated and made redundant so that they will have no locus standi in court.

I know that I stand on the right side of history, fairness and justice. The government did the right thing to hold open competitive exams with age condonation but it must give casual jobs to the back door Ad-hocs who will fail the open competitive exams. The government must heed my advice just as my brain child advice with substantiation that I gave to a certain person and party members to raise the upper age relaxation which came to fruition on January 2022 for our lakhs of suffering jobless youths.

Yours etc.,
Melarbor L Thabab,
Via email

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

Dogs 10,000 yrs ago roamed with bands of humans, came in all shapes and sizes

From village dogs to toy poodles to mastiffs, dogs come in an astonishing array of shapes, colours and sizes. Today there are estimated to be about 700 million dogs living with or around humans.

To many of us, dogs are loyal companions, working partners, and beloved family members - and the histories of our species are deeply woven together. But how did this incredible diversity come to be - and how far back does this relationship with humans go? Two new studies published today in *Science* provide some answers. One, led by Allowen Evin from the University of Montpellier, draws on ancient skeletal remains.

The other, led by Shao-Jie Zhang from the Kunming Institute of Zoology, draws on the study of DNA from ancient Eastern Eurasian dogs.

Together, these studies suggest the story of dogs and their relationship with humans is older and more complex than once thought.

The origins of modern dog diversity

The study by Evin and her colleagues used 643 dog and wolf skulls spanning the past 50,000 years to address the origins of modern dog diversity.

Her team's analysis suggests the distinctive "dog-like" skull shape first arose around 11,000 years ago, during the Holocene epoch, the time since the most recent ice age. They also found substantial physical diversity in dog skulls from the same period.

This means the wide range of shapes and sizes dogs have today isn't solely a product of the intense selective breeding programs that became popular in the last few centuries. Some of that variation emerged millennia earlier.

The team re-analysed the skull shapes of all 17 known dog or wolf skulls from the Late Pleistocene, a geological period from 129,000 to 11,700 years ago. Some skulls were 50,000 years old.



They found all of these Pleistocene skulls were essentially wolf-like in shape, including some previously identified as early dogs.

Importantly, this suggests that while the split between wolves and dogs likely occurred during the Pleistocene, the skull shape of early dogs didn't start to change until closer to the Holocene - that is, 11,000 years ago. However, some Holocene dog skulls still retained wolf-like features.

This research suggests early dogs were much more diverse than previously thought. This diversity may have laid the groundwork for the extreme variations in size and shape of the dogs we have today.

Travelling companions

Earlier genomic studies have uncovered four major dog lineages that likely originated about 20,000 years ago: Eastern (East Asian and Arctic) and Western (Europe and Near East) dogs.

The origins of these ancient dog lineages are still being untangled. However, studying shifts in the ancestry of dogs through time and between different regions can help us better understand both the origins of dogs and the movement of Neolithic (new stone-age) humans.

The new study by Zhang and his colleagues used 73 ancient dog genomes spanning the last 10,000 years to explore how humans and dogs moved across Eastern Eurasia through time.

Analysis of these ancient dogs identified multiple shifts in the ancestry of dogs in Eastern Eurasia at times that correlate with the movement of specific human groups (hunter-gatherers, farmers and pastoralists). This suggests that as different human cultural groups moved across Eurasia, their dogs often moved with them, carrying their unique genetic signatures.

There was some discrepancy between human and dog population ancestry in some parts of Asia. For example, Eastern hunter-gatherers from Veretie and Botai, who were more closely related to Western Eurasian humans, had largely Eastern (Arctic) dogs rather than the Western dogs observed with other Western Eurasian cultures at the time.

This means dogs may have been a key part of cultural exchange or trade between different human cultures or communities. It may also illustrate complexities in the evolution of dogs that we are yet to understand.

The work by Zhang and his team presents compelling evidence that in

Eastern Eurasia thousands of years ago dogs played an indispensable role in human societies as crucial "biocultural packages" that moved with humans.

In other words, humans took their companions with them on their journeys (and perhaps traded them), rather than simply acquiring new dogs after moving.

These findings highlight the long-term, complex and intertwined relationship between dogs and humans that spans more than 10,000 years.

The genetic ancestry of dogs can act as a living record of ancient human migrations, trade networks and cultural exchanges.

Studies on ancient dogs may also help us understand the environmental factors that contributed to the evolution of dogs, and their relationship with humans.

Reshaping our understanding of dogs

Together, these new studies profoundly reshape our understanding of how dogs became so diverse and how they have related to humans along the way.

Both studies underscore that the incredible diversity in modern dogs is not an entirely recent phenomenon. The genetic and morphological foundations for this variation were laid thousands of years ago, shaped by natural selection, human selection and diverse environments, long before the structured breeding of the past few centuries.

Future studies investigating the physical diversity and ancestry of dogs through time could deepen our understanding of the complex origins and spread of dogs across the globe.

Whatever their origins, this research deepens our appreciation for the unique and ancient bond between humans and dogs that was almost as diverse as canines themselves. (The Conversation)

(Authored by Kylie M Cairns, UNSW Sydney and Melanie Fillios, University of New England)

Psychedelics likely to help terminal patients find peace

In clinical trials around the world, a surprising treatment is showing promise for people with terminal illnesses: psychedelic therapy.

For many, the hardest part of dying isn't physical pain but the fear, anxiety and sense of meaninglessness that often accompany it. While palliative care in the UK is rightly praised for easing pain and managing symptoms, patients' emotional and spiritual suffering is often less well addressed.

Standard treatments - such as antidepressants, counselling and mindfulness - may ease some symptoms but often fail to help patients accept their diagnosis or find meaning in their remaining time. This is where psychedelic therapy may offer support.

The therapy involves the use of psychedelics such as psilocybin in combination with psychological support. This approach is designed to help patients explore difficult emotions, shift perspective and achieve profound psychological breakthroughs.

In two landmark studies, a high dose of psilocybin with psychotherapy was shown to reduce depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer. These effects were rapid and, in many cases, sustained for up to six months, with many participants reporting improved mood, emotional clarity and reduced fear of death.

Some also described experiences of deep emotional release, awe and a sense of connection during psychedelic therapy - altered states that appeared to help patients reframe their relationship to dying.

Recognition of the potential of psychedelics for treating severe mental health conditions generally has led to significant regulatory shifts in several countries. For example, Australia, Germany and Canada are beginning to allow access to psychedelics for people with serious or treatment-resistant conditions.

Meanwhile, the EU has invested millions in research into psychedelic-assisted therapy. But in the UK, progress remains slow. Psychedelics are classed as substances of little or no medicinal value and are tightly controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Regulations. This makes research slow and access nearly impossible. Even clinical trials face costly licensing

requirements and delays, discouraging researchers and limiting innovation.

A timely debate

Questions about how best to support people at the end of life are especially timely, as the end of life bill is currently being debated in parliament. While the bill focuses on legalising assisted dying, it has also sparked wider debate about the quality and scope of end-of-life care.

Access to good palliative support is not always guaranteed - a concern shared by both supporters and opponents of the bill. Against this backdrop, the limits of conventional approaches to psychological suffering become harder to ignore.

The bill opens up space to consider the potential role of psychedelic therapy, and to reflect more broadly on what it means to die well and whether current systems adequately support that goal. The bill has prompted renewed public interest in how we treat psychological distress in the final stages of life. A recent YouGov poll found that most UK adults support relaxing restrictions on psilocybin research, especially for people with terminal illness. This suggests that public attitudes may be ahead of policy. The bill provides an opportunity to question why the UK continues to implement such strict legal controls that hamper research and access to much-needed treatments, and why it lags behind other countries' approaches. It invites a broader conversation about how the UK supports those facing the emotional and existential challenges of dying.

Clinical evidence, public attitudes and the changing international landscape all highlight growing interest in psychedelic therapy as a complement to conventional approaches like counselling. For those nearing the end of life, it may offer a rare chance to face death with less fear and more meaning and emotional clarity.

Psychedelic therapy won't be right for everyone, but for some, it could mean meeting death with peace instead of despair. (The Conversation)

(Authored by Muireann Quigley and Laura Downey, University of Birmingham and Joanna Neill, University of Manchester)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 16, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Mars on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results for the whole year. You will look for long term goals and want to have stability in your life. Your financial position will get better. You will also plan to get married to a person of your liking. You will also have secret plans, and it will be difficult to guess what goes inside your mind. You will also buy a car or a flat. Your enemies will be unable to defeat you. You will achieve miraculous success in certain tasks. As a result, your popularity will peak at the right moment. You will form successful situation in your work to earn profits. Your capabilities and value will be appreciated. Your health is going to pose no major problems. You will also get interested in religion and spiritual activities. You will devote a lot of time to your family. Time will move smoothly.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) You would be highly ambitious and work hard to fulfill desired professional goals. The key to success is adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards work and commitments. This period brings excellent opportunities for people in show business, beauty-culture and related fields. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. Professionally there will be huge expenses as well as financial gains from foreign business associates. Family members would be supportive. Your finances could also improve if you employ a new strategy. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health and fitness needs.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) The planetary configuration is such that it brings desire for love, harmony and peace in your life. Personal and professional relations are loving, stable, and harmonious. You may lose your fear of taking risks and this brings success in competitive exams and interviews. This would be a good week for financial undertakings involving electronics, technology, arts as well as group activities. Learning new things is your passion. You are more sensitive artistically, your imagination is stirred, and you have an increased appreciation for subtleties. You are thinking more creatively and expressing yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. There may be a minor health problem, and you need to give more attention to your health.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) This period brings financial benefits and proves good for long-term investments and finances. You would impress people with your communication skills inspiring people to trust you. Self-confidence and actions are highlighted. You tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in adverse situations. You will be responsible, hardworking, dutiful, and serious when it comes to finances and romantic relationships. This is an excellent time under which to work on resolving differences in values or problems with loved ones.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) Your courage and confidence will keep your hopes alive. You can attempt difficult tasks, resolve complicated issues and connect with unapproachable people at work. Increased energy along with a renewed feeling of confidence favors you. Make the best of time and utilize your energy accordingly. Problems in your life may be overcome by bravery, self-assertion, and directness. There's nothing wrong with a bit of self-centeredness. You are highly motivated to make money, and this enhances your energy for new money-making projects. Romantic matters, as well as pleasure-seeking activities, come to the fore this week. You might spend a lot of time making short frequent trips, visiting friends and relatives.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) You achieve success as you are outstanding in your work. Attend to professional, personal and material aspects during this time. You interact with people in positions of power and authority gracefully and diplomatically. You think in an unorthodox way, and this brings appreciation from seniors and peers alike. You take on a dreamy and philosophical outlook, which opens your heart to new experiences. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform this week. Your finances could also improve with continuous efforts and follow-up. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate beautifully. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be kicked.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Self-confidence and quick action are highlighted. A strong positive feeling towards your beloved encourages you to do something new that is unusual and would be a wonderful surprise. Your personal charm and charisma take you through complicated situations. This stands you in good stead when you are faced with opposition. This is a good time for teachers and those in manufacturing and finance industries. People in marketing and sales will have to work hard to meet professional commitments.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) Your domestic and career needs are fulfilled. You find an intoxicating romance and express your feelings to your loved one. At work, you may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovation. Your inner hopes and desires come to the forefront even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. There may be gains from property, ancestral land, shares and assets in hand. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) You are unusually introspective and reserved. It is a good time to organize your workplace and make it well equipped with the latest infrastructure. This would help you to get better efficiencies to achieve desired goals. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. Your communications and presentation style brings accolades from people who matter. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy to your work area. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Health needs to be looked at also be careful in your interpersonal dealings and avoid confrontations.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) You work hard to handle business ventures and collaborations. You may take up assignments and projects but would require extra effort and networking to take them through. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted but with reservation, however you meet with success in foreign matters. On the finance front expenditure will be on the rise. You would be able to make an impact on business associates with hard work and creative ideas. Your creativity will assist in your output at work and help you gain recognition. You extend your hospitality to family.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You are practical, hard-working and helpful in personal and professional matters this week. You would find it easier to express your unique individuality, even if this involves changing careers or jobs. Time is well spent on your hobby that reflects your unique personality. You are more willing to adapt to new circumstances, ideas, and unfamiliar situations. You can find creative solutions to problems now. Health remains good as you are filled with a positive energy.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) Responsibilities and workload are on the increase and the key to success is to adopt a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life. This week proves to be good for people in finance, shares, law and management. Your ability to express yourself and to solve problems is enhanced. Students in creative fields and the performing arts will get success and good results. There is active support from family members and business associates. If you've been off track on your exercise routine be kind to yourself but make sure you re-commit to your personal goals.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) The desire for love, harmony and peaceful life will come to fore. You are powerful, transformative and energetic. You make a mark at your place of work and gain recognition from associates. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. Students will need to work hard and put in the extra effort for forthcoming exams. You would make best use of your knowledge and skills, but wisdom would influence more to the knowledge. You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. In fact, this is an excellent time for realizing a personal hobby, turning it into a business.

How Pacific nations plan to run on 100% renewables

Picture dusk falling somewhere in the Solomon Islands. A fisher's skiff glides home using a whisper-quiet electric outboard motor. In the Cook Islands, a big battery steadies the island grid. In Papua New Guinea's highlands, solar kits bring electric light to homes for the first time.

These aren't prototypes - they're already up and running across the Pacific. Put together, these stories of quiet change point to something bigger.

For decades, Pacific island countries have led the global fight on climate change. These nations are highly exposed to the damage from rising sea levels, acidifying oceans and bleached coral reefs. Pacific leaders helped secure the 2015 Paris Agreement and the global goal of holding warming to 1.5°C.

Now the Pacific is leading the way again. Island leaders have a bold plan to become the world's first region powered entirely by renewables and energy storage.

The move isn't symbolic. It's extremely practical. Pacific nations spend an eye-watering percentage of their GDP (10-25 per cent) buying fossil fuels to run power plants, generators and vehicles.

Ending reliance on imports and becoming energy independent will bring major dividends. Despite widespread support, the Pacific's clean energy transition has not yet taken off in earnest due to transport costs and gaps in financing, skills and regulation.

Leaders will formally release a renewable roadmap next week at the COP30 climate conference in Brazil. Pacific nations and Australia are bidding to host the next climate talks in 2026. Island leaders hope to leverage the global summit to attract investment in their own energy transition.

Slashing fossil fuel imports will save billions

Right now, Pacific countries spend AUD 9-14 billion a year importing diesel for generators and fuel for vehicles and boats.

Sharp falls in renewable costs mean solar and battery systems are now clearly cheaper than fossil fuels for electricity generation.

Even with the Pacific's logistical challenges, installed costs for solar have fallen more than five-fold since

2010. The cost of grid-scale and home batteries is falling quickly.

Replacing diesel generation with solar and batteries would cost an estimated AUD 3-4 billion. These costs would be quickly recouped, given annual savings would be around AUD 610-840 million.

The biggest challenge will be financing for large-scale renewables, grid infrastructure and energy storage. Many outer islands can move ahead faster by replacing diesel generators with solar and batteries. A rapid shift to electric vehicles (EVs) and vessels is also possible. Government incentives have triggered rapid uptake of EVs and hybrids in Fiji. Electric outboard motors are also ready for prime time.

Cost savings would free up funds for essential infrastructure, health, education and climate resilience. Renewables represent a powerful development strategy for the Pacific.

Global renewable uptake is key to survival for Pacific nations

Individual Pacific countries have set ambitious renewable energy targets in national commitments under the Paris Agreement. Fiji plans to be powered 100 per cent by renewables by 2035, while Tuvalu is aiming to get there by 2030.

These national goals can contribute to a regional target for 100 per cent renewable energy. Pacific leaders have agreed to establish a Pacific Energy Commissioner to coordinate the transition.

Pacific island countries are not major polluters, contributing just 0.02 per cent of global emissions. Cutting the region's emissions will do very little to limit warming.

The importance of this new plan is showing 100 per cent renewables is now doable.

As Vanuatu climate and energy minister Ralph Regenvanu states: "if we can manage the rapid transition of our energy systems in the Pacific Islands, it can be a beacon for the rest of the globe. Our survival depends on it." Holding warming to 1.5°C is critical for low-lying atoll nations. Climate resettlement is already under way, as Tuvalu residents enter ballots to move to Australia while Fijian villages are relocating to higher ground.

Two years ago, nearly 200 coun-

tries agreed to triple global renewable capacity and accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels. Reaching this goal is crucial to keep 1.5°C within reach. Pacific nations can show the way. But their survival isn't in their hands - it depends on the world following suit.

Next year's climate talks could drive the change

For several years, Pacific nations and Australia have been bidding to host the 2026 COP31 climate summit. But Türkiye has a rival bid. A final decision is expected next week.

As Palau President Surangel Whipps has said, hosting COP31 in the Pacific cannot just be about symbolism - it must demonstrate "tangible benefits" to Pacific peoples.

If the joint bid for COP31 gets up, Pacific leaders will be pressing for progress on their 100 per cent renewable plan by seeking investors and technology partners.

The COP talks are more than climate negotiations - they've become the world's biggest trade fair. Thousands of delegates will be looking to invest in renewable energy. More than 70 per cent of investment in renewables in Australia comes from abroad and COP31 could attract finance for both Australia and the Pacific.

Palau will host regional leaders next year at the annual Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting. Whipps, the incoming chair, will focus on building a regional renewable Pacific partnership and is planning an investment meeting next year to help attract international investment ahead of COP31.

Some investment is likely to come from Australia, both private and public. Australia is rapidly replacing coal-fired power with renewables and storage at home and is already supporting Pacific clean energy projects. But Pacific leaders have also called on Australia to "stop approving new gas and coal projects" and stop subsidising fossil fuel production.

The Pacific's plan to run on clean power makes clear sense on financial, energy security and climate leadership grounds. The question now is - will it happen? (The Conversation)

(Authored by Wesley Morgan, UNSW Sydney, and Scott Hamilton, Monash University)

"The world of learning is so broad, and the human soul is so limited in power!"
—Maria Mitchell

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 91 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2025

Kumar's magic in Bihar

THE Bihar assembly polls proved the continuing popularity of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. In a record of sorts, he occupied the top chair repeatedly for nine times while it's not clear whether a tenth innings is likely. The BJP scored four seats more than Kumar's Janata Dal (United), which could give the saffron party the right to seek the lead role in government formation. But, in a similar scenario in the past too, the BJP obliged Kumar. The BJP this time has a tally of 89 against JDU's 85 in a house of 243. Kumar, at 74, is not keeping good health, but he has the option to be a senior Union Cabinet member in the Modi ministry that his 12 MPs are propping up through vital support. But, moving away from his base and allowing someone else to be the CM could spell political doom for Kumar in the long run -- and might prove to be advantageous to the Laloo clan and the RJD.

Kumar remained the reigning hero for nearly two decades through a mix of strategy, a willingness to change colours and a direct engagement with the ordinary masses, principally women. The alliance's victory was thanks to the support it got from women -- whose voting per cent this time was the highest-ever at 71. With large numbers of Bihar's males working as migratory manual labourers in other states, women's support turned crucial in every election. The offer of Rs 10,000 as financial support to women and several other schemes specially meant for them solidified their support to the alliance. The 2015 prohibition policy had already won Kumar laurels from women. Another major factor that might have helped in this landslide victory for the BJP-JDU alliance is the Election Commission's revision of voters' list that weeded out 4.7 million names. While the Congress blames this for the drubbing it and the RJD received this time, they are yet to prove wrongdoing or denial of voting rights to any genuine voter. The downfall of the Congress in Bihar has been a continuing process thanks largely to the degeneration of its organisational structure there, as also in UP, and elsewhere too.

The Bihar sweep has obviously given a morale boost to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP. Had the verdict been against the saffron alliance in the state, chances are that the RSS would have been more emboldened to dictate terms with the prime minister. The Bihar elections would be followed by assembly polls in non-BJP ruled West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and Assam, the saffron citadel just months away. Curiously, Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj party lost its deposit in nearly all of the over 230 seats it fielded candidates from. He had promised to exit from politics if Nitish Kumar's party got more than 25 seats. Kumar, rather, had the right communal mix with him -- his own BC base and the BJP's wider, upper social segment. The CM's simple styles, incorruptible image and direct appeal to the masses acted as steroids for him and the ruling alliance in this electoral battle.

Rural school dropouts. What happens to them? Is there a way out?

By Toki Blah

We are all aware of the recent release of the Meghalaya Education Commission Report (hereafter to be referred to as the Report). Many concerned and enlightened citizens have expressed their views and opinions on the Report mainly through articles in The Shillong Times. It is not my intention to comment on the report as there are other more competent experts who, I believe, are lining up with their own views and suggestions. This writer is however disappointed with a missed opportunity -- the opportunity of the Report to define the over-arching and inclusive objectives of our education system. How do we then suggest positive interventions, mid-course corrections when the objectives themselves remain vague and unclear? Secondly, the Report, though based on secondary data, has been bold enough to make mention of the high rate of school dropouts, especially among rural students. What is disappointing is the absence of a required follow up as to what then happens to these dropouts? If Meghalaya is really experiencing a more than 40% secondary level rural school dropout rate, this translates to the alarming figure of more than 22,000 students, mainly in the rural areas, annually disappearing into the cracks of an uncaring society. No one seems bothered as to what happens to them. In short, the trauma of dropouts is a social nightmare that the state has simply swept under the carpet. But can we continue with our ostrich-like attitude to this social quagmire and do we have an answer?

To arrive at any tangible, achievable solution for rural school dropouts, one has to understand the reality that awaits these dropouts when they return to their villages. What livelihood options do they have? The obvious answer is farming and its allied activities, simply because all the big talk about other forms of enterprises mean nothing unless 24x7 power supply is assured for our villages. So if agriculture is the only choice left, are they equipped with the relevant knowledge to convert farming into an attractive livelihood exercise? One doubts if the existing curriculum that aims at white collared products is in any way related to a meaningful farmyard existence. So the dropout is willy-nilly forced to revert to traditional ways of scratching the hillside for

a living. This is not to say that the Agriculture Department has not done anything to improve agri-production. Crop production has definitely improved but only marginally, since size of holdings; terrain; available labour; rain dependency and a non-existent technology on mountain agriculture continue to remain stubborn hurdles for a sustainable livelihood through upland farming. But this is just the start of a Meghalaya farmer's woes.

After harvesting his crops, he is then expected to pack; transport to the nearest market; and all of this under his own steam. He has no marketing skills; lacks any bargaining power for his painfully limited produce (even after more than 50 years of statehood, still by the khohful and never exceeding 5 quintals at the most) where his own kith and kin await his arrival like hungry vultures to abuse him to the point of exploitation. (My blood boils at the neglect of the Syiem of Myllem when he allows Khasi tradesmen in Iewduh to rob poor Khasi farmers with that unjustified and unethical tariff called "ka ot kilo"). Every sale of our farmers ends up as a distress sale and there is no support system to say otherwise. That patriotic call of "Ko para doh, para snam" rings hollow when self appointed saviours of the community turn a blind eye to the misery of the poor.

So let us turn back to the rural school dropout and his desperate return to farming and agriculture for a living. Is there a way out by which he can turn his painfully small and limited agri produce into a strong, economically viable livelihood venture? Let us accept that we are not the only community or state that face such a problem. This writer has been to South Korea, a land with a less fertile and skimpy soil than that of Meghalaya. The Korean farmer like his compatriot in Meghalaya suffers from similar hurdles; small holdings, a hilly terrain, a more unforgiving climate etc. Yet the farmers there are progressive; their GDP equal if not more than their European counterparts; the Korean agricultural economy is one of the strongest in SE Asia; their farmers even if unlettered, proud and confident of their profession and its contribution to wealth creation of

the nation. How did they do it? By simply following "the bundle of sticks" story, one of Aesop's fables on strength through unity and coming together! They did it by coming together as Cooperative Societies; creating strength, bargaining power, value addition, accessing lucrative and non-exploitative markets and easily available credit through unity of effort!

The tragedy in Meghalaya is the dismal and depressing failure of the Cooperative Movement. The reasons for this state of affairs are many but the significant and prime reason is the Government's neglect of this empowering tool for rural poverty alleviation. It allowed the movement to be politically hijacked where only those with political connections or with vested self interests to access the benefits of all Centrally sponsored Cooperative schemes. The Coop Movement lost the confidence of the poor and the marginalized, the very target group it seeks to lift. The rest is history. Point for consideration -- can the Cooperative Movement be revived to give hope to rural dropouts who have turned back to farming for livelihood?

History and destiny have this surprising habit of coming up with opportunities of hope in times of crisis. Those with foresight grab such opportunities to turn failure to success. Fools however often fail to recognize such gateways. For Meghalaya this opportunity has come out in the form of a delightful little publication by the Directorate of Education Research and Training (DERT) titled "Training Module on Entrepreneurship and soft skills -- Unlocking entrepreneurial potential." To me it is a must read for those in Government who are in charge of Education, C&RD, Cooperatives, and Agriculture. It forms the key in unlocking the logjam of Agricultural poverty; of making farming and allied activities attractive livelihood activities and most important of halting this desperate influx of the rural poor to our urban centres.

Let me try and explain what I mean. With no intention of discriminating against anyone, let us accept that teachers of rural schools would have by class 8 or 9, identifies those students who are potential dropout material. This would be the ideal

time to start introducing the concept of the Cooperative movement, especially for students from farming communities, by including such introductions in once a week classes to be conducted by resource persons from the Cooperative Department. The idea is to familiarize those who are likely to return to farming, of the mutual benefits that can accrue by working together. The hope is that when the time and opportunity for forming a cooperative society arrives, it would be a word and concept already acquainted with and comfortable with. It means the poor farmer will be less likely to be exploited, abused and manipulated by those with malefic self interests. Now if this concept and idea of DERT has the potential of changing the lives of 22,000 of our youth, I think the Govt should be ashamed of itself if it pleads shortage of funds as an excuse for non application of the scheme. For the sake of the reader allow me to quote some of the more significant portions from the above mentioned DERT publication.

The "Training Module on Entrepreneurship and soft skills -- Unlocking entrepreneurial potential" in its preface speaks of "innovation and adaptability as drivers of progress." I don't know from where they picked up such ideas but they fit in so appropriately with the missing gap in Meghalaya development. It describes entrepreneurship "not just about starting a business; its about cultivating a mindset that encourages creative problem solving, resilience and a proactive approach to life's challenges." Just what the doctor ordered for the 22,000 school dropouts that happen every year. The module speaks about "equipping the student with the soft skills and confidence needed to navigate a rapidly changing world".

So glad for such wisdom if it starts teaching our youth to challenge those who are so determined to drag us back to the imagined past glory of the dark ages. It is my direct request to, not a challenge, for the Meghalaya Cabinet, the Departments concerned and for our legislators to discuss, debate and dialogue with stakeholders the potential of this DERT manual. It is my sincere belief that its worth the exercise. It could well be the first step towards the sustainable change everyone is looking forward to.

From Sacred Flow to Spectacle: The Changing Soul of the Umngot River

By Evangeline Dkhar

The story of how a community's sacred river became a stage for tourism, modernity, and contested ownership.

Nestled between the rolling green hills of Meghalaya's West Jaintia district, the Umngot River flows with a clarity so pure that boats appear to glide through air. For years, this emerald stream at Dawki and Shnongpdeng has drawn visitors who marvel at its transparent waters and surreal beauty. But beyond its surface charm, the Umngot tells a deeper story -- of changing livelihoods, shifting values, and a society caught between reverence and revenue.

A decade ago, before the tourism boom, the people living along the Umngot depended on it in simpler, humbler ways. The river was their sustenance. Men fished early in the morning, bringing their catch to nearby markets in Dawki and Amlarem, where the trade of local fish formed a vital part of the economy. Boatmen ferried villagers and goods across the river, connecting isolated communities to one another. The water also nourished nearby fields, sustaining small patches of agricultural land along the valleys. And from its riverbed, men collected river sand -- a prized material for house construction -- selling it locally to supplement their income.

The Umngot was not just an economic asset; it was a living presence woven into everyday existence. The rhythm of life followed the rhythm of the river. The Umngot has always been treated with deep reverence by the people of Dawki and the villages within the Elaka Darrang. Beside the river stand the sacred groves (Law Kyntang) managed by local clans. These groves embody the spiritual guardianship of nature -- believed to house U Kyngew U Basa, protector spirits that ensure balance between humans and the environment. Through the care of these groves, people expressed respect for the river and its surrounding ecosystem. Elders recall that in the past, there were no formal blessings for the river before fishing, but there existed an unspoken moral code: not to pollute, not to overfish, not to disturb the waters without cause. These beliefs reflected what sociologists call a moral ecology -- a system of ethics rooted in harmony rather than domination.

Even today, young people respect these older customs. Many still follow community rules, avoid fishing during spawning seasons, and take part in rituals within the sacred groves. This continuity of belief, passed through generations, is what has long protected the Umngot.

In recent years, however, the Umngot has undergone a dramatic transformation. Its once-quiet banks have turned into vibrant tourist destinations. Boating, camping, cliff-jumping, and riverside homestays attract visitors from across India and abroad. Tourism has brought undeniable benefits. Influencers and travel vloggers have helped make the Umngot a household name across social media platforms -- Instagram, YouTube, Facebook. Posts featuring the river's glass-like clarity and surrounding landscape have drawn thousands of visitors, creating a thriving tourist economy for the region. For many families, tourism has become the new livelihood. Boatmen now earn more ferrying tourists than fishing; homestays have replaced small-scale farming as a main income source. The youth of Elaka Darrang have found new opportunities in guiding, hospitality, and entrepreneurship. Government schemes and grants, channelled through traditional institutions, have supported the beautification of the area and the training of unemployed youth in tourism management.

The economic revival is real -- but it comes with cultural cost. The river, once approached with reverence, is increasingly seen as a stage for recreation. The sacredness of the waters has, in many ways, given way to spectacle. Traditionally, river use was governed by customary laws of the local Dorbar Shnong (village council). These rules ensured fairness and sustainability -- dictating fishing seasons, controlling sand collection, and maintaining respect for the environment. But with tourism's rapid growth, the question of ownership has become complex. The state, private tour operators, and even digital influencers now shape the river's image and economy. The commercialization of the Umngot raises a sociological question central to modern Meghalaya: Who truly benefits from the river's fame -- the local communities or external stakeholders?

Within Elaka Darrang, traditional authorities still play a key role in managing tourism and ensuring that benefits reach the community. Schemes promoting eco-tourism have strengthened local participation and created new forms of governance where customary law and state regulation intersect.

Yet challenges persist -- especially regarding waste management, unregulated campsites, and pollution. Community rules have had to evolve to limit over-commercialization: restricting the setting up of camps too close to the water, prohibiting the dumping of waste, and banning the poisoning of aquatic species. These are not just environmental measures, but a continuation of the old moral order -- translated into modern conservation.

In November 2025, the Umngot made headlines when its famously 'crystal-clear' water turned murky and brown. Investigations revealed that hill-cutting, soil dumping, and excavation linked to the NHIDCL's Shillong-Dawki highway project had caused massive sediment runoff into the river. The Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board identified multiple violations and imposed a ₹15 lakh fine on the company. While authorities assure that the clarity will return once construction stabilizes, locals express both anger and sorrow. A Dawki boatman lamented, "When the water turns brown, the tourists stop coming. For us, that means no income."

The event also reignited debates about sustainability. The Umngot's clarity is not just aesthetic -- it is ecological. Increased siltation threatens fish populations and disrupts the delicate hydrological system that the community has long protected through its traditional norms. Despite these pressures, local communities remain the first defenders of the Umngot. The Dorbar Shnong, youth groups, and women's collectives under Elaka Darrang organize periodic cleaning drives, awareness programs, and dialogues on sustainable tourism. They also advocate that development should not erase tradition. For them, sustainability means ensuring that the river continues to feed both the people and the spirit of the land. It is about coexistence -- where progress does not come at the cost of identity. Government and private stakeholders have increasingly recognized these traditional rights. Many agencies now consult with local leaders before implementing projects, acknowledging that true sustainability requires community consent.

Even amid change, the Umngot continues to live -- in the sparkle of its fish-filled waters, in the laughter of tourists, in the stories of elders who speak of its past. The river remains, in every sense, a living heritage: both a source of livelihood and a mirror reflecting Meghalaya's journey from tradition to modernity.

To restore and protect it is to reaffirm a way of life rooted in respect -- for nature, for culture, and for the unseen guardians that dwell between the hills and the waters.

"The Umngot has a soul," says an elder from Dawki, watching the river beneath the suspension bridge. "If we care for it, it will care for us -- as it always has."

(The writer is Assistant Professor: Sociology, Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

Need for strict traffic regulation

Editor,
The day when Pine City was enjoying its first Cherry music concert, I was returning from work as a pillion rider. It was already a little dark outside, and we were riding from Them Bijoy towards the highway junction that connects to the road towards Oxford, Kenches Trace, etc.

At that point, a driver of a large car, without caring about our movement, suddenly took a sharp turn at the junction which was actually a 'no-entry' for him. He did this only because he wanted to quickly reach his destination to take a turn towards Civil Hospital Road. This reckless shortcut caused an accident, and our two-wheeler was hit, leading to serious injuries to my left leg.

I earnestly request the Traffic Department to kindly depute some police personnel at this junction so that no vehicle can take such dangerous shortcut turns. Everyone should follow the proper route towards Anjalee point as per the Government's traffic road map.

Please ensure that vehicles coming from Them Bijoy side can safely and properly take their designated route while entering the highway.

Yours etc.,
A concerned citizen
Name withheld on request,
Shillong

Congress needs a reality check, not play the blame game

Editor,

The editorial "NDA wins Bihar" (ST 15th November 2025) made interesting reading. It may be added that the Bihar Assembly elections shifted across 2015, 2020, and 2025. RJD fell sharply from 80 seats in 2015 to 75 in 2020 and further down to 25 in 2025 showing a steady decline. The Janata Dal (United) from 71 seats dropped to 43 in 2020 and resurged in 2025 to 85 seats reflecting Nitish Kumar's comeback. The Indian National Congress collapsed from 27 seats in 2015 to 19 seats in 2020 and just 6 in 2025, its weakest position in decade. The BJP rose consistently from 53 seats in 2015 to 74 in 2020 and now in 2025 it registered a win in 89 segments, becoming the dominant force. The trends reveal that in 2015 Mahagathbandhan (RJD+ JD(U)+INC) was strong and defeated the NDA. In 2020 NDA regained ground, BJP overtook JD(U) while RJD remained the single largest party. 2025 was an NDA landslide with 218/243 seats, BJP and JD(U) together dominating while the opposition collapsed. This makes it clear how BJP's steady rise and JD(U)'s resilience reshaped Bihar's political map while RJD and Congress steadily lost symbolic capital

and voter trust.

The last three elections show Nitish Kumar's adaptability and BJP's growing dominance. RJD's decline from 80 seats in 2015 to 25 in 2020 and Congress' collapse from 27 to 6, highlights how Bihar's politics shifted from caste-driven alliances to governance and stability narratives. Allegations against the Election Commission are not new in Indian politics, but they rarely explain such dramatic collapse in seat share. Blaming the CEC is a way to delegitimize the NDA's sweeping victory and deflect attention from internal weaknesses.

The scale of the Congress' defeat suggests structural and organisational issues -- weak local leadership, poor alliance management and lack of resonance with voters rather than purely electoral malpractice. The bottom line: While raising concerns about electoral fairness is legitimate, Congress risks appearing evasive; it ignores the need for internal reforms and grassroots rebuilding. Congress' blame on the CEC reflects frustration and political positioning, but the real challenge lies in reviving its organizational strength and reconnecting with Bihar's electorate. Without introspection, blaming institutions may only deepen its decline.

Many within Congress itself including Mumtaz Patel and Shashi Tharoor urged the party to look inward, citing leadership disconnect from grassroots workers and fail-

ure to connect with women and youth voters. Reports noted that Rahul Gandhi's promises and Congress' messaging did not resonate with Bihar's electorate, who largely backed the NDA's governance narrative. Nitish Kumar's strength lies not in ideological rigidity but in adaptive pragmatism. He has shown that survival in Bihar's politics requires flexibility, symbolic resonance and the ability to balance caste equations with development narratives. His governance reforms gave him credibility, while his coalition manoeuvres ensured he never became politically obsolete.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Cherry Blossom Fest

Editor,

The Cherry Blossom Festival is over and done with but there are many who for various reasons will raise questions about its ability to address the multitude problems of the state such as youth unemployment and such issues. People don't seem to want anything happening in Meghalaya. Is it not the Cherry Blossom Festival that has turned Shillong into a sought after destination for concert lovers from across the country? Haven't our home-stay owners, guest houses and hoteliers gained from the festival? There are spin-offs to such festivals

where café owners, bars and restaurants too get their fair share of customers. And every restaurant needs to buy enough local products from shops in Iewduh and elsewhere so there are economic transactions that go beyond the ticket sales to the Festival itself.

The event management team behind the Cherry Blossom Festival has worked the whole year round to ensure that contracts with the international performers are firmed up and there are no last minute glitches that could spoil the show. This is no cakewalk and I am sure the Rockski team have missed many a heartbeat until the final event is accomplished. To berate all that the event management team has put together and link this to the larger issue of the state is a puerile argument by those who have a heartburn against anything and everything the Government seeks to do.

There are several areas of governance that need to be improved and those eternal complainants can instead give their list of suggestions on how to generate employment and in which sectors. After all, if some individual or group is unhappy with the Government and that will always be the case because according to some critics the Government can never do the right thing, they should submit a list of their own recommendations. I am sure that those in Government will give such progressive souls a patient hearing and

even try out their ideas if they are sound enough. However such people should base their recommendations based on sound research which should be based on regional differences within Meghalaya.

Personally I feel that if concerned citizens take the trouble to place their grievances before the Government rather than rave and rant on social media there might be better hope of Meghalaya moving in the right direction. Having said that, I wish to tell the Government that as a resident of 4th Furlong the noise from the concert venue after 10 PM was nerve-wracking. Some of my friends residing around Polo area too felt the decibel almost earth shattering. Polo Ground is certainly not the place for such events. In the west concerts are held during the day time. Why must concerts here begin late and end past midnight? And can the Government or event managers find empty spaces beyond Shillong? Remember how the NH7 Weekender Festival used to be held away from the city in open spaces? So dear Government please ensure that the next Pink Festival is held at a place that can take the heart thumping decibels without disrupting anyone's health or sleep.

Yours etc.,
Irena Sawknie,
Via email

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"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent."

— Isaac Asimov

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 98 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2025

Land: A Critical Issue

REPORTS that the KHADC had reconstituted the Committee to enquire into land alienation at Law Mawpat (Mawpat Forest) rings a warning bell that the enquiry is getting nowhere. The Committee set up on July 25, 2025 was to make necessary enquiries into the entire imbroglio and submit its findings within three months. The 3-month period should have ended in October 2025 but the enquiry report is hanging fire. Now the KHADC has formed a new Committee on the plea that there was a change of guard at the Council as the earlier CEM, S Rynjah stepped down and was replaced by Winston Tony Lyngdoh. The question is why should the delay happen because of a change of CEMs if the terms of reference of the enquiry remain the same. If the terms of enquiry have changed what are those changes? The public has the right to know. The enquiry into the land alienation at Mawpat forest was necessitated when it came to the fore that certain MLAs, groups and organisations were granted land within the protected forest.

What is intriguing is the change of custodianship from the KHADC to the Hima Myllem and how that was executed. Para 3 of the Sixth Schedule provides for the District Council and Regional Councils to make rules in respect of lands, management of forest (other than the Reserved Forest). In that case how was the management of the Mawpat forest handed over to the Syiem of Myllem? Does this arrangement exist in respect of other syiemships too? The next question is whether the ADCs come under the purview of the Environment Protection Act 1986 which is a Central Government Act. The Act says, "Subject to the provisions of this Act, the Central Government shall have the power to take all such measures as it deems necessary or expedient for the purpose of protecting and improving the quality of the environment and preventing, controlling and abating environmental pollution."

The third question now is whether the Sixth Schedule supersedes the Central Government Act. Since the ADCs have not shown any inclination to protect rivers from pollution nor the forests from being parcelled off to elite tribals, is it not time for the Central Government to extend its authority over so-called ADC administered areas where forests are now largely denuded? The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was enacted to conserve the culture and tradition of the tribes and to ensure that land which includes forests, rivers, agricultural land etc., are conserved for the general good of the tribes. The ADCs also have a duty to ensure that there is equity in how land is allocated to the indigenous tribals of Meghalaya. But what is witnessed today is that large sections of tribals themselves are landless and are farming on lease-held land with not even a homestead to call their own. Are the ADCs even concerned about landlessness? True that in 2021 the Khasi Hills District Council legislated on setting up of land banks to be distributed to the landless. How much land has been allocated to landless families since then? The public needs to know. What the ADCs also need to make public is the number of landless people within each ADC. These statistics are imperative to make necessary interventions.

Academia has often been derided as an "ivory tower," the residents of which neither understand everyday reality nor wants to engage with it. From their balconies situated under hallowed minarets, academics pontificate, pointing out what is wrong with the world and offering prescriptions that are resisted by common people—people who are bewildered by ideas that have no connection to their lived realities and fail to capture how they view the world. There is an element of truth to this criticism, but it would be naïve to conclude that academia is therefore worthless. Consider the most dominant economic framework under which political parties of all hues operate today: neo-liberalism.

The beginning of this school of thought can be traced back to the "Chicago Boys," a group of Chilean economists, the majority of whom were trained in the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago under Larry Sjaastad, Milton Friedman, and Arnold Harberger. After completing their studies, they became part of numerous South American governments, including the Chilean military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who was the first to implement neoliberal reforms. These reforms were later adopted by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. To recap: Pinochet—the first to experiment with neoliberalism—was responsible for the murder of 1,200 to 3,200 people, the imprisonment of as many as 80,000, and the torture of tens of thousands. When countries in the Global South complain about neo-colonialism being imposed upon them, neoliberalism is the accompanying economic system. What happens in academia is therefore deeply important, as those who operate in that space can have an outsized impact on society—especially when there is no pushback from ordinary people who may choose to remain silent, saying, "Oh ngi ki nongkyndong, ngin tip aiu. I Babu i tip bha."

I was struck by these thoughts when I participated in the one-day national seminar on "Land, Development and Livelihood in Meghalaya," organized by the Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, and sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, and

the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. The sessions were lively, and I also presented a paper questioning whether landless people exist in Meghalaya and the processes of dispossession that have produced such a condition. One presentation, in particular, caught my attention. The speaker declared that a certain community had improved its socio-economic condition because it had been able to maintain community ownership of land. This is something I also advocate—strengthening community ownership and restricting the conversion of Ri Raid lands (commons) into Ri Kynri lands (individual ownership). But what intrigued me was the speaker's suggestion that it was community ownership, not clan ownership that constituted traditional Khasi practice. This is a misunderstanding of Khasi traditional polity and social formation.

A Khasi is not simply an individual who is part of a political unit but a person embedded in society through the Kur to which he or she belongs. The identity of a Khasi cannot be separated from the Kur, which is matrilineal and rooted in a particular locality. In that locality, only a few Kur are considered Bakhrav, and they traditionally monopolized political offices such as the Basan and the Lyngdoh in a particular Raid (a collection of villages). These political functionaries then elect the Syiem, who governs the Hima, an amalgamation of different Raids. The Basans and Lyngdohs thus become the Myntri clans of the Hima, a territorial entity covering many villages. Hima Shillong (also known as Hima Khyrim) reportedly governed more than 200 villages during the Ahom invasion of Hima Jaintiapur, as documented by E. Gait in his 1905 book *A History of Assam*. The history and political structure of Hima Shillong offer a clear illustration of how Khasi polity is organized, and one can refer to the section on Shillong Syiemship—its origin and antiquity in the book 'History and Culture of the Khasi people' by Hamlet Bareh Ngap Kynta.

The role of the Bakhravs in governing the Raid has spilled into the contemporary Dorbar Shnong, where in many places only individuals from a particular

Kur may contest the position of Rangbah Shnong. For instance, only someone from the Thangkiew Kur can become the Rangbah Shnong in Nongkseh. Reading the history of Hima Khyrim, one finds that the Thangkiew Kur were indeed the Basans of Nongkseh. This is a remnant from the days when decision-making was the domain of the Dorbar Kur and Dorbar Raid, the original indigenous institutions, rather than the present-day Dorbar Shnong. The fact that the Basans held real power—not the Syiem—is evident in the historical episode where the three Basans attempted to exterminate the Syiem family by burning their settlement. It was U Basan Nongkseh who saved a little girl, Ka Jatkiri, and took her to a sanctuary in the west.

To suggest, therefore, that the present model of community land—where villages with multiple clans enjoy usufructuary rights—is the primordial system, and that Ri Kur is a recent innovation, is to fundamentally misunderstand Khasi culture and history. This misunderstanding has important implications.

At the moment, there is a case in the High Court challenging the matrilineal system, and the judge has asked the KHADC to submit its views. The last report I read stated that the KHADC had sought more time. If a judgment eventually recognizes patrilineal customs as legitimate Khasi practice, it would mark the end of the Khasi Kur, which has strict rules of endogamy and is central to the distinction between Kur and Kha, encapsulated in the phrase "Tip Kur Tip Kha". Without this, the taboo against incest collapses, and the mixing of related bloodlines becomes normalized.

Although the majority of Khasis have become Christians, they remain deeply connected to their tradition. But with such a judgment, this connection would be severed, and Khasis would lose their unique identity and history, becoming just another ethnic group. What then would distinguish a Khasi from a Karbi or a Bihari? The most affected would be the Niam Khasi and Niam Tre practitioners, for whom the idea of the Kur, derived from the mother, is sacrosanct. This change

would resemble the imposition of a Uniform Civil Code, since the opposition—on the grounds of unique identity—would lose its cultural legitimacy. Also lost would be the link to ancestors who fought to preserve the tradition. It is important to remember that groups like the Karbi, who once lived under Khasi Hima, such as Hima Jaitiapur, left to live under the Ahoms precisely because they complained that the Khasis were imposing matriliney on them. There are stories of Jait Syiem of non-Khasi origin who had to adopt matriliney to hold office. Would we still be able to call such stories our own?

While the Kur as an economic institution (control of land and resources) may no longer be as potent as before, its social role remains crucial. My suspicion is that those looking to undermine it and push for change are influenced by a form of Evangelical Christianity in which being Christian is more important than being Khasi—a view not shared by other Khasi Christians. For this group, it is not Khasi culture or history that should shape the future but their own vision of who a Khasi "should be."

And that vision is of a Khasi society structured around the framework of a patrilineal, patriarchal, conservative nuclear Christian family, one that opposes gender rights, women's empowerment, and views nature merely as a commodity to be exploited and sold for profit. In this vision, when the Kur is no longer important, the nuclear family becomes the primary unit—mirroring Margaret Thatcher's famous statement, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." We would, therefore, no longer be bound by solidarity, but would relate to each other through individual competition, where the guiding slogan would be 'no free lunch.'

What happens in academia, therefore, is a valuable indication of what the Don Burom or high level people are thinking and what plans they may have for ordinary Khasis. We should not ignore academia but engage with it, for those who are part of it want to tell us who we are—and who we should be. Are we going to allow that?

(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)

Bangladesh plunges into fresh turbulence after tribunal's death penalty to Sheikh Hasina

For Modi, the diplomatic crisis accentuates as the indicted challenges from Indian soil

By Nitya Chakraborty

Bangladesh plunged into a fresh turbulence on Monday, November 17 after the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) announced its verdict sentencing to death former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for "crimes against humanity" committed during last year's student led agitation that led to the fall of her Awami League Government on August 5, 2024.

The ICT set up by the interim Government of Bangladesh headed by Chief Advisor Dr. Muhammad Yunus also indicted Sheikh Hasina on two other counts. The verdict was on expected lines. Sheikh Hasina who has been staying in India since August 5 afternoon

participating in the election campaign. A recent opinion poll about the coming elections carried out by a private agency indicated that the Awami League, despite support, still has the support of more than 20 per cent just below the BNP. The other parties are ranking much below. This has given a boost to the morale of the Awami League supporters but at the same time, the divided anti-League political parties are getting frightened and trying to have a common approach against any fresh move by the Awami League.

While at the ground level of politics, the situation in Bangladesh has further engulfed in turmoil, for



last year, was in a challenging mood. She said that the Tribunal was rigged. She denied every single charge and castigated Tribunal for not giving the Awami League and herself a fair chance to defend themselves.

In a belligerent mood, Sheikh Hasina said in her statement "the verdict revealed the brazen and murderous intent of extremist figures on an unelected government with no democratic mandate". She even charged the Yunus regime by saying that the Islamic extremists inside the present administration including figures from Hizbut Tahir seek to undermine Bangladesh's strong tradition of a secular government."

Monday's development took place less than three months before the scheduled general elections in Bangladesh in February 2026. Though the exact date will be announced by the Election Commission shortly, the interim Government chief announced on Thursday last both the general elections and the referendum on the July charter would take place on the same day in February. All the political parties excluding the banned Awami League are in the thick of the election battle as this verdict was announced on Monday afternoon.

The security situation was tense during the day as Awami League called for a lock down in Dhaka and the areas surrounding the Court. Army pickets were stationed in all important points of the nation's capital. There were sporadic explosions and bomb attacks. Hasina has been active in the last few weeks and as sources indicate that the Awami League supporters including the leaders who were earlier hiding, are coming out to participate in demonstrations and bandhs. It seems they have decided to show their strength in public. For Awami League, after this verdict, their members will be facing new attacks and they will have to meet the challenge.

As a result, the coming few weeks are going to be stormy though the major political parties like BNP, Jamaat e Islami, NCP and others will be busy in choosing their own candidates and

India, especially, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the task has become tougher. This tackling of Sheikh Hasina's death penalty verdict and allowing her to carry on her campaign, from Indian soil, will be the biggest diplomatic challenge for Narendra Modi. Sheikh Hasina has been campaigning and issuing statements against the Yunus government in recent weeks. This could not have been possible without the tacit support of the Indian government. Earlier, a number of times, the Bangladesh government had requested India not to allow Sheikh Hasina to use Indian soil for her political actions against the Yunus govt. But the Modi government has not taken any note of that. And now the latest is the statement of Hasina against the verdict and the ICT itself.

India can not hand over Sheikh Hasina to Bangladesh at this time, though Bangladesh will put maximum diplomatic pressure at international level to persuade India to hand over Sheikh Hasina to Bangladesh. Pakistan and some other Muslim nations may support Bangladesh on this. India will have to be ready for that type of international pressure. For Dr. Yunus, this is a golden opportunity to take on his sworn enemy Sheikh Hasina. He will do everything to organize the deportation of Sheikh Hasina from India. He has political ambitions though he does not give that impression in public. If he succeeds in his attempt before the general elections, Dr. Yunus can be the accepted leader of the Bangladesh political parties for the post of President of the new Government after the February elections.

India is on a sticky wicket after Monday's death penalty verdict on Sheikh Hasina. Only exceptional diplomatic dexterity of our Prime Minister Narendra Modi can save India in this situation. It fully depends on Narendra Modi how he deals with this delicate situation keeping into account India's best interests in terms of national security. Next few weeks are crucial for Indian diplomacy. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

On school drop-outs in rural Meghalaya

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I wish to express my sincere appreciation for the recent article by Toki Blah titled "Rural School Drop-outs: What happens to them?" published on 17th November, 2025. His article deserves deep recognition for bringing to light a crisis that silently determines the future of thousands of children in our state.

A problem too large to ignore: As the author points out, more than 40% of rural secondary school students in Meghalaya drop out every year. This means that over 22,000 children leave school annually—many of them between the ages of 14 and 17. At such a young age, they step into adulthood without education, without skills, and without guidance.

According to the current Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) data, Meghalaya continues to be among the states with:

- one of the highest drop-out rates in the North East,
- low secondary school attendance, and
- large disparities between rural and urban schooling conditions.

This is not just an educa-

tion issue; it is a development issue.

Why this should worry all of us?

"When so many children drop out every year, the long-term consequences are serious:

1. Loss of future workforce: Meghalaya already faces shortages in skilled professions—health workers, technicians, agricultural specialists, and teachers. Dropouts widen this gap.

2. Inter-generational poverty: Without education or skills, most dropouts end up in low-paid, informal jobs, repeating the cycle of poverty their parents faced.

3. Higher vulnerability: Studies in the North East show that school dropouts are at greater risk of early marriage, addiction, unsafe migration, and exploitation.

4. Weak rural economy: With fewer educated youth, rural innovation declines, cooperatives struggle, and agriculture becomes less productive.

5. Slow human development: Meghalaya's Human Development Index (HDI) remains lower than the national average, and high dropout rates directly contribute to this.

These impacts affect the entire state's growth—not just one family or one village.

Why the dropout problem continues?

The crisis is not due to any lack of ability in our children. It is, as my long

years in the teaching profession have shown me, the weakness of the support system around them.

The major reasons include:

- poor school infrastructure in many rural blocks,
- teacher shortages in key subjects,
- poverty-driven pressure on children to work,
- lack of counselling to guide students academically or emotionally,
- no strong mechanism to track and bring back dropouts,
- distance to secondary schools, which discourages many girls from attending regularly.

Unless these root causes are addressed, dropouts will continue to rise.

Efforts that deserve appreciation:

It is important to acknowledge the positive initiatives of the Government of Meghalaya:

The Meghalaya Education Commission Report (2023) provides valuable insights and corrective measures.

The DERT's Entrepreneurship and Soft Skills Module is a step towards preparing students—and dropouts—for employable skills.

Skills Meghalaya and vocational training programmes help youth connect education with livelihood opportunities.

Infrastructure upgrades and teacher training reforms indicate serious intent.

These initiatives need strong monitoring and co-ordination to show real results.

A practical path forward: Based on the concerns raised by Toki Blah, the following steps, I strongly feel, can make a genuine difference:

1. A state-level Dropout Tracking System: Every student who leaves school should be identified within weeks—not years—and contacted for support.

2. School-to-skill pathways: Rural youth should have access to short-term skill courses, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship programmes linked to local industries, agriculture, and tourism.

3. Transparent cooperatives: Reviving village-level cooperatives with good governance can generate income and give youth meaningful roles.

4. Meaningful integration of soft skills and entrepreneurship: These should be practical, hands-on, and linked to real opportunities—not just classroom theory.

5. Community involvement: Village councils, parents, churches, and NGOs can play a major role in motivating children to stay in school.

These steps are realistic, affordable, and proven to work in many parts of India.

Toki Blah's article reminds us that each dropout is not merely a number—it

is a young life losing hope. Meghalaya cannot afford to let 22,000 children slip away every year.

We must act with urgency, compassion, and collective responsibility. Every child who enters school must be able to complete it with dignity and a future full of possibilities.

Yours etc.,

Jairaj

Via email

Mandani's win a vote against Trump

Editor,

Over and above what the editorial "Taming of Trump" ("ST November 7, 2025) has highlighted, the key takeaways from the 2025 Elections in the U.S. is that Democrats won governorships in Virginia and New Jersey by double digit margin. Exit polls showed that most Virginia and New Jersey voters disapproved of Trump, and at least 9 in 10 of those people supported Democratic candidates for governor. In New Jersey, GOP candidate Jack Ciattarelli's alignment with Trump hurt his chances despite a strong campaign.

Zohran Mamdani, a Democrat Socialist, made history as New York City's first Muslim and Millennial mayor, defeating Andrew Cuomo who ran as an independent. Affordability

was the top voter concern as the exit polls showed that economic anxiety and cost of living were the dominant issues. Democratic candidates focused on affordability, housing and energy costs, while Republicans struggled to distance themselves from Trump. Trump's influence backfired as many Republican candidates who embraced Trump proved detrimental. Youth and diversity shaped outcomes as Mamdani's win were powered by young voters and college-educated urbanites, reflecting a generational shift in political engagement. His campaign emphasized economic justice, social media outreach and symbolic representation.

California's "Proposition 50" passed, allowing Democrats to redraw congressional maps ahead of the 2026 midterms countering Republican gerrymandering efforts. Why does this matter? These results reflect a growing discontent with Trump's second term, especially among urban, younger and economically burdened voters. Democrats are leveraging this momentum to reshape congressional maps and build coalitions ahead of 2026.

Yours etc;

VK Lyngdoh

Via email

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"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

— Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 99 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2025

Hasina, India

THE death sentence passed on Bangladesh's exiled former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and the call from the country's interim government that India should extradite her in order to carry the judicial process forward are part of a larger gameplan. The swift response from India rejecting the call outright was also in the scheme of things. Bangladesh is in no position to force India to extradite the seasoned former premier. It neither has the military might nor the diplomatic clout to press for the demand. Fact is also that India will not throw its trusted associate to the wolves, come what may. Hasina, 78, represents a movement and a family that won East Bengal's people their hard-won freedom from the Pakistani military yoke and a nation of their own half a century ago.

Perceptions are that the exiled Bangladesh leader is safely positioned in a highly protected dwelling unit in New Delhi ever since her flight landed in the capital in August last. Bangladesh's governance, grabbed by leaders of the student-led anti-Hasina movement and overseen by Nobel laureate Mohammed Yunus in an advisory capacity, does not have legitimacy. It is promising elections in February 2026, but the process could further drag. It's here that Sheikh Hasina is anchoring her arguments against the death warrant. It's here that the international community would pause before taking any firm stand in support of Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal verdict. The verdict, based on rights violations on students protesting against Hasina in Dhaka and elsewhere last year, is itself seen by the exiled leader as a manipulated order. The tribunal's labelling of the security forces' action against the students as "a crime against humanity" looks far-fetched. Yunus and the others who run the present dispensation in Bangladesh have proven in good measure in the past over a year as to where their loyalties lie.

The present regime is building bridges with Pakistan and might be willing to dance to Rawalpindi's tunes if only to spite India. Yunus' attempts to court the US — and vice versa — ever since he assumed political power there, are no secret. The American political and military establishments have their interests to promote in the subcontinent and beyond. President Donald Trump is unpredictable. Yet, nothing goes to show that he can dictate terms with India in crucial matters of national interest though what happened during Operation Sindoor was an exception. The extraordinary situation at that time demanded so. It is well-known that the US sought to draw a feeder line to Myanmar too through Bangladesh's facilities. Geopolitical interests are intertwined also in ways that China is scouting around the region and offering a helping hand to Bangladesh while the reds had already built bridges with the Myanmar military brass. It's no small matter that the agencies investigating the Red Fort blast have also stumbled on some Bangladeshi link to the Faridabad-based terrorist outfit, which all apparently took orders from the Jaish-e-Mohammed and by extension from the Pakistani military's notorious ISI. Sheikh Hasina was a guarantee that the ISI schemes would not work through Bangladesh against India. That scenario no longer exists.

Beyond Festivals: Rethinking Meghalaya's Development Priorities

By Daniel Nongkynrih

Meghalaya has always been a place where culture is lived—where music, storytelling, and artistic expression shape everyday identity. In recent years, this cultural richness has also been positioned at the heart of the state's development narrative. Festivals such as the Cherry Blossom Festival, Me Gong Festival, and others have drawn national attention, boosting visibility, footfall, and tourism revenue. Their value is undeniable.

The concern arises not from the festivals themselves, but from the government's increasing reliance on them as economic engines. The idea of a "festival-powered economy" may appear attractive in the short term, but its long-term sustainability—and its influence on youth aspirations—deserves closer examination.

There is nothing wrong with celebrating culture. But when festivals are actively funded, highlighted, and politically showcased, they warrant deeper scrutiny. No government should allow a single seasonal industry, especially one tied to nightlife and transient consumption, to overshadow broader livelihood priorities. Meghalaya's youth need stable, skill-based, year-round opportunities—not just temporary bursts of employment during event seasons.

As the state shapes its identity and developmental priorities, it is important to ask whether this current trajectory truly reflects the needs and aspirations of the people who call this place home.

What the Government Claims

In recent years, the Meghalaya government has increasingly positioned festivals and cultural events as major drivers of economic growth. Official data highlights this emphasis: in 2024, the state invested about Rs 23.5 crore in festivals and concerts, reporting a return of Rs 133.42 crore in overall economic impact. The administration also cites large-scale employment during event periods, with estimates of over 5,500 jobs created per festival day, and claims that tourism now supports nearly 50,000 livelihoods across the state.

In sum, the government's narrative is clear: cultural festivals, entertainment events, and tourism-driven programmes are no longer peripheral—they are front-and-centre in Meghalaya's growth story. The discourse speaks not only of seeing festivals as celebrations, but as investments yielding measurable economic returns.

The Economic and Social Gaps Behind Festival-Led Growth

The government's figures may look impressive—high returns on investment, thousands of jobs during event days, and increased tourist footfall. But beneath the surface lies a structural weakness: festival-based employment is temporary by design. The work created during these events—logistics, crowd control, catering,

vendor stalls—lasts only for a few days. These roles do not translate into long-term income or build transferable skills that youth can rely on years from now. A state cannot anchor its development strategy on opportunities that vanish the moment the music stops.

Equally important is the broader environment that a festival-centric economy encourages. Shillong has long struggled with rising substance abuse, alcoholism, and robberies tied to drug dependency. Festivals are not the cause of these issues, but they often create settings where late-night drinking and unsafe behaviours peak. When the government invests heavily in nightlife-adjacent industries, it risks unintentionally reinforcing spaces where such vulnerabilities thrive.

This is not a moral argument against culture or celebration. It is a policy argument about the responsibility of the state. If public funds are used to promote industries that have known social externalities, then those costs—on policing, public health, and community wellbeing—must be acknowledged. Revenue and employment alone cannot be the only metrics of success.

In this context, the state must be especially careful about the industries it chooses to elevate. A festival economy may boost earnings during peak season, but its long-term impact on social stability remains deeply uncertain.

The Distortion of Youth Aspirations

One of the deeper consequences of the state's festival-centric development narrative is its influence on youth aspirations. In a region where unemployment remains a persistent challenge, the visibility of an industry matters. When the government's most publicised achievements revolve around concerts, celebrity appearances, and event calendars, the message that reaches the youth is unmistakable: this is where the opportunities are.

As a result, more youth gravitate toward entertainment-related careers—artistry, DJing, modelling, influencing, nightlife hospitality, event management. These paths may appear glamorous, but for most, they do not provide stable, long-term livelihoods. Even many established artists in Meghalaya rely on secondary jobs to sustain themselves. This is not a criticism of the arts, but a reflection of the inherent seasonality and unpredictability of creative industries.

The risk, then, is aspirational mismatch: where state-promoted dreams do not align with the realities of the job market. When expectations outpace actual opportunities, young people face frustration, financial instability, and disillusionment.

Visibility-driven success also creates pressure to adopt

performative lifestyles tied to nightlife, social media, and constant self-promotion. Young people may feel compelled to "enter the scene" not out of passion but out of the belief that this is the only path to relevance or recognition. Over time, this narrows how youth imagine their futures. Stable and essential sectors—agriculture, crafts, entrepreneurship, public service, skilled trades—fade from focus simply because they lack glamour or screen presence.

For a small state like Meghalaya, this imbalance can have lasting consequences. A resilient economy depends on diverse ambitions, not on channelling youth energy into a single cultural niche, however exciting it may appear.

What About the Other Livelihood Sectors?

It is important to acknowledge that festivals are not the government's only area of investment. Meghalaya continues to operate several livelihood programmes—rural self-help groups under MSRLS, entrepreneurship support through PRIME, agricultural value-chain missions, MGNREGS, and various small-business initiatives. These schemes quietly sustain thousands of families across the state. They provide steady, year-round income and strengthen local economies, even if they do not receive the same attention or political branding that festivals enjoy.

And that is precisely the issue: visibility shapes priority, and priority shapes aspiration. When the public narrative is dominated by concerts, celebrity acts, and event calendars, these foundational livelihood sectors fade into the background. Young people hear far more about headliners and stages than about opportunities in agriculture, crafts, rural enterprise, or small business development. Over time, this distorts expectations and misguides aspiration—especially in a state where unemployment remains high and clarity of opportunity matters.

The deeper concern is that the sectors which truly anchor livelihoods—agriculture, micro-enterprise, skills training, rural industries—require sustained investment, institution-building, and long-term policy consistency. A durable economy cannot rely on moments; it must be rooted in foundations. For Meghalaya's future to be secure and inclusive, development priorities must reflect this distinction clearly and consistently.

The Risks of an Entertainment-Centric Development Model

Creative industries can enrich a society, but they cannot replace the sectors that provide stable, year-round livelihoods. Across India and the world, festivals and cultural events thrive alongside strong economic foundations—not in place of them. When governments el-

evate a seasonal industry as a central pillar of development, they risk creating unrealistic expectations and fragile economic ecosystems.

A festival economy does not build long-term assets. It does not create manufacturing capacity, strengthen supply chains, or generate the skill-intensive jobs—teachers, technicians, health-care workers, engineers, agronomists—that hold a state together. It may draw tourists for a weekend, but it does not inherently produce the kind of employment that sustains families throughout the year.

The gains it generates are also highly concentrated. Event firms, alcohol distributors, hospitality players, influencers and contractors benefit the most, while the wider population experiences only temporary spill-over income. Sustainable development requires broad, inclusive growth—not windfalls that disappear as quickly as they appear.

There is also a cultural risk. When a state repeatedly highlights concerts, celebrity acts and social-media-friendly events, it can unintentionally narrow how Meghalaya is perceived—both externally and by its own youth. It sends the message that visibility matters more than stability, and that excitement outweighs long-term skill-building.

Festivals have value. They energise communities and showcase local talent. But no government should allow a high-visibility, low-stability sector to overshadow the foundational livelihoods that truly sustain its people. A state's success is ultimately measured not by weekend crowds, but by the stability and dignity it offers its citizens year-round.

Conclusion

Meghalaya's cultural vibrancy is one of its greatest strengths, and its festivals have undoubtedly brought energy, visibility, and pride to the state. The danger is not the existence of these festivals—they enrich our identity and bring genuine value—but the growing dependence on them as a central economic narrative. A few days of activity cannot replace the security that stable livelihoods, diverse opportunities, and year-round employment provide. The youth of Meghalaya deserve more than temporary jobs tied to events. They deserve pathways grounded in skill, reliability, and long-term growth. Development must be measured not by the crowds a state draws for a weekend, but by the stability it offers its people throughout the year. Festivals can remain a proud part of who we are, but they must complement—not overshadow—the foundational sectors that sustain families and strengthen communities.

If Meghalaya is to build a future rooted in dignity and resilience, its development priorities must reflect the everyday needs and aspirations of its people, not just the glamour of its brightest weekends.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

How the Opposition Can Win...

In my very fertile imagination, I can see the scene as clearly as if I were sitting right there in the front row, sipping chai and watching the drama unfold. A grand hall in the capital has been booked, dusted, decorated and prepared with great solemnity. The opposition parties have gathered inside it once again after yet another electoral defeat. They have come together with a sense of purpose that would make even a wedding planner proud.

They have gathered to do the impossible. They want to work out how to beat the juggernaut that has flattened them repeatedly, rolled over them smoothly, and even reversed for good measure. The air is thick with frustration, hope, ambition and the smell of samosas that have gone cold while speeches have gone hot.

A senior leader clears his throat. It is a long, meaningful, throat-clearing exercise. All eyes turn to him. He adjusts his shawl with the gravitas of a Supreme Court judge and strokes his chin thoughtfully. Finally, he speaks in a tone that suggests the fate of the nation depends on his next words. "Rahul must get married."

There is silence. Not the silence of agreement. Not the silence of awe. It is the silence of hundreds of political minds trying to figure out whether the suggestion came from an election strategy book or a matrimonial column. Someone at the back begins to whisper about possible honeymoon destinations and whether this too will require a coalition.

Before anyone can object, another leader jumps up with excitement. "And Mamata must change her rubber chappals. We need proper footwear symbolism." The room nods gravely. Footwear symbolism suddenly sounds like an ancient political science principle they had all forgotten to study. One leader even scribbles the words in his notebook as if this could be the breakthrough the nation has been waiting for.

With those two brilliant suggestions the hall comes alive. Ideas begin to fly like confetti at a political wedding. Someone suggests a new mascot. Someone else wants a new slogan. One proposes a national argument competition in which every opposition leader competes to see who can interrupt the other with the most passion. Another proposes a nationwide fasting campaign to gain sympathy. A third says fasting never works unless cameras are present.

In a far corner, a few leaders have begun snoring gently. They claim to be meditating. Their parties proudly explain that they are uniting their energies with the universe. One gentleman snores so loudly the universe may file a noise pollution complaint.

It is at this chaotic moment that a young voice rises from the back of the hall. A youngster in jeans and a simple kurta. His hand is raised politely as though he is still in school. Everyone looks at him with mild irritation. This is not the moment for bright ideas from people who still believe in logic.

He speaks. "Why not do what the ruling party is doing? Put money into the bank accounts of every voter."

The room freezes. The silence is now of a different kind.

Chair backs straighten. Shaws are adjusted. Eyebrows rise like the stock market after a good budget speech. Someone drops a biscuit. Another catches it out of habit.

An elderly leader blinks slowly. "But where will we get the money?" He speaks as though the youngster has suggested they purchase their own private island.

"The ruling party takes it from the government coffers," the youngster replies calmly, as though explaining simple addition to a group that has never passed kindergarten mathematics.

A murmur travels across the room. People nod with the dawning understanding of those who have finally found the last piece of a puzzle they have been rotating upside-down for years. Wisdom has descended upon the room like sunlight through dusty windows.

"So," the youngster continues in a voice that now sounds less like a suggestion and more like a prophecy. "Give every voter a promissory vote. Not for ten thousand. Not for twenty thousand. Promise them a lakh each. And tell them they can encash it only when we the opposition come to power."

The reaction is immediate. The hall erupts. Cheering bounces off the walls. Leaders slap one another on the back so hard that one gentleman's shawl falls off. A few leaders burst into spontaneous dance, movements that will later be described as energetic even if not rhythmic. Hope fills the room like monsoon rain.

It is the loudest cheer the opposition has produced in years, and the sound travels all the way to the ruling party headquarters. There, worried aides wonder what new scheme is brewing across town. They huddle together like students before a surprise exam.

Also worried are taxpayers who now realise that their hard-earned money, already stretched thinner than a government explanation, may soon be heading directly into the pockets of every voter in the country. They imagine opening their bank apps one morning and seeing their balance drop faster than their faith in political promises. And now every party wants to join the same game. The legal bribery game. The who-will-outpromise-whom game. The great Indian electoral gift festival. Democracy has rarely felt so entertaining. Or so expensive. Or so wonderfully imaginative. In the midst of all this excitement, the nation waits and watches. Will the opposition win with imagination or lose with enthusiasm? Will promissory votes replace manifestos? Will footwear symbolism defeat chappal economics? Will a wedding be planned before the next election?

Nobody knows. But one thing is certain. If political parties put as much creativity into governance as they do into brainstorming sessions, India would be the most innovative country on earth.

Until then, we the people will watch this comedy unfold, popcorn in hand, wondering what the next brilliant idea will be...

You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

School drop-outs in rural Meghalaya

Editor,
This is in response to the article captioned, "Rural School dropouts. What happens to them? Is there a way out?" by Toki Blah (ST Monday November 16, 2025).

Among the data highlights in the Meghalaya State Education Report is the secondary level of 40% or 22,000 rural school dropouts. Has anyone in the Government really given a thought to these 22,000 kids? By now the Government should have come out with the myriad socio-economic reasons ranging from the financial to the sociological for such dropouts and how to deal with them, some of which could turn out to be an attractive lot for drug traffickers.

Toki Blah has insightfully pointed to the publication by the Directorate of Education Research & Training

(DERT) which is under the Government of Meghalaya itself. The publication is titled "Training module on entrepreneurship and soft skills - Unlocking entrepreneurial potential." The module is on how students in rural areas beginning at the secondary level could be identified for such potentials, supported by a revived co-operative movement. If only officials in the departments of Education, Community & Rural Development, Agriculture, Health etc., stopped working in silos and started pooling their heads together by going through the DERT publication, we can expect some synergy. And of course the Government to fix the infrastructural pillar of uninterrupted energy and power supply! Even agricultural and livestock activities also need electricity for lighting besides using it for motors and pumps for water supply etc.

Further on the myriad socio-economic reasons of school dropouts being the deep rooted cycle of rural

poverty is what I witnessed with my own eyes. Two years ago the person who is the caretaker of my farm and who also cultivates for himself in the same farm, surrendered his entire tomato crop to me, before it could all rot and told me to even feed the pigs with them. The reason being that the price offered by the middle man didn't even meet the transport cost. And there was no co-operative organization to champion the cause on his behalf. He fathered nine children and became a grandfather at 38 from the eldest daughter who had dropped out because of teenage pregnancy. Three of the other daughters have already dropped out of school. One of them had stayed with my family and was sent to school. She dropped out of school because she failed in most of the subjects. I had tried to tutor her but it was beyond me because she pitifully didn't have any foundation at all and had been promoted in her earlier classes because of the

rule of not holding back any students up to Class 8. I'm sure there must be hundreds of stories like mine.

Perhaps the Government should think of a Commission to study rural poverty in Meghalaya and thus capture an accurate picture from the ground up before coming up with a report suggesting immediate and long term interventions to alleviate poverty. The reasons could be landlessness, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and livestock, quality of rural schools, wellness and health which impact on teenage pregnancy, sociological reasons like responsibility of men towards their families, religious beliefs that hinder progress, opportunities in rural tourism, opportunities in agri-industrialization value supply chain etc., The Commission should start by first building a digital file on every poor rural family which enjoys the BPL and MNREGA schemes.

Yours etc.,
Rudi Warjri,
Via email

Importance of revisiting cultural traditions

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation for the deeply moving and intellectually powerful article by Bhogoram Mawroh (ST November 18, 2025). His writing does more than educate - it stirs our conscience. He rightly reminds us that identity, ancestry, and cultural memory are not just traditions, but the living soul of a community.

His clear and courageous explanation of Ri Kur, Ri Raid, Tip Kur Tip Kha, and the matrilineal foundation of Khasi society comes at a time when confusion and misinterpretation are quietly weakening cultural roots. His article, I must say, shines as a guiding light, calling us back to wisdom, dignity, and the truth of our origins.

What moved me deeply was his reminder that when

a community forgets its lineage and land systems, it risks becoming directionless and divided. But when culture is honoured, society grows stronger, more confident, and more united. His message is inspiring not only for the Khasi people but for every indigenous community, including ours, urging us to reflect on our own foundations.

I sincerely thank Bhogoram Mawroh for this timely, honest, and beautifully written article. It truly deserves to be read and reflected upon by all.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Plight of overworked nurses in Garo Hills

Editor,
As a registered nurse and research scholar working closely with nurses in Garo Hills, I have witnessed firsthand the silent suffering of

my colleagues, the tireless caregivers who continuously give so much of themselves. Burnout here is not merely a concept found in textbooks; it is a daily reality that not only drains nurses' spirits and jeopardizes the quality of care that our communities urgently need. Emotional exhaustion, mental fatigue, and chronic stress impair nurses' ability to provide attentive and safe care, increasing the risk of errors and lowering patient satisfaction.

Nurses in this beautiful but resource-limited region face overwhelming patient loads, inadequate infrastructure, and chronic staff shortages that fall below INC norms. These challenges reflect deeper systemic neglect within the healthcare system. Their emotional strain and physical fatigue are further intensified by geographic isolation and limited support systems. I see many struggling to hold on as pressures steadily push them toward the breaking point.

This issue is not just about numbers or statistics; it is about human beings,

dedicated nurses whose wellbeing is being compromised by unmanageable workloads and constant challenges. It is painful to see some contemplate leaving the profession, a loss that would make an already vulnerable healthcare system even more fragile.

We cannot afford to overlook their plight any longer. Immediate steps must be taken to improve working conditions, address staffing gaps, strengthen mental health support, and acknowledge the essential role nurses play. These professionals deserve not only our gratitude but a meaningful and tangible change.

I write this with the hope that shedding light on this crisis will spark the attention and action my fellow nurses desperately need in Garo Hills.

Yours etc.,
Khushi Sangma,
Tura

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"The secret of success is constancy to purpose."
—Benjamin Disraeli

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 100 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2025

Environment The Last Priority

THE split Supreme Court verdict by a 2:1 majority on November 18 last to allow post-facto environmental clearance to infrastructure projects, on the plea that demolishing errant structures would tantamount to "throwing valuable public resources in the dustbin," is a slap in the face of the Environmental Protection Act 1986 and its successive amendments. While Justice BR Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandran ruled in favour of those who created infrastructure violating environment norms, Justice Ujjwal Bhuyan's dissenting voice reminded people of the Delhi smog and its lethal outcomes. The 2017 verdict that has now been recalled was against allowing retrospective environment clearances because the dangers for such a plea is that the real estate giants will first build after riding roughshod over environment laws and later seek condonation via the post-facto environment clearance route. Knowing how weak the implementation of all acts and rules are in India, the builders and construction lobby would use this to their advantage and give a wide berth to environmental concerns.

Justice Ujjwal Bhuyan was part of a two-judge bench that had passed a verdict in 2017 against a central government notification allowing retrospective environmental clearances. The latest judgment follows a review petition moved by a developers' group – Confederation of Real Estate Developers of India (Credai), Steel Authority of India and the Karnataka Government. Interestingly review petitions have had less than 0.1 percent success in the Supreme Court but this one, controversial as it succeeded in its mission. Naturally the November 18 verdict has drawn flak from environmentalists who argue that the 2017 ruling runs counter to Sections 6 and 25 of the Environment Protection Act and the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (2006) formulated by the Central Government. These sections prohibit certain industries and operations in specific areas and make environmental clearance mandatory before a project starts. Retrospective approvals with penalties, no matter how heavy, only regularises the by-passing of laws. Instances of heavy landslides in Uttarakhand and Darjeeling in recent times which resulted in deaths and destruction are harsh reminders of what happens when nature is extracted beyond a point. That the Supreme Court would place capital above the environment only goes to show how the judiciary is increasingly tilted to what pleases the government of the day rather than towards the ecology.

This judgment could have far reaching effects especially in eco-sensitive, bio-diverse regions such as those in India's North East where attempts are being made to establish extractive industries such as coal and limestone mining which requires that forests are mowed down without any plans for eco-restoration. Think East Jaintia Hills where mines abandoned for decades are yet to be reclaimed and restored. The water bodies that are poisoned are yet to be detoxified despite studies that certify that the waters are unusable. Forests are reservoirs that sustain the catchments which provide us the elixir of life – water. Why is it so difficult for the judiciary to see beyond the capitalistic lenses? Also has the November 18 judgment taken cognisance of the different regions of the country and their being located in seismic zones where any adverse intervention could result in unprecedented human disasters? India is not just a country with a single geography but vastly different topography. The Supreme Court order is a gross oversight.

Letters to the Editor

When Justice Turns Political: Will India Stand as Refuge or Arbiter?

Editor,
"When a tribunal meant to heal a nation becomes the stage for its deepest political rupture, can any verdict truly claim the name of justice?" Bangladesh confronts this uncomfortable question as the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) delivers an unprecedented death sentence to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, ironically, through a law she herself created in 2010 to prosecute 1971 war criminals. The decision has set off a political earthquake not only in Dhaka but also across the border in New Delhi, where Hasina has lived in exile since fleeing the country on August 5, 2024.

The crisis traces back to the student-led movement against the reinstated quota system for government jobs, which rapidly escalated into the "July Uprising." What began as a protest against perceived inequality spiralled into nationwide dissent against Hasina's tightening grip on power. Reports of hundreds of deaths during the crackdown, internet shutdowns, and deployment of security forces using live ammunition, helicopters, drones, and alleged arson deeply damaged her legitimacy. When the army withdrew support, Hasina's political empire finally collapsed.

The interim government under Nobel laureate Mu-

hammad Yunus redirected the ICT's mandate toward prosecuting Hasina and top officials for "crimes against humanity." Its 453-page judgment portrays her as the "mastermind" of lethal repression. Hasina, in turn, denounces the tribunal as a "rigged, politically motivated charade," insisting she never ordered violence against unarmed protesters.

The political stakes are high, and not only for Bangladesh. India now sits at the centre of an international dilemma. Dhaka has formally demanded Hasina's extradition under the bilateral treaty, calling it India's "mandatory responsibility." Yet that same treaty allows India to refuse extradition if charges are political in nature. New Delhi's cautious response, emphasising peace, stability, and constructive engagement, suggests it sees the verdict as deeply political. Returning Hasina could set a dangerous precedent of acknowledging a politically tainted trial; keeping her may invite accusations of shielding a leader convicted of crimes against humanity.

This tension exposes a broader regional question, what happens when the quest for justice collides with geopolitical reality? For Bangladesh's interim government, securing Hasina's return is essential to cementing its legitimacy. For India, handing over an ally who governed Bangladesh for 15 years, including during periods of strong bilateral cooperation, risks destabilising the relationship and empowering hardline forces.

Yet India's refusal could

In defence of the decibels: Why the Meghalaya Government must invest in the Cherry Blossom Festival and their ilk

By Lamshwa Nongrum

On May 21st, 2025, the Assam Chief Minister announced the "Policy on Concert Tourism in Assam" which aimed to position that State as a premier music and entertainment tourism hub to host large scale concerts and music festivals. The policy envisaged the development of state-of-the-art concert venues and proposed to support events with Viability Gap Funding. That day, a G-Plus News social media flyer read – Assam ready to be the Concert Capital of India. On December 8th, 2025, international rap star Post Malone will headline a one-night only concert performance to flag off the new policy.

In a nation as diverse, vibrant and culturally effervescent as ours, it often takes something as universal as music to remind us that we are more than the sum of our quotidian anxieties – the small, persistent concerns of everyday life, whether about work, finances, studies or social pressures – which can easily distract us from appreciating the collective strength and beauty that define our spirit. Music, by uniting people across backgrounds and experiences, serves as a powerful antidote to these everyday burdens by reminding us of our shared joys and aspirations. It is in this spirit that a government's decision to invest in a large-scale music festival deserves not derision, but decisive applause. Because – let us be clear – this is not merely an expenditure. It is an economic multiplier and a developmental strategy dressed in sequins and stage lights.

The world has already discovered the power of music tourism!

The sceptics may wrinkle their noses, but the global evidence is unambiguous. Woodstock, the grandfather of countercultural gatherings, was not just a rock concert – it was a socio-economic phenomenon that turbocharged New York State's tourism identity and later inspired decades of destination branding. Across the Atlantic, Glastonbury is reputed to add hundreds of millions of pounds to the southwest England economy every time its gates open. What began as a modest farm-side fair now sustains thousands of jobs and draws global media attention. And yes, Glastonbury Festival had received grants from UK Government's Culture Recovery Fund.

Closer home, Nagaland's Hornbill Festival stands as the shining exemplar of what strategic government spending can achieve. From gener-

ating lakhs of tourist footfall to creating direct incomes for artisans, transporters, home-stays, cafés, musicians and micro-entrepreneurs, Hornbill has become not merely a festival – but an economy. Other music festivals like Lollapalooza, Sunburn, NH7 Weekender may be privately run and managed but their success is also tied to the non-monetary support of local governments in the host destinations.

Let us ask ourselves why do people know about Woodstock or Glastonbury or Hornbill? Because festivals immortalised those names! Global recognition derived from competent event-hosting, positions a destination like Shillong as a leader in music festivals, attracting musicians and music tourists worldwide. The festival itself becomes an ecosystem that nurtures musicians, designers, digital content-creators, local artisans, food entrepreneurs and many startup ideas. The spillover-effect extend beyond the venue when tourists visit other parts of the host region before or after the event, generating additional tourism revenue.

Successful festivals enhance a destination's image as vibrant, culturally diverse and, most importantly – AS SAFE (something which cannot be overstated). The impact of one major festival on other cultural festivals and offbeat tourist destinations like Ri Bhoi District, which will be hosting the first edition of the Shyntor Festival and North Garo Hills district for the A-We Festival can only be appreciated in time. Yet, there can be no denying that, for a state seeking tourism growth, a festival is a branding instrument par excellence.

Why government spending on music festivals makes economic sense?

Can we dispense with the misplaced moralism that music, youth, and festivity are somehow "unworthy" of public investment. That argument is as atonal as a badly tuned guitar.

Music itself is the main motivator for attending festivals and concerts. Consequently, ticket sales conversions are often the go-to metric for gauging the success or failure of a festival. Apart from skill- and capacity-building of local "orange sector" businesses and entrepreneurs in the area, festivals can bring in other significant financial benefits to catalyse local economies. Per-capita visitor expenditure can be substantial, with spends not

limited to tickets but going towards food, accommodation and transportation. A festival weekend can cause a Kynrem Falls-esque surge in demand, independent of any financial support received from the Government. For analysis and in the absence of comprehensive and established data, it is posited that a micro-entrepreneur with an annual net-earning of ₹3 lakhs generates approximately 5% of that income over just two festival days. This activity directly results in the creation of additional man-days that would not otherwise occur without the event. While these minute details may not mean much to the salaried class, they can become a critical difference in the lives of self-employed professionals and micro-entrepreneurs.

Yes, critics also argue that the leakages are even more substantial – mainly because event organisers are forced to outsource major elements of the programme to outside firms. But does that not prove the solidity of the economics behind a Cherry Blossom? The issue of leakages, of course, is a topic for another day; but perhaps, simply linking festival funding to MIPP 2024 guidelines might go a long way in plugging the holes.

While avoiding moral debates, one fact stands out – that regions with vibrant cultural events see higher youth retention and entrepreneurship. State support may take the form of a viability gap funding to de-risk a particular project – which is perhaps the major bone of contention for the Festival's critics – or support can take the form of approvals, permissions; logistics and security support to festival organisers by the local governments of the host destination. The question is, if affluent nations, with their stable economies and diversified industries, find such festivals worthy of state support – financial or otherwise – why shouldn't an emerging tourism-rich region like ours?

Naturally, organising an event of this scale is rarely flawless and issues like noise pollution, traffic problems, high ticket prices and leakages all highlight several areas in need of improvement. Yet one cannot deny that the event organisers, with the Meghalaya Government's support, have managed to drag an obscure Tier-II town – legacy flaws, hill-station problems, et al – and put it on par, if not above, metropolises and Tier-I towns in India

and perhaps even South-east Asia. For that singular reason, they deserve my applause and the Assam Government's coveted glances.

Music in Meghalaya has undergone much of its evolutionary journey – from Church choirs and music classes in Missionary schools to fund-raising Rock Concerts and locality fetes; and from college beat contests to music festivals with only local audiences – without much government-funding. Yet, because music continues to serve as the universal language which transcends cultural boundaries, its role in driving tourism demand and enhancing destination appeal has become ever more pronounced. Given the transformative impact that festivals like the Cherry Blossom have demonstrated on tourism economies, a robust case emerges for active government intervention. Put plainly ₹5 crore invested today can generate hundreds of crores worth of economic value and branding the region for decades.

We are witnessing the transformation of music festivals and concerts into engines of economic development and cultural pride while ensuring sustained prosperity and international recognition. A recent Ernst and Young report post-the Coldplay concert at Ahmedabad stated, "...the organized live event segment surpassed the ₹12,000 crore mark in 2024 and is projected to grow at an impressive CAGR of around 19% over the next three years..." Naturally, this motivates other cities and towns to get into the Concert Economy bandwagon. However, the Assam Government's Concert Policy must serve as our wake-up call. By supporting festivals through targeted funding, the Government can help regions fully harness their tourism potential, ensuring that local stakeholders benefit and that Meghalaya's destinations remain competitive amidst growing international and domestic rivalry.

It is hoped, therefore, that we do not shoot ourselves in the foot and to potentially, de-rail our long-standing reputation as India's Rock Capital.

In parting, we are reminded of Bob Dylan's poetry –

Your old road is rapidly agin'

Please get out of the new one

If you can't lend your hand

For the times they are a-changin'

(The writer can be reached at ulamshwakibho-nongrum@gmail.com)

On the other side, we were paying almost triple the normal price for food inside the venue. The contrast was painful and a reminder of a truth we often ignore: the rich always find a way to get richer, and the poor – no matter how hard they try, end up paying more for less.

Pushing my way through the crowd I finally reached the front of the fanpit and expected things to get better. Instead, the view from the front only made the divisions clearer. Right beside us was a fenced-off zone labelled "Fanpit+" – an area reserved for the expensive Backstage 250 ticket holders. At first, I assumed it was simply another premium section. But what surprised me was seeing several high-ranking government officers comfortably seated inside.

This left me utterly confused. If these officials already had access to an exclusive government lounge with free food and drinks, why were they also occupying a space meant for people who paid a huge amount for their tickets? It felt like lines were being crossed, and not by accident. The more I watched, the more I felt a growing discomfort – not just about space, but about fairness.

Standing there, pressed among the fanpit and general crowd, I felt reduced to the lowest rung of this unspoken hierarchy. At that moment, I couldn't help but feel like a "shudra" – the group pushed to the bottom. The people in the regular VIP zones looked like the "vaishyas", comfortably enjoying better facilities but still having to pay for amenities. Those

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Bihar elections: A clean sweep that comes with many concerns

By Jagdish Rattanani

There was a time in India when whatever the election results, the Election Commission of India (ECI) was the acknowledged winner of the battle and the chief protector of India's democratic traditions. The ECI was initially tame, then it became a tiger under the Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan and has since kept up its image as a fierce protector and an independent arbiter of the one ingredient that is critical for the democratic success of India – the process of elections. Come election time and political parties would test boundaries, but the ECI would stand up, ensure that the violations were called out and indeed increase scrutiny and oversight so that the process was not only fair but also seen to be fair. That is now likely to be seen as the golden age that is no more a part of the Indian electoral process. The loss carries implications

prohibition and claims of improved law & order across the State.

This standard ex post-facto reading that builds on the lines argued by the incumbents in the election, reflects some ground realities but can it convincingly explain the landslide that brought 202 of the 243 seats to the NDA alliance, the BJP in the lead with 89 seats and Nitish Kumar's JD (United) with 85 seats?

The counter argument, equally valid, would ask how a nine-time Chief Minister who has been called palu-Ram for his changing affiliations and criticised for not being in control or for being "hijacked" by the BJP, can lead a victory of these proportions. Even considering the backbone of BJP's superior strategy and resources in the system, this was an incumbency that has not particularly seen Bihar

The near-clean sweep by the BJP-led NDA alliance in the Bihar assembly elections is also marred by the infirmities that have crept into the working of the ECI. The results therefore send complex signals to the nation. They become a cause of lingering doubt. It is no longer possible for one side to be sworn in for a new term with due acknowledgement by the loser, both bowing to the mandate of the people and their power to decide the political futures of candidates.

that are not fully grasped by an ECI that has allowed itself to be drawn into a vortex of controversies that it needn't have. Today, the end of elections marks the beginning of a new battle over results, a slide that should cause serious concern to the entire political system and to the proud history of a young nation that has successfully run a reasonable and fair election process since independence.

The near-clean sweep by the BJP-led NDA alliance in the Bihar assembly elections is also marred by the infirmities that have crept into the working of the ECI. The results therefore send complex signals to the nation. They become a cause of lingering doubt. It is no longer possible for one side to be sworn in for a new term with due acknowledgement by the loser, both bowing to the mandate of the people and their power to decide the political futures of candidates. They rob the system of its integrity, of its finality in the reading and the enforcing of the will of the people and therefore do injustice not only to the losers but also to the winners and to the political system as a whole. In this reading, the ECI has let all sides down by not keeping itself beyond allegations and suspicions that now cloud its various actions.

In Bihar, too, like has happened in earlier elections in Maharashtra and Haryana for example, the winning side will have to contend with the allegations that they romped home with an umpire whose role remains hotly contested, placing the fairness of the entire electoral process under a cloud. Further, the allegations are more than a case of sour grapes and have now become a growing part of recent election campaigns and results, putting Indian democracy at risk from the very structures that are meant to protect and strengthen it.

On the one hand, the plain numbers from the Bihar 2025 Assembly results reiterate the overwhelming dominance of the Narendra Modi-led BJP machinery and its mastery of alliances, messages and imagery. Apart from its general strengths, a variety of Bihar-specific reasons are also being cited, examples of which are Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's so-called popularity or long service, the Rs.10,000 per woman giveaway to 75 lakh women in Bihar in the thick of election season which almost certainly made a difference, or longer term actions that have reportedly won the hearts of women voters like

flourish. The lack of jobs for the youth or lack of investments is the flip side of the coin that buys voter loyalty with gifts and giveaways, even if these will mar long term governance and fiscal management. Outmigration for work remains the bane of Bihar and mirrors the lack of opportunities built in the State to provide decent employment for the masses. Seasonal migration is more predominant in Bihar with 72.8% of the seasonal migrants seen in the Middle Ganga Plain coming from the State, according to a study dating back to 2019 by the Indian Institute of Population Studies, Mumbai. The reasons: poverty, and compulsion, unemployment, landlessness and lack of food. There is no evidence that historic disadvantages of the State have changed dramatically in recent years.

It is equally fair to note that there was some disarray in the ranks of the Opposition, but also energy seen in the rallies led by the Rashtriya Janata Dal's Tejashwi Yadav, the Chief Ministerial candidate of the RJD-Congress-led Mahagathabandhan alliance. The Vote Adhikaar awareness rallies by the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi were also noted for the good response received at the grassroots. Gandhi began the 'right to vote' movement in Babu Jagjivan Ram's political home of Sasaram and covered some 20 districts across Bihar. The very movement in the thick of an election highlights the loss of confidence in the election commission so that election after election has chipped away at the moral authority of the ECI in recent years.

The growing crescendo on the issue of fairness of the electoral process cannot be dismissed easily. An election commission that these days is defended only by the BJP, and otherwise stands discredited, is a deeper loss that cannot be washed away by the victory celebrations of the BJP or its allies. What the winners do not realize is that they may well have won but they too have been robbed of the prize because when the doubts linger, the victory is but pyrrhic. The angst this causes among people and political parties will likely play out in some very complex and challenging ways in the days ahead.

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

"Trying to tear down the past prohibits you from building up your future."

—Lil Wayne

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 101 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2025

Short-cuts to success

WITH grandmaster Nitish Kumar taking oath as Chief Minister of Bihar for the tenth time, discussions centre on what makes him so special in the choppy world of politics. No one expected him or the NDA alliance to make a clean sweep of the assembly polls this time. In fact, a generational shift in state politics was anticipated – with a youthful Tejashwi Yadav of the JDU being cited in opinion polls as the best CM-face. Many thought Nitish Kumar would be packing his bags. At age 74, the evergreen Kumar returns to the CM post with a broad smile on his face that disarms even his worst rivals. CM-hopeful Tejashwi Yadav himself breaking his long silence and wishing Kumar well at this juncture reinforces such positive vibes.

Allegations of manipulation of the electoral verdict, mainly from a disheartened Congress party, would not stick for long on the CM or the BJP unless this is proven. The other ground realities that helped facilitate this massive victory for the NDA cannot be lost sight of either. The fact that Nitish Kumar's party emerged as the largest party in the new assembly, winning four seats more than its associate the BJP puts the CM at the centre of this victory halo. Perceptions are that the large turnout of women for voting in a state, where lakhs of youths have moved to other states for work, helped the Nitish-led NDA immensely. Kumar's transfer of 10,000 each for 21 lakh women under the Mahila Rozgar Yojana a month ago was more than what these poor beings aspired for. Irrespective of whether or not this huge sum was organised through questionable government means, the families of the poor in the state had reasons to cheer. The CM's prohibition policy had already won him a huge fan-following among women. Nitish's "Sadak, Pani" push, ensuring roads and water for every village, had also enthused women more than men. For ages, in the absence of these, they were at the receiving end. However, Bihar as a state remained poor, a reason why so huge a number of its population is working in other states as migrant labour. Nitish Kumar had no panacea for such grave ills of his state. He compensated those with offers like Sadak, Pani and doles.

Notably, several recent assembly elections have shown that crafty politicians wooed the poor masses with lollipops, grabbed their votes, and laughed their way to power. This happened in Karnataka, where the Congress promised freebies, regular cash transfers, free gas cylinders, and free travel for women on state buses. The Telugu Desam copied these and wrested power in Andhra Pradesh; and the Congress, again, in Telangana. Kerala's LDF government too won a second term in 2021 by generous offer of kits and other incentives to the poor and ordinary masses. The BJP governments in the Hindi belt continue to win votes by whipping up Hindu religious feelings, as in the erection of the Ram Temple. Nitish Kumar opted to woo the women, rather than whipping up communal feelings. Both these strategies present their own problems for the nation.

Shillong Literary Festival: Sublime and Thought Provoking

By Patricia Mukhim

Sambha Lamarr was the first to introduce a literary festival in Meghalaya. She called it the Creative Arts Literature and Music (CALM) Festival which was launched in October 2012. Sambha toured India extensively trying to woo some of the notable authors of the time to visit Shillong and share their experiences. She owned a bookshop in Nongrim Hills – Bookmark. It was more than a bookshop. We had book releases and discussions and many a quiet time just browsing at books, reading them in a quiet corner much like 'Borders' the once famous bookstore in the United States where one could sit for hours, take out a book, copy stuff and keep the books back in the racks. I recall meeting Shobhaa De in one of the CALM festivals. Chetan Bhagat too had come and given a talk once and so had other notable writers. Sambha held the CALM Fest in collaboration with the Government of Meghalaya.

Sadly, Sambha passed away in 2016 and the CALM festival too died a premature death. It was only in 2020 that the CALM took on a new avatar in the form of the Shillong LitFest. It's now into its 5th edition and it has become a thriving event that brings together cerebral engagement during the day with theatre and music thrown in, in the evenings to soothe the tired minds of authors who have been busy discussing their books and signing copies and also giving interview galore. These days the Shillong LitFest is in the literary festival map of the country.

It would indeed be a great tribute to Sambha if the Shillong LitFest organisers recall her extraordinary contributions and make a mention of it in the course of the celebrations. Yesterday when I mentioned this to a young media person for whom the literary engagements in Shillong as far as she could recall began only in 2020, she expressed surprise because she didn't know about the CALM festival. It's no fault of hers: Life is all about moving on. But Sambha Lamarr's contributions merit a mention in the Shillong LitFest.

Since 2012 up to 2015 with a short interregnum of four years Shillong is back

hosting the LitFest, now at the picturesque Ward's Lake which looks lovely by day and mesmerising by night with the coloured lights casting their beautiful shades in the lake waters. Thankfully this year the Cherry Blossoms are still blooming around the lake as if to honour the guests at the Literary Festival. Elsewhere in the city and beyond the Cherry Blossoms have bloomed and cheered everyone and packed up to retire into their green attire. Cherry Blossoms are a petulant lot. Their blossoming is unpredictable. They sometimes decide to bloom early and when they are not cheered they bloom a little late. Now that the youth of Meghalaya are learning Japanese, they ought to ask their Japanese friends how they tame the Sakura to bloom with precision during the summers.

So much about Cherry Blossoms! Let's move on to the 5th edition of the Shillong LitFest which is in its second leg today, the first having been completed with aplomb on Thursday. Listening to author Sanjoy Hazarika in conversation with literary agent Preeti Gill on the theme "River Traveller" one could actually imagine oneself swaying on a boat while traversing the length and breadth of the Tsangpo and then the Siang until it becomes the Brahmaputra; the twists and turns at its different reaches beginning in Tibet. Sanjoy describes with great flourish what it feels to witness the large expanse of territory called Tibet which spells "challenge." Sanjoy drew attention to the propensity of humans to tamper with nature and build structures along the river banks. His narrative gets interesting by the minute as he speaks of the prospect of actually encountering pirates somewhere along the way. Sanjoy's love affair with the Brahmaputra is legendary and the fact that he is journeying with award winning film maker Jahnua Baruah makes it even more fascinating. Baruah the film maker is interested in the picturesque part of the journey while Sanjoy the scholar-academician-journalist wants to absorb every bit of the descriptive aspects of the Brahmaputra.

It is on the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra that Sanjoy encountered the sufferings of those dwelling in the char areas (flood plains). They had no health care facilities and Assam then had the highest maternal mortality rate (MMR). Sanjoy, through the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES) designed the hospital ships and with the generosity of well-wishers and funding partners succeeded in providing mini hospitals in ships to reach out to the unreachable, particularly. This project is now running in collaboration with the Government of Assam and has regular staff to carry out this momentous initiative.

The discussion between Prof Desmong Khar-mawphlang and Ikagai author Frances Miralles was of a different kind. For a moment I was transported to Okinawa in Japan where we are told people live to a ripe old age because they live peaceful lives free from stress and are generally happy with life. It sounds too good to be true considering ordinary humans here live stressful lives checking their mobile for every ping and are generally overworked. When I asked Miralles what is one way of countering stress, he said we should take on only so much for a day and not attempt to do more than we can. "To live long you must love your life and find reason to live instead of being pessimistic," advised Miralles. He spoke of time management and advised that we should pause and take a break and not put too many things on the table of life. But one advice that really resonated is that today we humans share information but not emotions. That's courtesy the little instrument we cannot live without today. Also, Miralles' wise counsel – The first part of our lives we should be students and learn; the second part we have to be teachers and guide younger people is also what empathy and caring is all about.

Sam Dalrymple, a typical historian, brought in different facets of empire from his book 'Shattered Lands.' He certainly has done phenomenal research about North East India's borders with South East Asia and how geography defies the idea of nation.

My session with Banu Mushtaq the incredible writer, activist, lawyer and International Booker Prize Winner. 2025 brought out the challenges of women in Muslim society who are trapped by patriarchy at every step of the way. However Banu says its only incidental that the characters in her book, Heart Lamp with 12 stories picked from her long list of stories are Muslim. The reality is that women across this country continue to be hamstrung by patriarchal mindsets and often even women unwittingly become collaborators of patriarchy such as the mother-in-law who invariably chains the daughter-in-law in the guise of societal norms bondage. Banu has survived a stabbing incident and has been under attack from fundamentalist elements for her advocacy and bold stances. No one deserves the Booker more than this plucky soul. More power to Banu and her ilk.

The session on Heal the World with the intrepid writer, one time journalist and Jerry Pinto and Neena Verma on grief, care mental health and why empathy matters drew out the best from the discussants with Jerry literally meeting up with the audience to speak to them personally about why palliative care means a personal visit to one in suffering and even offering to cook them a meal. Jerry was emphatic that medical care has degenerated to figures and machines where a person is simply diagnosed and told to take medicines with no empathy from doctors. Neena Verma who lost a young son at an age where he was just at the verge of launching himself professionally and had won a scholarship to study in a university abroad, said that healing does not come from the outside. The capacity to heal she says has to come from within, from deep within oneself.

There were other interesting conversations through the course of the day, one of which was about the Bates residing in Saipung, Jaintia Hills. Sadly the moderator took it for granted that everyone knew who the Bates are but everyone knows they are from the Hmar family. That I felt needed some explanation.

Looking forward to more interesting conversations in the next two days.

How AI learns, and Why It Sometimes Gets Things Wrong

By Abhivarya Kumar

Have you ever thought about how ChatGPT is able to give you the latest fashion trends, do your assignments and help mom with a shopping list? The answer lies in how Artificial Intelligence systems are trained.

The funny thing about artificial intelligence is it can write essays, paint pictures, and beat world champions at chess, but ask it to identify a blurry turtle, and it might call it a rifle. This captures the essence of AI's biggest challenge, it doesn't comprehend or know what it is learning. To understand why that happens, we first need to see how it actually "learns."

AI doesn't learn like a human does, we don't sit it down and explain it something, neither do we write something on a board and teach it that way. Instead, we feed it data, millions of examples of something we want it to recognize. Imagine teaching a child what a cat looks like. You'd show lots of pictures: fluffy cats, skinny cats, cats hiding in boxes. Over time, the child starts noticing patterns, pointy ears, whiskers, tails. AI does the same thing, but with math. It learns patterns in the data that helps it make predictions.

At the glowing mathematical centre of this process is a complex web of digital "neurons" called a neural network. These neurons are

technology, especially on the battlefield in Ukraine, one can't help but wonder the disastrous consequences of having machines behind the trigger finger.

The implications of AI "guessing wrong" go far beyond harmless image recognition errors. A biased or poorly trained AI might unfairly flag someone as suspicious, misread satellite imagery, or amplify human prejudices encoded in its data. That's why researchers emphasize that AI is only as good as the data it's trained on, and this data is never perfect.

So, how can we make AI better at recognizing things, and stop it from repeating mistakes like the perceptron?

The answer lies in better data, transparency, and feedback.

First, AI models need diverse and balanced datasets. If all your "cat" photos come from one environment, like a sunny room then the AI will struggle with cats in darker settings or outdoors. By showing the model a wider variety of examples, it can learn more general patterns that actually reflect reality, not just quirks in the data. While this may be great in theory, however in practice a recent analysis published by MIT, AI models' data requirements may be outpacing

The AI doesn't really understand what it's looking at, it only matches patterns. If an image has similar shapes or colors to what it saw before, it can get confused. Show it a picture of a dog wearing sunglasses and it might confidently declare it's a panda. This isn't the AI being stupid, it's just following its training data very literally.

inspired by the human brain; each neuron makes tiny calculations and passes them on to others. Together, they build a sort of decision-making system. When you show the AI an image, it doesn't see a cat the way you do, it just detects patterns in pixel colors and shapes and decides that these patterns "look like what I've seen in other cat pictures."

Now you may ask, why does this complex decision-making system made up of neurons inspired by the human brain still mess up?

Well, the answer is simple.

The AI doesn't really understand what it's looking at, it only matches patterns. If an image has similar shapes or colors to what it saw before, it can get confused. Show it a picture of a dog wearing sunglasses and it might confidently declare it's a panda. This isn't the AI being stupid, it's just following its training data very literally.

Let me show you just how dangerous this can be when the stakes are high. Back in the times of World War X, researchers trained a simple neural network called a perceptron to detect camouflaged tanks hidden among trees from aerial pictures. It performed amazingly well during testing. But later, they discovered the "AI" wasn't identifying tanks at all, it was just distinguishing between photos taken on sunny days and those taken on cloudy ones. The training data had a hidden bias: all the "tank" photos were taken in bright light, while the "no tank" photos were taken in shade. The machine hadn't learned what the researchers thought it had.

If AI can confuse a turtle for a rifle or misclassify tanks based on shade then imagine what could happen when these same systems are used for military intelligence or surveillance. In these contexts, misidentifying an image could be the difference between life or death or identifying a threat correctly or mistaking a civilian object for a weapon. With AI being used increasingly in drone

ing the supply of suitable, usable data available today. The median training dataset contained about 3,300 datapoints in 2020. This figure grew dramatically to over 750,000 datapoints in just the three years that followed. Even though the total data generated is expected to hit 180 ZB by the end of this year, it might not be enough to feed the growing demand.

Second, scientists are working on something called Explainable AI (XAI), systems that can describe why AI made a particular decision. Instead of a black box that just says, "this is a tank," an explainable AI can tell you which features in the image made it think that. This helps humans catch and correct mistakes faster.

Third, human feedback is becoming a key part of training. You've probably seen those little pop-ups asking, "Was this answer helpful?" or "Click all the images with traffic lights." Every time you respond, you're helping an AI model learn from its errors.

But the question arises, where does all this data for training come from? Companies source data in two ways, internally or externally. Examples of internal data might include Spotify using your music history to generate a list of trending songs in your area, external data might be made up of datasets provided by the government or research agencies. There have already been several reports of AI companies using data unethically, so the search for better, more accurate answers reminds us to sometimes take a breather and think of the consequences behind the things we do.

So, the next time you ask ChatGPT to give you a good dosa recipe and it asks you to add sugar instead of salt, think what could have gone wrong in its thinking instead of just calling it stupid.

(The writer is a 4th Year B Tech Plaksha University, Mohali)

Letters to the Editor

Who will protect the environment?

Editor,
The editorial "Environment the Last Priority" (ST November 20, 2025) made interesting reading. "The environment is everything that isn't me" – Albert Einstein. Einstein suggested that the environment is everything external to the self – the vast web of reality beyond personal identity and understanding this distinction is key to grasping our place in the world. Many legal experts and environmentalists see the Supreme Court's November 18 verdict allowing post-facto environmental clearances as a serious dilution of the Environmental Protection Act 1986, because it legitimises violations after the fact rather than preventing them.

Justice Ujjal Bhuyan dissented strongly, saying the verdict overlooked the fundamentals of environmental jurisprudence and undermined the precautionary principle. The Environmental Protection Act, 1986 is built on the precautionary principle – environmental harm must be prevented 'before' it occurs. Allowing post-facto clearance means developers can build first, ignore norms and then seek approval later. This erodes deterrence and emboldens violators. The verdict weakens environmental regula-

tion, undermines institutional credibility and risks turning clearance into a mere formality. The Shillong Times bluntly called it a "slap in the face of the Environmental Protection Act 1986 and rightly warned that real estate giants will exploit this loophole. The editorial correctly pointed out that the "judgement could have far reaching effects especially in eco-sensitive, bio-diverse regions such as those in India's Northeast where attempts are being made to establish extractive industries."

The implications of the ruling are that real estate, mining, steel and infrastructure projects facing demolition now get a legal lifeline. The risk to the environment is weak enforcement in India means projects may bypass safeguards, worsening pollution, deforestation and public health crisis. The verdict revives earlier government notification of 2017, 2021 that allowed retrospective clearances, fundamentally altering compliance landscapes.

From a governance perspective, the majority prioritised economic costs and public resource preservation. From an environmental perspective, critics argue this is short-term pragmatism at the expense of long-term sustainability and rule of law. The split verdict itself shows the deep tension between development imperatives and environmental protection

in India's legal system. In essence the ruling may save billions in infrastructure but it risks hollowing out the Environmental Protection Act's preventive spirit – turning environmental clearance into a post-ad hoc rubber stamp rather than a safeguard.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

When Festivals Become Hope: A People's Reflection on Meghalaya's Cultural Future

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I wish to share a heartfelt reflection on the recent article titled 'In defence of the decibels: Why the Meghalaya Government must invest in the Cherry Blossom Festival and their ilk' authored Mr. Lamshwa Nongrum (ST November 20, 2025) urging greater investment in the Cherry Blossom Festival and similar cultural events. My sincere appreciation to the author for his clear, comprehensive and courageous presentation. I also wish to thank the Government of Meghalaya for its ongoing efforts to promote tourism and preserve our cultural soul—often quietly, often without applause, yet with sincere commitment.

For us in Meghalaya,

music is not just rhythm; it is memory, belonging and comfort. It lives in our hills and in the gentle warmth of our people. During festivals, our towns and villages breathe a little easier. Small entrepreneurs, homestay owners, taxi drivers, weavers, artisans and our talented youth see a glimmer of hope—hope that their hard work will be recognised, that their dreams matter, and that their homeland has space for them too.

Across the world, festivals have healed economies and uplifted communities. Glastonbury revived Somerset. It attracts over 200,000 visitors from around the world every year. The festival has transformed Somerset's economy, generating hundreds of crores in tourism revenue through hotels, food stalls, transport and small businesses. Many towns around the venue thrive mainly because of this festival. . . Montreux Jazz Festival (Switzerland) held along the scenic Lake Geneva, Montreux draws international families, music lovers, and cultural tourists. Its calm, safe atmosphere and diverse music have turned Montreux into a global tourist destination. Hotels, cafés and shops flourish in July, and the city's cultural tourism brand is recognised worldwide because of this festival.

Oktobefest lifted Munich; Coachella transformed an empty desert; Edinburgh

Fringe gave artists a global stage; Harbin Festival turned a cold city into a wonderland; and Hornbill became Nagaland's pride. These success stories remind us that culture, when nurtured with care, becomes livelihood, dignity and global identity.

The article compellingly underscores this truth for our own home. Yet, people's genuine concerns—crowding, leakages, waste, mismanagement—must be addressed honestly. Festival benefits must reach local hands first. No community should feel left out.

Today, with Assam advancing confidently through its Concert Tourism Policy, Meghalaya must awaken with renewed courage. Let our state become a synonym for world-class music, culture, nature and warmth—a place that not only attracts global tourists, but also celebrates its own people, branding our villages, markets, forests, waterfalls and hilltops with pride. Meghalaya can and should grow into a world-class music and cultural concert centre with local artists at its heart.

If guided with vision, sincerity, accountability and deep respect for community sentiments, festival tourism can become far more than an event. It can become a source of healing, a shared celebration of who we are, and a promise to our youth that their future can bloom

right here at home.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Emission Testing Centre

Editor,
Since the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board has decided to discontinue the emission testing of petrol and diesel vehicles from its premises at Lumpyngngad, Shillong and other similar facilities are located at the extreme end of the town, it will be wise to have them integrated with fuel stations operated throughout the city. The same facility is available in all major cities across the county where one can easily get their vehicle emission tested at fuel stations instead of travelling from one corner of the city to the other for the same.

With the current state of traffic that the city faces it is nothing short of painful for vehicle owners to drive around looking for an emission testing centre. Through your esteemed daily I would request the concerned authorities to make it easier by integrating it with various fuel stations in the city.

Yours etc.,
Anubrata Choudhury,
Via email

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

*"To acquire knowledge, one must study;
but to acquire wisdom, one must observe."*

—Marilyn vos Savant

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 102 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2025

Shillong LitFest Dividends

THE Shillong Literary Festival now into its 5th year has made significant strides in terms of the quality of writers invited. This time International Booker Prize winner Banu Mushtaq was not only present for one session but was also engaged in two different sessions enlightening the audience about how she took to writing short stories, the challenges she faced and how she bravely overcame a fatwa against her for her writings and advocacy. These sessions where authors bare their hearts out are very encouraging for young listeners who are actually the target audience and who need to hear these stories of hope and resilience. The other event for school and college children was exciting and provided a platform where the young could understand where poetry comes from and why verses actually form in the deepest recesses of the heart and those words need to be given wings to.

The Ward's Lake wore a festive look and had huge tourist footfalls. Many who were in Shillong for tourism purposes, heard of the LitFest and dropped by only to find that it was an exciting event with music following the cerebral interactions. What's good about the LitFest is also that bookstalls were set up and people could buy the books by their favourite authors and get them to pen their autographs. Banu Mushtaq patiently signed books on the first and second day. To get a book signed by an International Booker Prize winner in itself is a special occasion for many. Litfests encourage the reading culture and that is perhaps the biggest dividend. In a world driven by byte-sized information and consumers get their news from their mobile phones rather than from newspapers, a literature festival is a timely reminder that reading and reflection still pay huge dividends because the human mind needs these exercises to remain sharp and responsive.

The Government of Meghalaya is keen on making the Shillong Literature Festival one of the best in the country and the Meghalayan Age Limited (MAL) team seems geared up for the challenge. Their ability to work round the clock to ensure that authors and invitees receive the best treatment shows their commitment. The food and wine stalls around Ward's Lake are crowded and serve delectable local cuisines. Other stalls with souvenirs and other takeaways are also doing brisk business. What surprises the guests who were at the LitFest last year and are here this year too is, why the bridge across the lake remains out of bounds for visitors. Their question- why does it take so long to repair a less than one kilometre wooden bridge. Hygiene amenities at Ward's Lake which will now be a venue for different festivals round the year need urgent upscale. They require to be models of cleanliness and the talking point of visitors to the Lake. A good example are the toilets at Jiva Veg Restaurant, Nongpoh which are exemplary. Word of mouth is the biggest advertisement for any place and the Ward's Lake needs to become a memorable destination for the LitFest crowd in every aspect from intellectual and literary discourses to the arts and culinary delights and finally the rest rooms.

Hope, Perseverance and Passion

By Dominick Dauni Roising Rymbai

These days, the moment one reaches for the newspaper (hard copy or electronic), or opens the YouTube channel of an online-based news portal, the following reactions or emojis are robotically generated.

Cynical; sad; oh, ok; not again; seriously! And the worst: the question, for how long innocent lives of women and children (and good men too) are going to be sacrificed at the altar of ideology, power, or simply just to prove a point? Most readers tend to head straight to the inspirational Sports and/or dopamine-enabled Entertainment pages. If the mood is happy, then perhaps they go back and try the Op-Ed page.

For YouTube fans, it feels rather hopeful to watch the interviews of the (finally) World Champions' Indian Women's National Cricket Team (especially, the captain Harmanpreet Kaur and the latest national crush Jemimah Rodrigues and Harleen Goel). To experience good/bad feeling, best is to watch the latest BBC Sport analysis of an Arsenal FC and/or Liverpool FC football match, or maybe the antics and histrionics of an attention-seeking and monetising celebrity. Or worse, some revenge scrolling of algorithm-controlled reels and shorts on the "smart" phone and experience dopamine rushes to the head.

And life goes on. However, now and then, come stories of hope, perseverance and passion. Batskhem Thabab, a former teacher at Raibah Government Lower Primary School, deep in the Mawsynram area is a case study of how a teacher can motivate others to uplift a dilapidated 75 year old school building. Another story is of Shemphanglin Khardewsaw, a teacher at Byrki Government Lower Primary School, about 49 kms from Nongstoin, covered in the Highland Post, the Khasi newspaper. *U Nongstoin Hima* and Youtube-based news portals.

And recently, the release of a book of Khasi poems, *Umpholw - Ka Jingshemphang* (Spring of Wisdom) by Sibunbha Kharumnuid, published by Martin Luther Christian University, (MLCU) Press is worth cogitating on. Sibunbha was born in Laikhyrong village and resides in the beautiful Laitlum village, Nongkrem area. Unlike most street vendors

and hawkers, and from what one can remember, Sibunbha has been selling vegetables and Khasi traditional organic high-tea snacks for ages, at the same location. The address is just outside a shop with a popcorn machine, in Laitumkhrah Beat House. In partnership with her husband, she perseveres to feed, clothe and send their children to school. Then, to find time for herself: a woman with a beating heart of feelings, an observant eye and a thinking mind crafts out verses that arise deep inside her consciousness. In the processes of life, she has a passion; something most of us need in this mad, mad world of individualism, consumerism, materialism and the sprint/marathon for "success". Sibunbha's life and works are an inspiration. To reach out to a general readership, an original Khasi plus a good English translation of the poetry book of this simple village woman is a must. Perhaps something like the children's story-book, *"The Mystery of the Cave"*. Or the good English translation of her Poet Laureate Soso Tham's *Ki Sngi Barim*. *U Hynhiewtrep* (The Old Days of the Hynhiewtrep Community) by Janet Moore Hujon. The aforementioned both are publications of the MLCU Press.

Caves, the ubiquitous natural formations in the indigenous lands of the *Hynhiewtrep* people, as well as wide occurrences in our folklores are now well documented. We should follow-up on the works of the self-trained renowned speleologist and novelist, Brian Daly Kharpran, the founder of 'Meghalaya Adventurers' Association. Kharpran has also been mentioned in the Prime Minister's *Mann Ki Baat* programme.

There is a genuine permanent outsider-settler of Shillong city named Paplu Chanda. He also happens to be a Bengali gentleman and a Person with Disabilities (PWDs). Almost every single day from the early morning hours onwards, he is a regular sight just opposite the gates of Nazareth Hospital, Laitumkhrah. He does not beg, borrow or steal; or even wait for government assistance. He chooses to work for his livelihood, i.e., sell newspapers of prominent languages of Shillong city. Interestingly, his spoken Khasi has minimal

or zero influence of his mother tongue. Like most street-smart small business owners, he can converse in over 10 dialects and languages. Paplu is a perfect pick-me-up for someone who feels down and a lesson for the arrogant. The sight of Paplu working hard smilingly, uplifts or humbles one automatically.

Another story is of the genuine permanent outsider-settler of Shillong city, the Sindhi philanthropist-entrepreneur Jiwat "Bablu" Vaswani. Unlike most ethnicities of India, the non-Muslim Sindhi community may find a mention in our National Anthem but have no homeland to call their own. Jiwat and his family and community call these verdant hills their home. He happens to have a deep passion for our natural environment. In the pre-COVID lockdown days and perhaps even till date, being a non-indigenous businessman he faces (d) his share of trolling and nasty remarks from the internet *khilawats* (keyboard warriors). Today, what speaks for him are his philanthropic works featured on social media platforms. And also his latest recognition from the progressive *Hynhiewtrep* community (Dorbar Shnong) of Nongrim Hills, Shillong. In general, conversations among the indigenous *aam aadmi* in public transport that mention him, usually run thus, *"U Bah Babloo Vaswani, u dei u brieu ba bha shisha (Jiwat) Babloo Vaswani is truly a good man!"*

For any indigenous tribal of Meghalaya, is it difficult to forget the inspirational and motivational non-indigenous teachers of our schools and colleges? They happen(ed) to be Anglo *Hynhiewtrep* *A'chik* Indians, Assamese, Bengali, Hindi-speakers, Kanada (usually Mangalorean Catholics), Malayali, Nepali, Tamil, Telugu-speakers and, even from the trading (vya-pari) community of Marwari, Punjabi Sikhs and other ethnicities.

There are quite a few stories out there, of inspirational people, building Hope while also making an honest living. We need to hear and read more of such good human beings from the Garo Hills too. Why should it only be about Chief Ministers from Garo Hills lasting a full-term of five years? Or say, the latest young, dynamic and rooted in ground realities Ada

Conrad Sangma, on his way to be the first CM to complete two full-terms of consecutive 10 years? Or how the *A'chik* people are politically very intelligent as compared to the *Hynhiewtrep* people?

Hope: the last value/vice that came out of the Pandora's Box of Greek mythology; hope for a better future for our Gen Z and Gen Alpha, in our one single Mother Earth (*Mei/Bei Ram-ew*). Yes, the physical land is always there and is dear to most indigenous communities. What matters most are the human beings living on it. We should thank heaven and humanity for good people in our midst. Else, like the heavy metal album of Megadeth of 1992, we can all start the countdown to extinction with a symphony of destruction. And end up extinct like the dinosaurs, n-th-XL in size but tiny-brained with enormous volumes of burps and farts.

There are published scientific works that claim that about 65 million years ago, burps and farts of dinosaurs contributed to global warming and eventually their extinction. The exhaled gas of Carbon Dioxide is a Green-House Gas or GHG, responsible for depletion of the Ozone layer of our atmosphere. Try watching the Jurassic Park and Jurassic World movies, the first one released in 1993 and the latest one in 2025.

Well, being in a Christian-majority state, maybe, just maybe, we can all say our last prayers and look forward to the Wrath of God, all fire and brimstones and, end up like the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. It may be noted that most Indians do not have the means and mind-set to migrate to the English-speaking developed countries of the world; no matter what the Taapee Pannu character did, with help from the Shah Rukh Khan character, in the Bollywood film *Dunki* (2023). Nor join-up with the tech billionaires in their quest to colonise the latest "Scramble for Africa" of the planet Mars and Space.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to the editors and the on-ground print and electronic media journalists for bringing stories of hope, perseverance and passion to the regular readers and watchers.

Living on, on a ray of hope and a wing of prayer.

(Disclaimer: Views expressed are strictly personal. Email: dauni.roising@gmail.com)

NDA has successfully exploited insecurity over SIR in Bihar Assembly Polls

INDIA Bloc has to introspect while fighting for fair elections

By Nilotpal Basu

The Bihar assembly election is a watershed in the electoral history of our country. Conducted against the backdrop of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) announced on June 25, it laid out a new set of ground rules for adult franchise.

The debates in the Constituent Assembly, which framed the Constitution, had envisaged a democracy which was to be 'by the people, for the people and of the people'. Electoral democracy was its cornerstone. It was premised on the legacy of the freedom struggle which underpinned the role of the citizen as its bedrock. Every Indian citizen was to have one vote, regardless of caste, creed, language, culture and origin. In order to hold the arrangement together, the Election Commission of India (ECI) was empowered as a truly powerful and independent constitutional entity.

The ECI was supposed to enable the citizens in deciding the future of the Indian democracy and its political system, by providing for two simple principles. Firstly, the electoral rolls will be drawn up by the machinery of the ECI itself without leaving it to the whims and fancies of political parties or governments. Therefore, it was incumbent on the ECI for the publication of the final electoral rolls and the individual citizen was not burdened with it. Secondly, though it was implied that Indian citizens would be appearing in the electoral roll as voters, the ECI was kept out of the task of determining citizenship. If any controversy arose, it was to be resolved in consultation with the Home Ministry.

For the first time, the SIR in Bihar deviated from these two basics. The SIR presumed that the voters would have to ensure their entry into the electoral roll by filling up an application form and even if there was no controversy, they would have to produce documents as prescribed by the ECI for eligibility to vote. This also interlinked the second principle as the documents prescribed by the ECI uncannily resembled the requirements of a National Register of Citizenship (NRC), as was envisaged by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

By this, the entire controversy over citizenship which had exploded earlier and remained stalled because of vexed questions, was being re-enacted through the backdoor. This led to huge protests in Bihar and the debate raged across the country. The principal problem was that there was no single document officially recognised for citizenship. The proposed SIR was implicitly rekindling the trauma over Partition. On close questioning, the ECI was denying the connection between citizenship and the finalisation of electoral rolls. But in effect, the changed focus was all too evident.

Therefore, sometime into the exercise, it became apparent that this was not an exercise to rectify errors of the electoral rolls, but one of mass exclusion and disenfranchisement. The draft electoral rolls and its final form has further intensified the controversy and the reduction in the number of voters is all too evident. The Constitutional underpinnings of the SIR process are yet to be clinched by the Supreme Court. It is obvious that the process led to a great deal of trauma among a large section of the voters. In Bihar, with a high proportion of migrant workers and the extremely short time available, this was bound to happen. The electoral rolls also saw a major increase in the proportion of women voters deleted, as also of those belonging to minority religions in the border districts.

Along with the SIR, the obvious question about the role of the ECI also raised major concerns. The conduct of the ECI made it amply clear that apart from ineptitude and lack of transparency, there was a clear bias to benefit the ruling party. This was evident in the manner in which the ECI monitored

the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The BJP-JD(U) government initiated the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, just before the elections were announced, crediting Rs. 10,000 each to over one crore women. This large-scale direct benefit, in which Rs. 14,000 crores were immediately disbursed was too close to the election and failed to insulate voters' choice from this act of a new kind of 'state clientelism'. This was distinctly different from the past when poor voters were clients of individual parties, and candidates dictating overall political choice.

Apart from this, free power for up to 125 units, the tripling of social security pensions, and the creation of one crore jobs, were also promises made by the ruling alliance. Of course, such commitments were contrary to what Prime Minister Modi had been saying about 'revdi' politics and its impact on the future economic situation. Already, questions are being raised about re-drawing the MCC to include a reasonable gap between such announcements and the actual holding of elections. It is clear that such efforts actually diverted attention away from the long-term wellbeing of the people, but aimed to shore up public perception, particularly among those who were most distressed.

The election results have shown that paradoxically, while number of women voters have gone down, they have voted in comparatively much larger numbers and with more decisive impact on the final outcome. This trend had been emerging even earlier but, combined with SIR and the absence of a relatively bigger number of male migrant workers, it has been further amplified. The disconnect from the actual issues of development is all the more evident, that despite Bihar lagging behind most of the major Indian states in terms of wage, income, employment, education, health and other social indicators, the corporate media in order to explain the results and the major victory of the ruling alliance was asserting that this was due to the record of development of Nitish Kumar's government.

The fact remains that the ruling alliance had consolidated the caste-communal impact accentuated by the sense of insecurity generated by the SIR in large sections of the people who are distressed and vulnerable. The so called 'vote management', a feature attributed to Amit Shah, has led to decimation of small parties and independent candidates, and the vote they got completely gravitating towards the ruling alliance. Some of the smaller parties, though not making a major impact in terms of seats, but their percentage votes have adversely impacted the opposition. The high-profile campaign of Prashant Kishore's Jan Suraj Party, or even the AIMIM in Seemanchal, are cases in point.

Everything said and done, there is also much to introspect for the parties aligned with the INDIA Bloc. While there is no doubt that there were several issues which affected the lives and livelihoods of the people, the opposition failed to galvanize the public opinion on them, to ensure that the ruling alliance could be pushed back. There are several factors which need to be studied more deeply and addressed collectively. The Left PM, had worked tirelessly and had received substantial votes. But that has not been translated into the number of their Assembly representation. The future lies in the re-dedication to invigorating people's struggles on issues that they face and the relentless political campaign against the Hindutva-corporate invasion with official complicity and the overall neo-fascist ways. The battle for a fair electoral system and a just democracy demands such a consistent struggle. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Urgent Concern Over Rampant and Systemic Noise Pollution in Shillong

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I wish to draw urgent attention to the growing and deeply troubling issue of noise pollution caused by late-night celebrations—be it weddings, birthdays, or other events—across Shillong. In recent weeks, some localities have witnessed a rise in such disturbances, including a recent incident where a wedding party continued with loud music and DJ sets well past midnight, lasting until 3 a.m. in a particular area. Such unchecked high-decibel noise is not only a violation of legal norms but also an outright assault on the peace, health, and well-being of residents.

What is most distressing is the severe impact these disturbances have on children, senior citizens, and students. At a time when many students are preparing for their final examinations, prolonged late-night noise robs them of rest, focus, and a calm environment essential for their studies. Likewise, elderly residents and infants—who are particularly sensitive to loud and continuous sound—bear the brunt of these violations.

These recurring incidents raise serious questions: Why do the Dorbar Shnong, the Dorbar Dong, and even the District Administration consistently fail to intervene in time? When wedding

celebrations blatantly flout noise regulations, it points to a worrying reluctance to enforce existing laws, resulting in a systemic failure to protect public peace.

While festivities and cultural celebrations are important to our society, they cannot override the fundamental right of citizens to a peaceful night's rest. Shillong cannot aspire to be an educationally progressive city if such persistent disturbances are ignored in our neighbourhoods.

It is worth noting that this problem of lax enforcement is not limited to wedding celebrations alone; even major public events in recent times have shown a similar disregard for noise restrictions. This recurring pattern only reinforces the urgent need for authorities to take decisive, consistent action throughout the year. And we must ask ourselves a simple yet crucial question: does the rule of law truly prevail in these hills?

I sincerely hope the concerned authorities take immediate steps to curb these violations and ensure strict compliance with established noise control laws across all localities.

Yours etc.,
P Majaw,
Shillong-1

A horrific accident

Editor,

When I first saw the video of the gruesome accident that took place at NEHU Campus, Shillong that was circulated on social media I thought it was AI generated.

The intensity with which the vehicle hit the two girls was such that it gave the chills to anyone who saw it. If only this was the work of technology. However tragically, it was but a fellow human being who was in an inebriated condition ran his vehicle on the two girls on that fateful evening. The law must take its course and the man behind the wheel must be punished and put behind bars. I cannot begin to imagine the condition of the girls who have suffered this tragedy for no fault of theirs.

Accident is normally understood as an event or a situation that takes place by chance and unintentionally but this time the accident was one inflicted by an adult who was fully aware of his condition and a man who knows well that he was breaking the law. This tragic incident cannot be dismissed as a mere accident because driving under the influence of alcohol is neither unforeseen nor unintentional. The man has violated the law and he knowingly endangers not only his own life but the lives of every pedestrian and fellow drivers around him. The driver must be severely punished. The justice system is expected to ensure that such blatant negligence is not treated lightly, especially when the victims are still battling for survival.

No words can adequately describe the anguish of the family members of the two girls. One moment their daughters were walking with in what should have been the safety of a university campus; the next, they were being rushed to the hospital

with injuries that no parent should ever have to witness. It is even more painful for them to come to terms with the fact that their daughters did nothing wrong but simply became victims of someone else's irresponsibility. The parents' emotional suffering is immeasurable.

As the two young girls continue to fight for their lives in critical condition, we pray for their recovery though the trauma of this accident will be beyond the visible injuries. They may need months or even years of treatment and counselling. Their dreams, routines, and aspirations have been abruptly interrupted by one thoughtless act of another person. What was once a normal evening for them has now become a defining moment they never asked for.

This incident is a reminder that irresponsible behaviour on the road can change lives in an instant. There is a need for stricter enforcement of drunk-driving laws, accountability for offenders, and a collective societal intolerance towards such recklessness. While the accident demands empathy for the girls who are battling for their lives the law must be rigorous and it must act as a deterrent so that such tragedies do not repeat in the future.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Bangladesh drifts towards fundamentalism

Editor,

The editorial "Hasina, India" (ST November 19, 2025)

made interesting reading. A death sentence from Bangladesh International Crime Tribunal has made Sheikh Hasina's return to Dhaka impossible for now and with the Awami League banned from political activity, the field is left open to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. Under the interim chief Muhammad Yunus, Dhaka has drifted closer to Islamabad since August 2024 with the fundamentalist groups emboldened. Deep Halder the author of 'Inshallah Bangladesh' on Bangladesh's drift from 1971 argues that Jamaat is becoming the de facto system in Dhaka, reversing the secular ideals of 1971.

The Bangladesh National Party is widely expected to come to power in 2026. Halder warns India must hope for a "new BNP" since the 2001 BNP-Jamaat coalition period saw massacres of Hindus and widespread violence. The judicial commissions documented atrocities, including villages where women were raped repeatedly in a single night. India fears a repeat of the BNP-Jamaat era, which was hostile to Indian interests. The author of 'Inshallah Bangladesh' stresses that while India must do business with whoever comes to power given the fact remains that BNP's historic stance has not been pro-India. The rise of Jamaat represents a strategic and security challenge for India, beyond electoral politics.

For nearly 15 years, Sheikh Hasina's government acted as a firewall against ISI influence in Bangladesh. She cracked down on cross-

border insurgent camps, kept Dhaka aligned with Delhi's security concerns. Her presence meant Pakistan's intelligence networks had limited room to manoeuvre through Bangladesh. Now with Hasina out of Dhaka and Awami League banned, the political field is now open to the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami who have been historically close to Islamabad. Jamaat's resurgence, coupled with open calls for Hindu genocide, signals a fundamentalist tilt. This creates fertile ground for ISI to re-establish networks, whether through political patronage, madrasah funding or covert logistics.

The implications for India are that the 4000 Kms India-Bangladesh borders could again become porous for insurgent groups in the Northeast. Violence against Hindus in Bangladesh weakens India's moral leverage and creates refugee pressures. Dhaka drifting towards Islamabad undermines India's eastern flank, complicating its Bay of Bengal Strategy. The core takeaway is that Hasina's absence removes a strategic guarantee. India now faces a dual challenge – Hard security – preventing ISI-backed networks from re-entering Bangladesh. Soft power – rebuilding civic trust and pluralist narratives in the region are needed to counter fundamentalist drift.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Air travel may go supersonic

An experimental supersonic aircraft called the X-59 took to the skies for the first time in October.

The plane lifted off from Skunk Works, the famed research and development facility in California owned by aerospace giant Lockheed Martin. It cruised for about an hour, before landing at Edwards Air Force Base 85 miles (136km) away.

Nasa's X-59 is designed to test technology for quiet supersonic flight. In the US, loud sonic booms led to a five-decade ban on non-military supersonic aircraft flying over land.

The ban was lifted this year by the US president Donald Trump, via an executive order. In the UK, supersonic flight over land needs to be specifically approved by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), which functions independently of government.

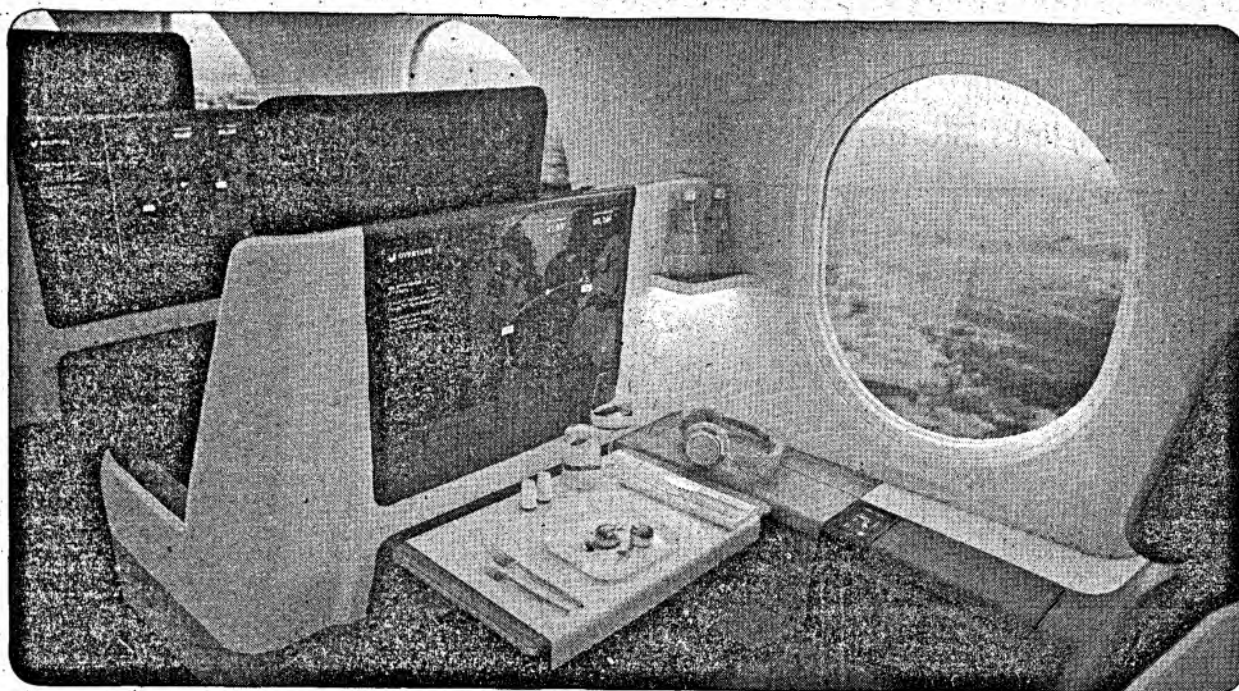
The X-59 aims to turn sonic booms into a quieter "sonic thump". So if this proves possible, how likely is it that we will see a return to commercial supersonic air travel - not seen since the Concorde passenger jet was retired in 2003? Beginning in the 1950s, the race to achieve commercial supersonic travel was a long and technically challenging one.

Teams from the UK and France, consisting of the companies British Aircraft Corporation and Aerospaiale, the US (Boeing) and the Soviet Union (Tupolev) worked on three aircraft to meet this challenge.

Out of these three competing designs only two: Concorde (UK and France) and the Tupolev TU-144 (Soviet Union) produced prototype aircraft and follow-on planes that entered commercial operation.

In the US, the Boeing 2707 aircraft would have carried between 250-300 passengers, three times that of Concorde, and would have done so at a higher cruise speed. However, rising costs, uncertainty about the market for flights and concerns about noise led to the cancellation of the American plane in 1971.

The Soviet TU-144 took to the skies first, on December 31, 1968, while Concorde's first flight took place in March 1969. The service life of the TU-144 was relatively short, however, lasting from 1975



to 1983.

It initially carried mail, in preparation for passenger services which began in November 1977. However, safety incidents and concern about the economic viability of the plane led to these flights were cancelled in June 1978.

Once passenger flights had been discontinued, the then-Soviet airline Aeroflot operated an updated variant, called the TU-144D, on freight-only services.

The withdrawal from service of the TU-144 left Concorde as the only operating commercial supersonic passenger aircraft.

As the standard bearer for supersonic travel, Concorde carried passengers from London and Paris to destinations such as New York, Washington, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City. But its routes were limited by the US ban on non-military supersonic aircraft flying over land.

The plane operated successfully until July 2000, when Air France flight 4590 crashed shortly after take-off, killing 109 passengers and four people on the ground. Flights by both British Airways and Air France were suspended after the crash, returning only in November 2001. But a lack of confidence and other

factors led to the retirement from service of Concorde in 2003.

But within 13 years of the withdrawal of Concorde there was fresh impetus for supersonic travel. In 2016, Nasa launched the Quiet Supersonic Technology (Quesst) project.

The aim of Quesst is to investigate aircraft designs which would reduce the sonic boom typically associated with supersonic flight. The centrepiece of the Quesst project is the X-59 an experimental aircraft built by Lockheed Martin at its experimental Skunk Works site in California.

Flying experiment

The X-59 has been designed, manufactured and flown to test both the theories and assumptions relating to low boom technology and to demonstrate that such an aircraft can operate over land without causing disruption on the ground.

The aircraft will act as a flying experiment, collecting data from its test flights which will be disseminated within the aerospace community. This will support current efforts by the companies Boom Supersonic and Spike Aerospace, both of which are proposing their own supersonic aircraft.

So how does the X-59 achieve this? The short answer is in its configuration. The aircraft design has been reached after detailed design work both through extensive computer simulations and through the use of a wind tunnel test programme.

The final configuration which has been reached in effect reshapes the shockwaves produced during supersonic flight, changing the associated boom to a quieter sound. As a result, however, the X-59 does not resemble any conventional aircraft flying today.

The unusual design of the X-59 prevents the shock waves generated at supersonic speed from merging (which would produce the loud boom).

The long, thin tapered nose and other features of the aircraft will mitigate against this by producing a "quieter" boom. This nose, resembling a spear, means that the cockpit for the pilot is located almost halfway down the length of the aircraft.

Its location means that a conventional cockpit window, as seen on all aircraft, is not possible. Consequently, a number of high-resolution cameras and monitors allow the pilot to fly the aircraft and see what is

going on outside.

The X-59 will provide useful flight data on supersonic boom mitigation, which could be applied to future aircraft.

But even when boom mitigation has been addressed, there are still a number of challenges which need to be overcome in order for a new generation of supersonic aircraft to enter service.

A clear and well-developed business case will be needed, taking into account the potential customer

"The X-59 aims to turn sonic booms into a quieter 'sonic thump'. So if this proves possible, how likely is it that we will see a return to commercial supersonic air travel - not seen since the Concorde passenger jet was retired in 2003? Beginning in the 1950s, the race to achieve commercial supersonic travel was a long and technically challenging one

volume and number of aircraft required. The economics will need to be worked out, such as how much the aircraft costs to operate, its fuel costs and the price of maintenance.

There will also be environmental issues to consider, such as the fuel efficiency of new propulsion systems that can operate for long times under supersonic conditions.

If these challenges can't be overcome, the rebirth of commercial supersonic travel might remain a distant dream. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 23, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Sun on your solar return chart and it will bring amazing benefits. You need to exercise some control over your dominating nature. Otherwise, your work can get stuck. Your financial position is going to be strong. And favorable conditions will be created in business and trade. You will also undertake a major expansion in your business. Money inflow be continuous but do not lend money to anyone. Decisions related to property matters will be in your favor. You will undertake lot of business-related trips. Those who are in politics or media will too do well. Your name and fame will rise.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be an amazing week for you. Your destiny will have something good in store for you. Planets are favoring you a lot. Good news related to progress will be all around. You will be getting good job offers. You can also start a new business venture in collaboration or partnership. Good financial gains are indicated. You will also make plans to buy a new vehicle or property. Your life will be on right track. Peace and harmony will prevail in family ties. Students will focus on their goals. Concentration will be high. You will also have plans to get married. You will also get involved in religion, rituals, spirituality etc. You will make best use of your abilities and potential. And will get praise for your deeds.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) It is going to be a very favorable week for you. You will be financially rewarded for your efforts. The placements of planets will strengthen the way for fate betterment. You will have more opportunities to rise in your work. You will be able to complete it for a long time. You will be blessed with good health, and your spirits will be high. Enemies and opponents will try to dominate but they will not be able to succeed in harming you or spoil your work. There will be an increase in respect and recognition in society. People will respect and acknowledge you as an influential person. A feeling of spirituality and inclination towards religious work and offering will flare in the heart. There will be joy and cheer in family relations.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You will have to face challenges at every step. But you will prove equal as the task. Financial struggles and adjustments will continue. Money will come in after putting in a lot of effort. Take proper care of your health. You will defeat your enemies with courage, wisdom and cleverness. Your work will start getting completed. You may sign some agreements to bring an element of newness into your work. The results of job-related tests, departmental tests, competitive tests will favour you. You will use this trick in your family. Your family members will support you in the most demanding circumstances. You will enjoy a good time with them. Loved ones will come closer to each other.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is a very favorable time. You will receive financial opportunities and there are chances of progress in your job/work. You will take your work seriously and receive handsome rewards for it. You will use your capabilities and capacities to their fullest. You will also receive good news regarding progress of your children. Your respect and dignity will increase. Your good deeds and acts will spread like wildfire. You will also take initial steps in the expansion of your work. And achieve maximum level of success. Your colleagues will help you in your work. You will receive blessings from your elders. Religious activities will keep you involved. Money inflow will be continuous.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) You will be having lot of opportunities. You will rise fast in your work field. You will also have monetary gains and profits from your work. Your intelligence and work potential. You will make a lot of money. There are chances of promotion or increment in your job. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. You will also receive good news related to the education, career or marriage of your child. You will take care of elders. Love birds will have a wonderful time. You may do some deed because of which your fame and popularity will spread far and wide.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) It is going to be a week full of accomplishments. If we talk about fate, it is a very favorable time for you. You will take suitable and important decisions in business. Many new policies will be implemented. Money inflow will be

continuous. There are chances of promotions in job/work. But hard work and diligence must be put into completion of tasks. Placements of Jupiter will help in children's education and career. New romantic relations leading to marriage are indicated. There will be an increase in your respect, honour, reputation and prestige. The relationship between husband and wife will be cordial. Take special care of food and drink etc. Auspicious functions will take place.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) It is a great time to fulfill your dreams. Conditions at work will be good. You will get opportunities to rise in your life. You will also face challenges at every step with confidence. You will work very hard and put in lot of effort into business. You will maintain a perfect balance between your personal and professional life. You will start taking your relationship seriously. You will also listen to views of others. There will be an increase in your fame and self-respect. Keep an eye on your mood. Everyone will appreciate your kindness and politeness at work.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) You will see a major improvement in your fortunes. Your efforts will also start getting due results. The clouds of crisis will also dissipate. You will work very hard and get good results too. Money will come in large amounts. You will have monetary gains. In case of romantic ties, situations are turning in your favor. The results of tests given for a job, competitive exams and interviews will also favor you a lot. You will continue to work on your duties without bothering criticisms.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) It is a great time for you. Your fortunes will rise sky high. Your boss and superiors will be satisfied with your work. Your colleagues will also help you in your work. You will reap monetary benefits. Students will focus on studies. Students who are pursuing career-oriented courses will get success. You will spend time on entertainment, amusement and fun. Your spouse/partner will keep you happy. You will also get the blessings and guidance of a saint or a holy man. Your relatives will stand by you in your difficult times. You will get support of your family members. You will deal with difficult situations with patience and good sense.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You will be feeling a lot better and will spend quality time with your closed ones. You will be flexible in your outlook and will win confidence and support of your family members. You will work selflessly and expand your circle of friends. You will be able to convince your officers with your intelligence and hard work everybody will admire your intelligence and capability. Do yoga and meditation. It will enhance your memory and make you feel good. You will get a chance to meet an influential person which will open the doors of progress for you. So, you should grab this opportunity with both hands.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) You will make a new beginning in your life. You will work very hard in your business. There will be opportunities to rise in your professional work too. You will make effort to remove the obstacles in family relationships. There will be good bonding between husband and wife. Your enemies and foes will be active. You will be busy with spiritual, religious and special work. You will be successful in trading and commission work. Your work will get completed with the blessings of God. Be vigilant about your diet, exercise, walking etc. Auspicious functions will take place in your house.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) You will face challenges with ease. And bask in glory of your achievements. Your health will be much better, and you will remain busy with your work. You will fulfill your objectives at work. Your colleagues will be jealous of you, but it will not stop you from making progress. You will be able to increase your earnings. You will also work towards your objective with total dedication. You will give preference to your career over your love life. You will feel that even in adverse circumstances your entire family will be standing with you. Marital relations will be pleasant. Keep a watch on the health of elders and seniors in the family. Disputes regarding division of property will get resolved with patience and tact. It will make everyone happy and satisfied.

Is racism more acceptable in UK?

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has called on Nigel Farage to address allegations of racism in Reform UK, and antisemitic and xenophobic comments and bullying allegedly made by Farage while he was at school. Farage has denied the accusations.

A few weeks before the allegations about Farage emerged, Reform MP Sarah Pochin was accused of racism after saying that it "drives me mad when I see adverts full of black people, full of Asian people".

Farage said while Pochin's comments were "ugly", they did not amount to racism, explaining: "If I thought that the intention behind it was racist, I would have taken a lot more action than I have to date. And that is because I don't." This reaction suggests that, to some extent, it is still a taboo to be seen as racist. But is this taboo losing its strength? As scholars of the social psychology of racism, we think so.

In a recent interview, health secretary Wes Streeting noted that rising racism faced by NHS staff was similar to the "ugly" racism of the 1970s and 80s in the UK.

Streeting made the worrying claim it had now become "socially acceptable to be racist". Hate crime statistics and other reports support this idea and suggest racism is widespread. Quotes in news reports have echoed the idea that the present climate is reminiscent of overt and violent racism of the recent past.

Social psychologists have shown that people generally do not want to come across as prejudiced. Academic Michael Billig describes this as the "norm against prejudice".

The overtness of racism and its social acceptability are intertwined. Subtle or hidden racism, by its nature, is hard to call out and easy to deny, so in effect becomes socially acceptable in many situations. Overt racism, on the other hand, breaches common understandings - norms - that racism is wrong.

Anti-immigration

Much research has shown how talk about restricting migration is regularly argued to be prejudiced or racist. Historically, calls for restricting migrants, in the UK at least, have been about excluding ethnic and racial outgroups like Jews, black and brown people or eastern Europeans.

However, because of the norm against prejudice, people typically



(Representational photo)

do not offer openly derogatory descriptions of migrants, such as that they are sexual deviants, lazy, or are inferior to the resident population. However, some high-profile figures and their supporters are, arguably, increasingly comfortable doing so.

In 2011, scholar Frank Reeves examined political discourse about race in the House of Commons in the context of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act. His research showed how MPs would frame calls for stricter migration in terms of problematic race relations between black and "resident" or white populations, instead of saying anything about the supposed superiority of white people.

Similar findings are noted across parliaments in the UK, Australia and Europe, where immigration controls are routinely argued for and justified in terms that do not make racism explicit.

But the current situation suggests this is changing. Anti-migrant protests and demonstrations in the UK show that migrants and refugees are being directly demonised, often from a racist, religious or ethno-nationalist viewpoint. This has included calls to deport asylum seekers and migrants, irrespective of their legal status in the UK, and demonising Islam and cultures that are allegedly not "British".

Weakening norms

In the last few months, overt anti-migrant racism targeting non-white people has become public around the world, as seen in the riots and racist attacks in Ireland, Australia and the Netherlands. In the UK, attacks on mosques and migrant properties are not unheard of.

In September 2025, the UK saw its largest ever far-right march, the

"Unite the Kingdom" rally. Several of the speakers openly called for the removal of migrants or foreigners in the UK, and to transform it into a Christian nation. Such claims could readily be seen as racist.

But for many others on the march, the norm against prejudice appeared to be in operation. When interviewed, people largely gave specific reasons for why they had attended these protests or, to them, why it was okay (and perhaps necessary) to protest:

Racism as a political tool

Accusations of racism are still taboo and treated as unfair labelling. But psychology professor Kevin Durrheim and colleagues have shown how the norm against prejudice is weakening in rightwing populist spaces.

The researchers illustrated this point with a comment from a supporter of Farage during the UKIP years: "I see uncontrolled immigration when I look around. If that makes me racist then so be it. I live in a predominantly racist country (many people share my view) so be it. If you want to call me a racist then go ahead, but please don't try to tell me up is down and down is up." Other research shows that radical right politicians sometimes deal with accusations that they are racist by embracing it and using it to present themselves and their supporters as targets.

It is not a precondition for the rise of the far right that norms against prejudice are weakened, but it does make it harder to challenge. If it is no longer a problem to be viewed as prejudiced, then intimidating marginalised others and calling for deportations becomes easier. (*The Conversation*)

Psychology can change the way food tastes; here's how to use it to make most of your meals

Ever eaten while doom-scrolling and realised you barely tasted anything? Or found your favourite pasta strangely bland after a stressful meeting, yet somehow delicious on a relaxed Saturday evening?

We often think taste comes from ingredients and cooking techniques. But taste isn't just on the plate. Our emotions, expectations - even the people sitting with us - can shape how food tastes.

This mind-food connection sits at the heart of gastrophysics, a field that studies how our senses, brain and mental states shape our eating experience.

Once we know how this works, we can start using simple psychological shifts to make everyday meals taste richer, brighter and more satisfying, without changing a single ingredient.

Mindful eating means paying attention to each bite; noticing flavours, textures, aromas and the sensations in our body as we eat.

But most of us don't eat like this. We eat while scrolling, replying to messages or watching Netflix in the background.

Our attention gets divided, our senses dull and we go into "autopilot" mode.

We chew quickly, swallow automatically and miss the subtle flavours and signals from our body telling us we are full. We also lose touch with our body's hunger cues, which makes overeating more likely.

Normally, rising levels of the "hunger hormone" ghrelin and gentle stomach contractions alert us it's time to eat. But distraction makes those messages easier to ignore.

Essentially, our body also has a sophisticated system to tell us to stop. As we eat, our stomach stretches, sending "fullness" signals to the

brain.

At the same time, hormones such as leptin and cholecystokinin are released, creating a feeling of satiety that slowly builds over the course of a meal.

When we're distracted, we may miss this delicate hormonal conversation. A 2011 study found that people who played a computer game during lunch felt less full afterwards, remembered less about their meal and snacked more later.

Distraction also weakens the memory of eating - and when the brain forgets food, it will seek more food sooner. Appetite, therefore, isn't just about biology. It's shaped by our attention and memory too.

Slowing down, on the other hand, improves our sensory awareness. Suddenly, a tomato isn't just "tomato-y", it becomes sweet yet tangy, juicy yet firm.

Chocolate doesn't just "taste nice", it melts slowly, bitter at first, then rich and velvety. Mindfulness acts like turning up the volume on our taste buds.

Mood as a flavour enhancer

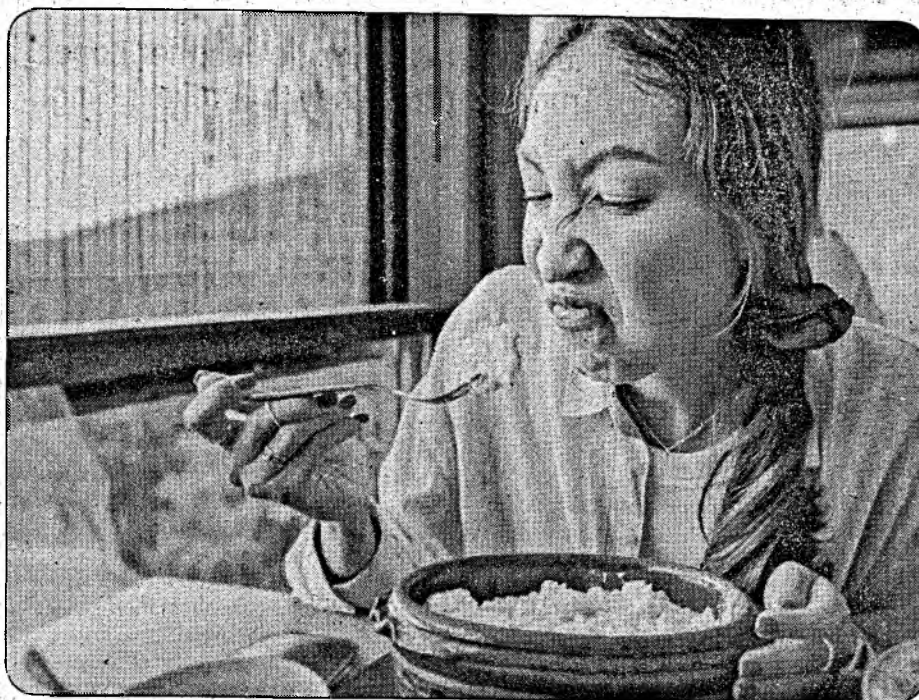
Negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and frustration can dull our sensitivity to pleasant flavours. When we're tense, our body prioritises survival, not enjoyment.

Stress hormones narrow our attention, and pleasure-based functions such as flavour appreciation get pushed aside.

That's why food can taste flat when we're upset.

In one experiment, published in 2021, participants who watched a horror movie felt more anxious and rated juice as less sweet than those who watched a comedy or documentary film.

The participants who



watched the horror movie even drank more juice than the others - possibly trying to "find" the sweetness their brain was suppressing.

These effects may be linked to physiological changes, as anxiety can influence autonomic nervous system activity and hormone levels that affect taste perception and consumption.

When we feel calm, safe and socially connected, the opposite happens.

Our brain releases feel-good chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin, and food tastes better. Think of how amazing your favourite food tastes when you're laughing with friends or eating at a festival.

So if dinner suddenly tastes "off", the recipe might be fine, your nervous system may just be in a different state.

Next time you've had a heavy day, try pausing for five minutes before eating. Play soft music, take a few deep breaths, or eat with someone who makes you feel

relaxed.

Food is what you think

Before we even taste food, our brain forms predictions about what it should taste like. And those expectations shape what we actually taste.

Visual cues do a lot of this work. We expect red foods to be sweet, green foods to feel bitter or sour, and golden-crisp foods to crunch.

The sound of a crisp bite sends a signal to the brain that the food is fresh and satisfying.

Presentation matters too. Fancy plating isn't just for Instagram. It changes taste perception.

In a 2024 study, the shape, size, and colour of the plate shifted how appealing a dessert looked.

The features of the plate also affected how much people thought it was worth, and even how modern or traditional it felt.

Black plates made desserts seem more premium and exciting, while white plates

made them feel more familiar and understated.

Even the weight of cutlery changes our experience. Heavier cutlery gives the impression that the food is premium.

Our sense of smell is another factor

When people had their noses blocked with nose clips for an experiment, a sweet drink tasted less intense and less satisfying, showing how aroma shapes the full flavour experience. This is exactly why food feels bland when we have a cold or a blocked nose.

So what does all this mean for your next meal?

It means you have more power than you think. Try eating something you love from a nice plate. Notice the colours.

We don't have to wait for a chef's touch. With a little psychology, we can make everyday meals more satisfying and enjoyable. (The Conversation)

India a pioneer in living donor liver transplantation

World-class infrastructure, unique surgical expertise, and robust regulation have driven the number of liver donor liver transplantation (LDLT) in India, said experts here on Saturday.

The experts were speaking at the Annual Conference of The Liver Transplantation Society of India (LTSICON 2025) - held from November 20 to 23, in the national capital.

According to data from the Global Observatory on Organ Donation and Transplantation (GODT) and the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO), India performed around 5,000 liver transplants in 2024.

The country has more than 200 active liver transplant centres across the country.

"India's liver transplant ecosystem represents the perfect harmony between science, ethics, and humanity. Every success story here is the result of rigorous protocols, a transparent donor

evaluation system, and the commitment of multidisciplinary teams who treat every case like family.

What makes India truly special is not just the number of transplants we perform, but the values that guide our process - compassion, accountability, and excellence," said Dr. Abhideep Chaudhary, President-Elect of the Liver Transplantation Society of India (LTSI).

The experts noted that India performs the highest number of living donor liver transplants annually, setting new global benchmarks in terms of success and safety.

Every LDLT conducted in India now follows a stringent, transparent, and legally monitored process, ensuring the safety of both donor and recipient.

The entire system is governed by state and national regulatory bodies. Donors are generally close family members, and each case is scrutinised at multiple levels of medical, psychological, and ethical evaluation before approval.

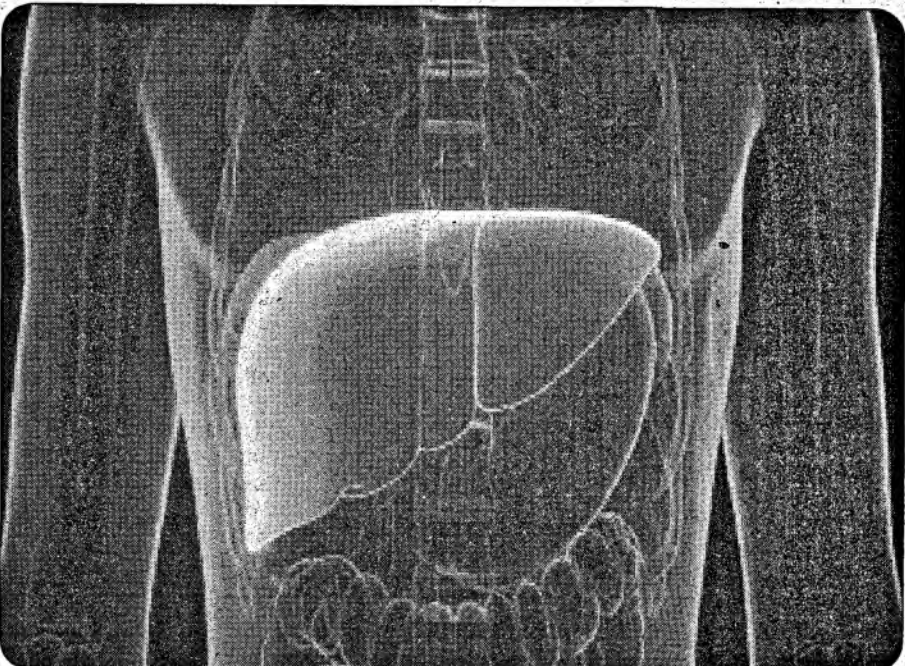
This strict adherence to protocol has helped India achieve one of the highest success rates in the world, often comparable to and sometimes better than many developed nations.

Prof. Mohamed Rela, President of ILDLT, said that exceptional surgical skill with a moral and legal framework that ensures safety for both donor and recipient

"The Indian model of living donor liver transplantation has become a gold standard for the world.

As India continues to lead through innovation and collaboration, we will keep sharing our experiences to enhance global outcomes and make liver transplantation accessible and safe for all," Rela added.

LTSICON 2025 serves as a powerful platform for scientific collaboration and the exchange of ideas. This year's conference will bring together more than a thousand liver transplant specialists, hepatologists, and researchers from over 20 countries. (IANS)



Cry for justice gets louder...

(Contd from P-1) It urged the Meghalaya government to take immediate steps to ensure that the probe is completed.

The HLC said it stands united in grief and indignation as it remembers the local residents who lost their lives in the incident. The organisation described the act as "senseless" and "inhumane," noting that it remains an open wound for the community.

The HLC reiterated its demand that Meghalaya and Assam governments ensure a transparent and independent investigation, make the findings public, and prosecute those responsible. It stressed the need for sincere and sustained efforts to resolve the boundary issue.

As it marked the anniversary, the HLC reaffirmed its solidarity with the people of Mukroh and renewed its commitment to pursuing justice. It urged leaders and institutions to act swiftly and justly, stating that justice and peace must prevail.

Cement firms warn freight hike...

(Contd from P-1) The cement manufacturers also revealed that plants were forced to scale down production, accumulate unsold inventory and absorb significant financial losses, while builders and retailers across the state faced reduced availability of cement.

Although the strike was called off on November 11 following government intervention, the industry has warned that subsequent demands by trucker associations could have severe long-term economic repercussions.

According to them, during post-strike discussions, associations reportedly demanded that the prevailing freight rate be revised upwards from Rs 7 per tonne-kilometre to Rs 9 per tonne-kilometre for both cement and clinker.

The association termed this an "uneconomic demand", noting that companies are already paying approximately 35 per cent above the broader market rate to nearly 80 association-linked trucks operating daily from Lumshnong.

The manufacturers also provided a comparative analysis of the Lumshnong-Bymihait route.

According to them, while general market rates for this route hover around Rs 1,000 per MT, association-linked vehicles are already paid significantly higher at approximately Rs 1,370 per MT. They said if the proposed rate of Rs 9 per tonne-kilometre is implemented, the cost would climb beyond Rs 1,700 per MT—a rise the industry says is not supported by any market-driven rationale.

The manufacturers argued that such a hike would push effective freight charges to nearly 70 per cent higher than what non-association truckers charge for similar distances, thereby rendering logistics costs uncompetitive and difficult to sustain.

The memorandum also included representations from more than 100 cement dealers across Meghalaya, many of whom expressed concern that an increase of this scale would immediately raise retail prices, impacting individual homebuilders, contractors and public works projects.

The association highlighted that as MCTODA is an owners' association, the benefits of a higher rate would be limited to a small group of truck owners, while the wider population would be forced to bear the cost through higher construction prices.

On the regulatory front, the manufacturers referred to provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, suggesting that the government's authority to fix or revise freight rates is limited.

They cautioned that any move to formally notify the Rs 9 per tonne-kilometre rate would require careful legal examination and could face challenges if found inconsistent with statutory limits.

The industry has requested the government to take steps to prevent prolonged disruptions on key transport corridors and to facilitate structured dialogue for all stakeholders, rather than allowing future stoppages to dictate market terms.

Mawlynnong to close for...

(Contd from P-3) shops, stalls and public toilets will remain shut on Sundays.

In its notification, the Dorbar said the decision followed long and careful deliberation. It explained that Sundays in Mawlynnong are devoted to religious services, with most residents attending church for much of the day. Because of this, villagers are unable to extend services or hospitality to visitors, which has often caused inconvenience, especially to elderly tourists.

The Dorbar noted that such situations risk creating dissatisfaction and potentially harming the village's reputation, prompting the need for a clear policy.

The Dorbar clarified that tourists who are already staying in guest houses or homestays during the week and extend their stay until Sunday will not be affected by the closure, and visitors who wish to check in on Sunday nights may still do so.

In both cases, responsibility for hospitality and services will rest entirely with the respective guest house or homestay owners. The Dorbar Shnong has appealed for the cooperation of all concerned as it moves to implement the decision.

Modern crimes no...

(Contd from P-3) to prevent fund movement.

He stated that in some instances, innocent individuals suffer when their accounts are incorrectly frozen, disrupting their livelihoods.

Justice Thangkhiew expressed hope that the training would enable judicial officers to better understand emerging cybercrime trends and the evolving role of courts in handling such cases.

It may be mentioned that the programme, held in collaboration with the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) under the Ministry of Home Affairs, featured technical sessions aimed at strengthening the justice system's response to technology-enabled offences.

Nisheeth Dixit, Advocate and Cyber Law Consultant, delivered detailed sessions on 'Cybercrime and Cyber Laws' and the appreciation, admissibility and handling of electronic evidence.

On the other hand, Deepak Kumar, Senior Cyber Intelligence and Forensics Expert at I4C, presented an overview of the I4C framework, its services and latest trends.

Fisheries min calls...

(Contd from P-3) protection of aquatic ecosystems.

It may be mentioned that the event, which focused on sustainable fisheries, livelihood promotion and ecological conservation, was attended by fish farmers, officials and stakeholders.

17-day expo gets under way...

(Contd from P-3) extensive selection of stylish and modern furniture, home décor items, decorative fountains, and carpets, warm Kashmiri winter wear, shoes, sandals, ornaments, Ayurvedic medicines, a wide range of pickles, and jari buti and much more," the statement said.

Another major attraction is the Food Zone, which offers a wide range of delicious dishes, from authentic Kashmiri cuisine to mouth-watering specialities from various regions.

Marcuse links Sardar Patel's legacy...

(Contd from P-3) Addressing the gathering, he urged the youths to embrace the values of love, unity, peace and brotherhood, while reminding them that just as Sardar Patel shaped India with courage and conviction, today's generation carries the responsibility of strengthening the nation.

Following the minister's remarks, West Garo Hills Deputy Commissioner Vibhor Aggarwal noted that the march symbolised collective responsibility toward national development.

Highlighting the relevance of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat mission, Aggarwal encouraged support for local entrepreneurship, citing local LED bulb manufacturing in the district as an example of grassroots innovation contributing to livelihood generation.

He also expressed confidence that promoting similar initiatives would contribute to a stronger and self-reliant India.

It may be mentioned that the programme commenced at William Point with the ceremonial garlanding of Sardar Patel's portrait.

The march covered the route from William Point through Hawakhana, Tetengkol, Jerusalem, and Babupara, before concluding at DC Park.

Hundreds of youths, government officials, MDC Bernard N. Marak and community leaders walked together.

On the occasion, participants also took the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Pledge, reaffirming their commitment to responsible citizenship.

3-month vigilance awareness...

(Contd from P-3) painting events.

Inter-school and inter-college competitions drew enthusiastic participation from students across several institutions. All participants received prizes and certificates in recognition of their efforts.

In the school category, Aayan Gurung of Seven Set Higher Secondary School secured first place, followed by Laweihaka Dkhar of BK Bajoria Higher Secondary School in second and Deepali Chettri of Army Public School in third.

In the college category, Jonistar Jyrtwa of Synod College took the top position, while Fabian Tyngkaihook Nongkynrih of Shillong Commerce College and Annibaak Kharbani of Synod College placed second and third respectively.

A special vigilance awareness session conducted by an Inspector from the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Shillong Branch, was among the key highlights of the programme. The session laid focus on the importance of ethical conduct, preventive vigilance and collective responsibility in building a corruption-free society.

Shillong Chamber Choir recalls...

(Contd from P-1) When asked how they balance their hectic schedule with having to travel the length and breadth of the country and also manage their families, their answer was: Family comes first.

Over time, the members of the Shillong Chamber Choir have professionalised their functioning. They have an administrative office and someone to manage their operations. They never realised they would travel this far, but they said now they have learnt along the way. They have also inducted other younger singers into the group.

Rishila recalled how, in the past, they never thought of substitutes. This meant, a member running a fever and with a sore throat would take a quick paracetamol to bring the fever down and take some throat lozenges to be able to sing. "That's how tough it was for us in the initial days," she said.

William narrated how the choir was once invited to Scotland to sing for just a man and his son.

"Normally, we would perform for an audience of thousands or a few hundred, and we would appear on stage only when everything was set. But this time, we were performing in this big auditorium in Scotland and for just two people. The son of the Scotsman left halfway through. So, we sang only for the man who invited us here. Our visas were done without any hassle, as officials came all the way to Shillong to get them done. Our air tickets were all done, and all we had to do was board the flight to Scotland and back. That gentleman continues to be our friend," he said.

Other than a vast genre of music, the choir now sings in 40 different languages, depending on where they are performing. When in Russia, they would sing in the Russian language.

Recently, they conducted an oral workshop for over 300 music students in Norway. At the end of the workshop, those students sang the Khasi song composed by the late Neil. "Ko Ri Baied Jongnga."

A member of the audience remarked that she was mesmerised by the train song they performed inside a real train and in many different languages. William said they have sung in Tamil when in Chennai, in Malayalam when in Kerala and so on.

Noted author Jerry Pinto then asked the Choir to sing for the audience. They obliged and sang the chorus of their favourite song, Ko Ri Baied Jongnga."

As always, the Shillong Chamber Choir is a beacon of hope for many young people. The way they have negotiated the twists and turns of life and plodded along with grit and determination after Neil Nongkynrih passed away very suddenly in 2022 and have remained constant in their fervour to live up to his expectations is a story that needs to be told over and over.

Vinay Kumar is new Himachal Cong chief

NEW DELHI, Nov 22: The Congress on Saturday appointed Vinay Kumar as the new president of the Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee, replacing Pratibha Singh.

Kumar was the Deputy Speaker of the Vidhan Sabha and tendered his resignation from the post.

Speaker Kuldeep Pathania accepted his resignation on Saturday. (PTI)

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."
—John F. Kennedy

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 104 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2025

Laws, orphaned labour

BETTER late than never! Labour laws in the country have undergone a comprehensive revision. These would now run on four codes after consolidation of 29 previous laws governing this hugely populated sector. The newly codified laws are effective from November 21, signifying several changes that are of immense benefit to the workforce across the wide and diverse spectrum. Labour unions are not satisfied, though, and are planning protests, though the present reform has been introduced after tripartite talks including government and representatives of industry and trade unions. Such protests are natural; and valid points, if any, must still be addressed. Refining the system is an ongoing process.

India's labour laws, introduced during the British Raj, underwent periodic changes short of any wholesale reform. These laws, nearly a century old, remained in place for most part. The three-term Modi government has not been able to majorly reform any sector other than implementing the market reform through GST. This step, however, proved to be a money-spinner for the national economy. For every purchase done in the market, the government gets a cut. This is also thanks to the previous UPA government that had conceived the smart system but failed to take it forward due to resistance from the BJP and others in the Rajya Sabha. The Modi government attempted agricultural reforms, but cut and ran due to protests from farmer lobbies. It introduced education sector reforms in the form of the National Education Policy 2020, which gained attention mostly for its alleged "attempt to saffronize" the system. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, implemented last year, was less inspiring, considering the large array of issues plaguing the policing system. The government is reticent about the much-needed reforms in several sectors, including to the justice-dispensation system, even as cases are dragging in courts for decades. Justice delayed is justice denied. Another vital sector awaiting reforms is the administrative system, where the bureaucracy has turned itself into white elephants. Red tape and corruption are massive right under Modi's nose.

Notably, the labour force as a whole has been orphaned in recent times due to a variety of factors. The age of Liberalization since the early 1990s saw the nullification of some labour rights while it also effected new controls on trade union functioning. Contract labour system emerged as a new attraction for companies while it undercut the interests of the workers in several sectors. The Covid19 and its aftermath further disrupted the process of collective bargaining. Alongside, the Leftist parties, principally the two Communist parties that had major control of the trade unions, lost their clout in the political arena. Unions organising the workforce showed more zest in collecting membership fees, levies and much else on a monthly and annual basis, which proved to be a lucrative 'business'. The unions and their leaders substantially lost their bargaining power in several sectors, while white-collar government employees could still assert and get what they wanted from successive governments. All things considered, the reform being introduced in the labour sector is well-appreciated for their good sides while there naturally is scope for improvements.

Politics of Rotation: Meghalaya's Cabinet Becomes a Musical Chairs Game

By Leander Lyngwa

When eight of Meghalaya's twelve ministers resigned on a single morning on 16 September, the spectacle seemed almost ceremonial – not a crisis, not a scandal, just a routine prelude to a cabinet reshuffle.

The public explanation was brief: the government wished to ensure "balanced regional representation." The Chief Minister stayed, the two Deputy Chief Ministers stayed, the coalition composition stayed – only the individuals occupying eight portfolios changed.

In a cabinet limited to twelve seats, replacing two-thirds of its members is no routine – it is a choice. It reveals an emerging approach to governance in Meghalaya: ministerial office treated as a rotational asset, a resource to be distributed rather than a responsibility to be held. What was once an exception has become a method. The long-term stewardship expected of ministers is being quietly replaced by a politics of turns.

The logic is simple: with limited cabinet space and many interests to accommodate, time becomes the only thing governments can divide. But the cost is subtler and more enduring. Leadership becomes temporary, departments lose continuity, and the purpose of ministerial office drifts toward symbolic inclusion. A reshuffle of this scale raises a simple but urgent question: if ministers are expected to rotate, who is expected to lead?

The Constitutional Space – and What It Leaves Open
India's Constitution is clear about how ministers are appointed, but deliberately silent about how long they should serve. Under Article 164, state ministers hold office "during the pleasure of the Governor," which in practice means at the discretion of the Chief Minister and as long as they enjoy the confidence of the Assembly.

This flexibility was meant to ensure stability – allowing a Chief Minister to dismiss an incompetent minister, or to manage unforeseen political fractures without paralyzing governance.

What the Constitution does fix is only the size of the cabinet: no more than fifteen percent of the Assembly, which limits Meghalaya's Council of Ministers to twelve seats. With a rigid numerical cap and a flexible tenure framework, political leaders possess both a constraint and a loophole – few chairs to distribute, but complete freedom to divide time.

The Constitution, in its wisdom, expected the executive to exercise restraint. It did not foresee a political culture where ministerial terms can be rotated, swapped, or halved. Legally allowed,

yes – but the impact on governance is far more complicated.

The Practice and its Logic in Meghalaya
The September reshuffle did not emerge in a vacuum. It is part of an evolving pattern in Meghalaya where the ministerial office is increasingly treated as a distributable resource. The clearest example came in the previous Assembly, when the MDA government informally split a ministerial term between the state's two BJP MLAs – one holding office for the first half of the five-year term, the other for the second. It was framed as fairness, but it marked a shift: when cabinet seats are limited, time itself becomes negotiable.

That logic has since deepened. With only twelve cabinet positions and multiple coalition partners to satisfy, the government faces a structural scarcity. Every party expects visibility, and every influential MLA expects recognition. The result is a system where a ministerial berth is no longer a full-term responsibility but a commodity that can be redistributed to maintain balance.

This pattern is not driven by malice; it is driven by arithmetic. Meghalaya's coalition governments have long relied on elaborate balancing acts across parties, tribes, regions and personalities – the emergence of tenure-sharing is simply the latest adaptation. It was no surprise that the September reshuffle followed this template. Eight ministers stepped down, not in protest but as part of a coordinated rotation.

The Political Drivers Behind This Practice
From a political standpoint, it is a highly effective tool. Meghalaya's political landscape is fragmented by nature – multiple parties, diverse tribal identities, regional expectations and a constant churn of alliances. In such an environment, the cabinet becomes the most valuable instrument a Chief Minister has to maintain equilibrium.

First, coalition management. With only twelve cabinet seats and several parties in the ruling alliance, not everyone can be accommodated at once. Tenure-sharing becomes a way to keep each partner invested in the government. A short stint in office is still a tangible reward, and the promise of a future stint is useful leverage.

Second, inter-party balancing. Within the MDA itself, senior leaders and ambitious first-time MLAs all expect recognition. Rotating ministers allows the leadership to distribute pres-

tige without permanently elevating any one faction. It reduces resentment and keeps internal competition contained.

Third, preventing disaffection. An MLA who believes he will eventually "get his turn" is far less likely to rebel or defect. Tenure-sharing offers a form of political insurance for the ruling party.

These drivers create a system optimised for stability rather than performance. Rotation satisfies many, offends few, and keeps the coalition intact.

Governance Implications
The political logic behind tenure rotation may be compelling, but its impact on governance is far more troubling. Rotating ministers at the scale seen in Meghalaya forces the state to operate with short-term leadership, fragmented priorities and an executive structure increasingly pulled toward a single centre of gravity.

The first casualty is continuity. A minister who enters office knowing he may hold the portfolio for a brief period inevitably approaches the job with a compressed horizon. Ministers understandably prioritise projects that can be inaugurated quickly and showcased locally. The work that truly strengthens governance often requires years of steady attention – attention a rotating minister cannot realistically provide.

The second casualty is coherence. Every minister brings new preferences, fresh priorities and a different working style. Bureaucrats adjust, but the price is delay. Files move slower, schemes are reinterpreted, and ongoing work is quietly paused until the new minister's orientation stabilises. When eight of twelve ministers change at once, entire sectors of governance enter a period of administrative limbo.

The third casualty is accountability. When a portfolio changes hands in a single term, responsibility becomes a moving target. The minister who initiates a programme is not the one who oversees its implementation, and the one who inherits it may not be present when its outcomes are judged. In such a system, successes become collective, but failures become untraceable. The public is left unsure of whom to credit or blame.

Most significantly, real executive power gravitates toward the Chief Minister's Office. This is not because the bureaucracy becomes more assertive, but because rotating ministers cannot anchor long-term authority within their departments. Advisors and close aides become the carriers of political intent. Over time, ministers become

intermediaries – temporary occupants who sign files but do not shape the long arc of policy, while the CMO becomes the durable centre of decision-making.

This quiet centralisation is the structural outcome of rotational governance. It may not create instability, but it creates something more subtle: a system in which political power is stable, yet ministerial leadership is perpetually temporary. And in a state that requires steady, long-term focus, temporary leadership is the most expensive cost of all.

Why Meghalaya Needs Better Politicians

If rotational governance persists, it is not only because the system allows it, but because Meghalaya's political class has grown comfortable with it. Our leaders have adapted to a culture where ministerial office is valued not for what can be achieved, but for the visibility it provides while it lasts. The musical chairs work because the players benefit from the music; it is the state that pays the price.

Too many of our politicians view a ministerial berth as a moment to consolidate influence, not an opportunity to steward development. Their horizon rarely extends beyond the next reshuffle, the next constituency visit or the next internal negotiation. In such a mindset, a short tenure is not a problem – it is a chance. And because everyone expects a turn, no one is expected to lead.

This is the deeper tragedy: Meghalaya lacks statesmen. We have individuals who seek office, but too few who seek responsibility. We have leaders who want their time on the chair, but very few who want to leave something behind when they rise from it.

And the public notices. People may not follow every cabinet change, but they understand optics. When eight ministers are rotated without any change in governing direction, it signals that political accommodation matters more than continuity. Citizens see the reshuffle not as a sign of renewal, but as evidence that their leaders are more invested in balancing chairs than building the state.

Meghalaya deserves more than this. Ultimately, the question is not about eight resignations or twelve seats. It is about what we expect from those who lead us. If ministers continue to treat office as a temporary entitlement, Meghalaya will continue to receive temporary governance.

The state deserves leaders who think beyond their time on the chair – leaders willing to build, not merely to occupy. Until our politics shifts from rotation to responsibility, we will remain governed by motion rather than direction.

Umngot joins the endangered list of rivers!

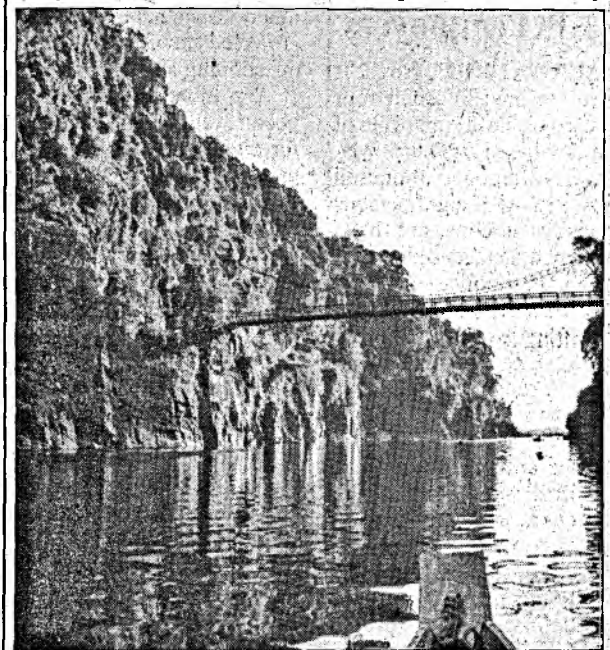
By Naba Bhattacharjee

The reflection of a boat in the crystal-clear waters of Umngot has become a legend world over, highlighting with clarity the pristine status of Umngot river. Rivers are basic natural resources supporting ecosystems and human societies, and the health of rivers is crucial to the Earth's sustainable development. Climate change and human activities, have induced great changes in the motion and development of rivers, including their utilisation. Evolution of rivers, the shaping of biodiversity, and the cultivation of human civilization are intricately linked. It is no different for the Khasi-Pnar community settled on the banks of this river. In this context, achieving an effective balance between river protection and human development is necessary.

In order to understand the issue of the denigration of Umngot, plausible cause attributed to the clear waters turning murky, is the ongoing construction work-involving expansion of Shillong-Dawki stretch of NH-40. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is funding the project, like all other interventions, are very particular before sanctioning any project. In this regard, decision of funding was finally approved after intensive appraisal of all respective JICA conducted feasibility studies, like EIA, SIA, IPP etc, with this writer associated as Environment Safeguard Adviser to JICA in the year 2016 and 2017. All

to formulate separate parameters for the hilly region, particularly the eastern Himalayas are imperative. This aspect requires a separate write-up, highlighting all relevant details. However, forest clearance was applicable as alignment passes through forest area from 3rd mile to 5th mile in Upper Shillong. The clearance was duly granted by MoEF&CC after extensive study of all parameters.

Although a National Act may not be applicable in a particular JICA funded project, JICA ESC guidelines and related recommendations in EIA, SIA, IPP etc are applicable on mandatory basis. In this project, the change in topography from the existing is envisaged at various places along the entire length of the road while developing double and above-lane standards. The slope protection is to be established/strengthened regularly through plantation and civil structures. The surface area of erodible earth material exposed by clearing and grubbing, excavation, borrow and fill material operations shall be limited to the extent practicable. The contractor will provide immediate permanent erosion control measures to prevent soil erosion that will adversely affect construction operations, contamination of nearby streams or other watercourses, etc. Further, green belt is mandated to be developed simultaneously



these are in addition to studies carried out by the project proponent NHIDCL. Application of JICA's Guidelines for Environment and Social Considerations (ESCs) are required if a project funded by it shows a significantly adverse impact on the environment or society. The project proponent then is required to assess the environmental and social impacts at the earliest possible stage of planning, and implement measures in accordance with the guidelines. If the negative impact of the project cannot be avoided or mitigated to an acceptable level, JICA does not support such projects.

The proposed road alignment passes through hilly terrain, with major stretches through reaches with either full cutting or part cutting and filling. Due to high cut and fill, natural stability of the hill slopes is disturbed. High rainfall and watercourses along the slopes cause erosion affecting road stability. The major shortcoming of the project has been the non-application of Environment Clearance for the project under EIA Notification, 2006, which ensures comprehensive environment safeguard measures, particularly overburden management and disposal etc., which appears to be one of the major causes affecting Umngot. Environmental Clearance (EC) was not required for this project as per MoEF&CC notification, dated August 22, 2013, which clearly states "... expansion of National Highway greater than 100 kms involving additional right of way or land acquisition greater than 40 m on existing alignments and 60 m on re-alignment or by-passes" require EC. In this case, altitude of the project is below 1000m, road length of around 85 kms and additional right of way on an average not exceeding 25 m. The need

along with construction activities to control the erosion process. In addition, gabion and apron concrete will be installed at the outlet of culverts to avoid soil erosion due to water runoff.

To avoid contamination of the various water bodies and drainage channels, construction work close to the watercourses or other water bodies is to be avoided, especially during monsoon period. All wastes arising from the project will be disposed of, as per the State Pollution Control Board/Central Pollution Control Board norms. The wastes are to be collected, stored and taken to approved disposal, over burden storage sites. In addition, the provision of proper risk management with respect to construction activities such as accidental spillage is critical at this stage to avoid damage to flora and fauna, agricultural land and sensitive water resources. This will be most crucial and active stage for the Environmental Management Plan (EMP).

The detailed measures to be adopted during different stages of the project to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive aspects are subject to strict monitoring. The responsibility for implementation and supervision of EMPs are vested with three agencies, namely, Contractors, PIU, and Supervision Consultants (SC). All prescriptions are on paper which requires implementation in letter and spirit on the ground. The question is whether such recommendations have been complied with under the scrutiny of monitoring agencies and if in the positive, to what extent?

(The views expressed by the author are personal, by virtue of technical association with JICA during feasibility study of the project)

Letters to the Editor

The Shillong Lit Fest - A cultural investment which transforms destinations

Editor,
Through your esteemed paper, I wish to highlight an often-overlooked truth that a well-organised literary festival is far more than a gathering of authors and readers.

Cities and towns that host literary festivals typically witness a surge in tourist footfall, extended visitor stays and renewed interest in local heritage spaces. Such events create a virtuous cycle – drawing acclaimed writers/authors, scholars, students and culture enthusiasts, whose presence invigorates hotels, cafés, transport operators, artisans, and bookstores. More importantly, they elevate the intellectual profile of the destination, branding it as a hub of creativity, dialogue and artistic exchange. For Meghalaya, which is striving to diversify tourism beyond the usual nature-centric, Instagrammable-sight offerings, this cultural pivot is particularly valuable.

A telling example of this transformation can be seen at Ward's Lake. Once regrettably stereotyped as a dilapidated jogging track by morning and an open bar by evening, the venue has been reimagined in recent years – and we have the Shillong Lit Fest to

thank for this. The space has now been infused with music, poetry readings, author meet-ups, children's workshops and indigenous storytelling. What was once an after-hours hangout has now evolved into a vibrant cultural commons that families, tourists and local residents proudly reclaim. The shift is not merely cosmetic as it reflects a deeper societal aspiration for refined, responsible and community-oriented public spaces.

Investing in literary festivals therefore yields multidimensional dividends: cultural enrichment, economic stimulation, youth engagement and the revitalisation of iconic public landmarks. It is time we recognise festivals not as expenses but as long-term assets that strengthen the cultural identity and tourism appeal of our destinations.

Yours etc.,
Lamshwa Nongrum,
Via email

Why is the military holding land in the heart of Shillong?

Editor,
We the people of Shillong are going through traffic jams like as if it is part and parcel of our daily lives. So much time is lost in traffic jams every day of our lives yet those who can make life better for all citizens are unyielding. To

ease traffic is all that we the common people pray for and hope that our prayers would be answered. It is gratifying to read that the State Government is trying to extend the vital overpass from Rilbong to Barik. This new plan will only materialise if the Defence land is handed over to the National Highway Infrastructure and Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL). Defence Land in the heart of the city does not really make sense. Besides, the stretch starting from Barik to Umshyri bridge is no less than a battle ground that we have to go through every single day. The Defence land leading to Lady Keane College and exiting at the Civil Hospital is one that could help ease the traffic congestion.

The way things are now, the army authorities in the cantonment road prohibit vehicles from using that alternate route thereby adding to the traffic mess. It is a sight to behold especially during school hours. The guards have been issued such strict instructions from their superiors that even during heavy rainfall, as we are experiencing now, no vehicles are allowed to use that road. But why should a public road be converted into an "army-only" route? If the army is unwilling to allow civilian movement along that stretch, then perhaps it should consider shifting to less congested areas and allow the public the right of access to these routes. It is unreasonable for the army to remain perma-

nently stationed in the heart of the town at the expense of public convenience.

For too long, the army has taken an unyielding stance regarding cantonment areas, behaving as though they operate above public concerns, while the Government seems to have conceded to their demands. This time we hope that the State Government takes up this issue with all sincerity and the Defence land is handed over to the NHIDCL to ease the persistent traffic congestion.

Yours etc.,
Jenniffer Dkhar,
Via email

Why non-white Christians are more Christian than white Christians?

Editor,
On October 30, 2025 India achieved one of the greatest victories in the women's world cup cricket semi-finals by defeating the mighty Australian women team in as much as in chasing the highest record target of 339 set by their counterparts in a semifinal match. And it can't be over stated that the heroine of this match was none other than Jemimah Rodrigues, named after the most beautiful of the three daughters of Job in the Holy Bible. She scored an unbeaten 127

runs to stun the defending champion and thereby enable India to storm into the women's ODI world cup final. Incidentally, India had never successfully chased more than 265 in ODIs.

After the match, in an interview Jemimah squarely attributed her phenomenal 127 runs for her match-winning contributions in the India against Australia game to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, she asserted, without mincing words, that she couldn't have achieved such a milestone on her own as Jesus carried her through the gruelling innings. She intrinsically articulated these words, "Firstly, I want to thank Jesus. I could not do this on my own". During the final stages of the innings at the crease she confessed that she kept repeating a Bible scripture from the book of Exodus highlighted in verse 14:14 which recounts, "Stand still and God will fight for you." These words were uttered by Moses, preceding the miraculous splitting apart of the Red sea to enable the fugitive Israelites to escape the hostile pursuit of the Egyptian army, but alas, it ended in a watery grave! But lo and behold, Jemimah Rodrigues' reference to the Holy Bible has in turn, set the teeth of Christians' baiters of our country on edge!

Correlately, in the London Olympic games in 2012, when Meseret Defar from Ethiopia won a gold medal in the Women's 5000 metres race,

she was asked by the journalists the rationale behind such a unique feat. She, instead, dug out from her pocket an icon of Virgin Mary bearing the child Jesus in her arms! By means of this gesture, Defar told the press personnel that she owed her success to Virgin Mary and dedicated her gold medal to none other than the mother of Jesus herself!

In earlier decades, we witnessed hordes of Christian missionaries from Europe coming to India to enlighten us on the essence of the Gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ. Now, conversely, the grammar has dramatically changed where Indian priests/missionaries have landed in Europe to become ambassadors of Christian legacy. Recently, a young and handsome catholic priest from Nagaland has been reportedly authorized to proceed to one of the parishes in Romania. Nearer home, I have been given to understand that even from our land of Hyniewtrep, Khasi priests have been appointed as missionaries in South America. These uncanny equations have amply demonstrated the enigmatic ways of the Almighty God! And we none the wiser.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh
Shillong-2

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The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 105 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2025

Shillong Civil Hospital: Whither Accountability

SHILLONG Civil Hospital is yet again in the news for the wrong reasons. This time for not taking an emergency case as it should be handled — with the speed and efficacy that is needed to help save lives. This is especially so in cases of motor car or other accidents requiring emergency measures that could make the difference between life and death. The establishment there comprising doctors, nurses and helpers have been blamed time and again of complete lack of empathy while dealing with patients and adopting a haughty attitude because most patients come from the underprivileged sections of society. The word 'emergency' seems to have taken on a different meaning in this hospital created to meet the needs of the poor who cannot afford to go to a private hospital for treatment and medicines. Civil hospital is also where people are to report to in cases involving accidents caused by criminal negligence which end up a police case.

The case of the two students from the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) who were run over by a speeding vehicle driven by a drunken man behind the wheels, just near the University gate has once again brought the focus on Civil Hospital and its lack of critical care facilities. Eye-witness accounts of how the ambulance arrived at NEHU without the necessary assistance and life-saving equipment to deal with deep cuts and wounds that bleed, expose a complete lack of professionalism Doctors and nurses are aware that urgency and efficiency with which accident victims are handled could make that critical difference between life and death. So why do they fail in their primary duty? That the patients had to be shifted to a private hospital at the insistence of the family members and the students who had accompanied the accident victims, informs that they had lost trust in the manner in which the Civil Hospital staff handled the case. Their complaints that the student with a deep head injury was allowed to bleed for an hour before dressing was applied is shocking.

That the Civil Hospital staff had the audacity to say they had too many patients to handle and therefore could not handle the accident cases with the alacrity they deserved shows the lengths to which service has degenerated in this Government run hospital. If this is the case in the state capital the plight of patients in public health centres and sub-centres beyond Shillong would be worse. Everything boils down to lack of accountability and a couldn't care less attitude which is the hallmark of all government run institutions. Surprise checks are unheard of so the staff take their duties casually and without a sense of responsibility, knowing full well that no action can be taken against them because they are permanent staff. That's the bane of government service in this state and country. People continue to get their salaries whether or not they produce outcomes! It's time to hold the government run hospitals accountable through a social audit process and that action be taken against errant staff! After all the salaries of all who work in government run institutions are paid for from the public exchequer. Hence, they are accountable to the public.

Letters to the Editor

Bringing back reading, calm, and confidence to our youth

Editor, With reference to your thoughtful editorial Shillong Litfest Dividends (ST November 22, 2025) I wish to express my appreciation for the Shillong Literary Festival and the many enriching events it offered this year. I especially value the sessions for the deep influence they had on young minds and our youths who have a growing interest in literature and who eagerly seek such live experiences to inspire and guide them.

I personally felt, though I could not attend the festival, that your editorial conveyed its spirit, warmth, and genuine impact with great clarity. As someone who has spent many years with young learners, I could easily sense the hope and renewed curiosity such an event brings into their lives. With surety, I intend to attend such a programme next time.

The sessions featuring Banu Mushtaq, the International Booker Prize winner, must have been especially inspiring. Her honest sharing about her struggles and courage would surely encourage young listeners. The student-focused sessions also helped the youth understand how poetry rises from real feelings and why expression brings inner strength.

Your point about improving the facilities at Ward's Lake is important. Better maintenance will enhance

the experience for visitors, especially students.

Expecting such events every year so that our youth continue to find inspiration, direction, and emotional balance through literature, I look forward to the Litfest growing stronger.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj
Via email

Shocking that children are used to sell drugs!

Editor, When a community groans under the scourge of drugs, silence becomes a dangerous consent. Well, it is impossible to remain unmoved after hearing what Paul Lyngdoh, advisor to the Social Welfare Department, shared with the media recently. His revelation that even small children are being used by drug traders is a very serious issue.

Living in close proximity to an area affected by the drug menace, I have often overheard the unsettling whispers. These whispers reveal how cleverly these networks operate. Those drug dealers could easily outsmart a police station located just a stone's throw away. Their strategies are not just clever but deeply disturbing because they take advantage of the most 'vulnerable and the least suspected.' Some of the most notorious drug dealers in certain Cantonment localities have reportedly drawn their own families into the business, including their in-laws and distant

relatives. Small kiosks that appear harmless by day become covers for transactions by night. Some taxi drivers, daily wage workers and vagabonds are also lured into the trade and used as carriers.

The darkest part of this story is the involvement of children. If a child is made to act as an errand runner with drugs, there is every chance that the same child will grow up believing this trade is normal. Most of them might also fall prey to drug addiction later. I believe this is not merely a crime against the law but a crime against the future of the state! When Paul Lyngdoh held the Social Welfare Ministry, many arrests were made, including hardcore kingpins, for which the neighbourhoods around the Cantonment area remain ever grateful.

What I would like to further say here is that those suspected of drug peddling in the cantonment areas should not be allowed to stay in rented houses in any locality. Under Section 25 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, house owners are held equally liable if they knowingly allow their premises/houses/vehicles to be used for illicit activities such as drug trafficking or drug selling. The Shillong Cantonment authorities should take stern action against those owners who out of greed continue to give their houses on rent to those involved in illicit activities.

It is also heard that some relatives of drug dealers are themselves deeply into

criminal and unmentionable anti-social activities and pose a serious threat to the entire neighbourhoods and state at large. Such fear-some activities would not have proliferated had the Cantonment authorities been more prompt in cracking the whip. Well, it is most surprising that defence land, often regarded as the very epitome of dignity, integrity and discipline, has now become infested with such anti-social felonies. Why can't such things be weeded out for good? Does the Shillong Defence establishment lack the means and skills to deal with such criminal elements?

The Anti-Narcotics Task Force further dropped another bombshell! The major share of drugs entering Meghalaya end up flooding our own backyard. Just imagine the gravity of the situation. Should this fact not wake us all from our slumber? Any further hint of complacency from government machineries, community groups, NGOs, Rangbah Shnongs or residents will not just worsen the problem, it will only invite disaster. If the Assam Government can take such a hard line against the drug menace, why can't the Meghalaya Government do the same?

Yes, parents and residents in the neighbourhoods must speak up or inform the police when they see something wrong, something suspicious! The police station, with utmost integrity, supports the citizens who come in with crucial inputs. It is our shared responsibility to protect our children. It is our foremost duty to safeguard

our "tender hearts". The true calling before us now is to preserve the moral fabric of families that keep society healthier. Development without a healthy society is meaningless.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal &
Richmond Kharbudon
Shillong-2

Demand coordinated civic accountability

Editor, Despite crores of rupees being invested in Smart City projects, Tura's urban development feels like a half-finished dream. Projects such as the Tura Bypass and Greater Water Supply promise progress, yet roadside infrastructure is crumbling. Street lights vanish, flower beds are dismantled, and public spaces are littered or illegally occupied by encroachers. The problems go beyond MUDA, the Municipal Board, and PWD. The District Administration, Tourism Department, Commissionerate of Food Safety, and Floriculture Department must all work together in close coordination. Who monitors the quality and safety of foods sold at roadside stalls? Who licenses these vendors, collects fees, or enforces safety regulations, especially when stalls are dangerously close to electricity transformers?

What role does the Floriculture Department play beyond occasional flower sales? These departments must actively maintain urban

beauty, public safety, and provide livelihood opportunities. This is not just a project or a line item for anyone to exploit. Tura is the second most important urban center in Meghalaya after Shillong and deserves focused, respectful governance. Officers need to be instructed to stop wasting valuable time in endless tea sessions of chai, (tea) bandal (beef tripe) kapa menil (sticky rice) puri and office gossip. We need visible, consistent, and effective governance—not excuses. Illegal construction on streams, unregulated market stalls, and public littering show a total lack of civic responsibility and leadership. If the demand exists for more food stalls or catering outlets, authorities should propose and create regulated, designated markets and livelihood projects instead of allowing unplanned illegal sprawl that degrades public safety and aesthetics.

Funds should be directed toward sustainable urban upkeep rather than short-lived festivals. It is time for every citizen and officer to stand united, confront responsibility, demand inter-departmental coordination, protect our town's heritage and safety, and ensure Tura rises as a shining example of smart, inclusive growth.

Our town is rotting, but with will and courage, we can reclaim it. Rise up, Tura. The change begins with us. Officers—get to work.

Yours etc.,
Vero Amana Sangma,
Via email

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Telling Together to Know Together: From Saipung to Shillong, and Beyond

By Anna Notsu

Alongside the familiar temperature drop, Shillong once again welcomes its festive season. The Shillong Literary Festival is one such event that marks its warm, celebratory moment in the city's otherwise cold winter. As Kong Patricia Mukhim noted in her coverage of the opening day in the Shillong Times, the Festival has already sparked inspiring conversations and connections through panel discussions, activities, performances and book launches.

This year, my own Biate picture book, Khānu Khah A Vār Im?/Is She Wise?, became part of that moment. Although I could not attend in person, editor Monica Thomas, illustrator Gladinia Pyrtuh and Biate translator and co-founder of this picture book project, Anthony Durpuj, witnessed something historic—our picture book being launched by the 2025 International Booker Prize Winner, Banu Mushtaq, and later discussed in a panel moderated by Moushumi Chakraborty.

For all of us, this affirmed one thing above all: this book is truly collaborative. Yet, as Kong Patricia pointed out in her article, many still did not know who the Biate are—even within Meghalaya, even within spaces celebrating "local" voices. Reflecting on the launch ceremony and panel discussion at the Festival, Anthony messaged me late at night:

"In those years around 2008, when I used to speak with Moushumi on the radio, I would introduce myself as Anthony Biate, because I wanted people to hear the word Biate. And now, having met Moushumi again—this time to speak about the Biate community on such a big platform—how things have turned out in my favour is truly a wonder."

For my team and me, what matters most is 'how' we speak of the Biate community. While still little known, those who have heard of the Biate often frame them through narratives of neglect, isolation, or unchanging tradition. These tropes flatten a living community into the past and, worse, take away their own agency to tell who they are today. This led me to think of my research work, of which this book production is part.

Explaining a community is intricate work, more so when the narrator is an outsider. It raises questions of responsibility and authorship. During my time in Saipung, both as a researcher and through the making of this picture book, I

came to understand that writing about the Biate community must be a mutual act. It is a relationship, a practice of attention. It grows, not given, in the space between what we come to learn and what others allow us to see—an elder's hesitation before speaking of heritage, a friend's sharing of personal stories. In that space, the distance between researchers (we) and research collaborators (them) begins to narrow, and learning becomes shared.

In academic work, we often talk about knowledge: who holds it, how it circulates and who gets to speak for whom. But in Saipung, those questions were not abstract. Knowledge was exchanged through daily gestures, glances and silences—lived, not theorised.

When we speak of knowledge co-creation, perhaps what we really mean is learning to listen: to stories that do not ask to be recorded, to insights that do not demand citation. What institutions call participation is, in practice, a willingness to listen before we speak. Yet, greater attention must be paid to the fact that we are always entering someone else's story midway. Research, then, starts not at arrival, but at the point of mutual listening.

At the book launch, Monica, Gladinia and Anthony were called onto the stage as the authors of Khānu Khah A Vār Im?/Is She Wise? Later, during the panel discussion, Monica clarified that the author is me. Watching the live stream on YouTube, I pondered for a moment. Is this a mistake? It made me wonder who the author truly is after all.

In Saipung, I shared not only a roof but daily challenges with the Biate community: enduring weeks-long blackouts, washing clothes in a nearby stream when water was scarce, and managing without markets or regular medical facilities. Life there was sometimes difficult, but these shared experiences forged a strong bond of trust and belonging that no one else could have earned.

Water scarcity, constant blackouts and limited infrastructure—a while real—offered only a partial picture of Biate everyday life. What I observed and experienced was not marginality, but the ways people continually manoeuvred towards the futures they envisaged. I realised that this, too, is the story of who they are.

tell a story of contemporary Biate-ness: not confined to the past, nor reduced to an external tale of neglect. The shared realisation of the need to narrate everyday life led to the birth of the Kirzai Project—an initiative to show how the community lives today and how they envisage the future, where their reflections and perspectives take centre stage.

As part of this project, Biate schoolchildren were invited to collect stories about their environment from parents, neighbours and elders. From folktales to short narratives, they were free to gather any story, on one condition: it had to be original and undocumented. The second phase was a 'drawing workshop', exploring how the children imagined the environment through the stories they had collected.

During the drawing workshop, the room was filled with a low hum of concentration, occasional laughter and the scent of paints, with pop music coming out of a large speaker in the background. Children bent over sheets of large paper, all of them trying to fill the entire space with colour. One painted a mountain under a blue sky with their houses on the side. Another drew a couple walking through a forest. Their drawings were not simply illustrations—they were interpretations, ways of thinking through the stories they listened to.

The collected stories and paintings from Saipung have now become the first-ever Biate children's book. Looking back, this book stands as a symbol of my relationship with the Biate community—a proof of mutual trust and collaboration. It shows that collaboration is not merely about taking on a task together, but about acknowledging differences, interpreting what matters, and sharing responsibility for what we collectively imagine.

The co-creation process enabled by the Kirzai Project extended beyond collaboration between the Biate community (as research participants) and me (as the researcher). The circle of trust, relationality and responsibility expanded within the community itself. As schoolchildren engaged with elders, new collaborations formed, and existing relationships deepened. Through this process, I contend, 'research participants' become equal contributors to producing knowledge.

I learned that storytelling, whether oral, literary or visual, lies at the core of how knowledge lives. But more importantly, long-term engagement forms the foundation of collaboration. Returning to Saipung for feedback, creating opportunities to reflect together and exploring what we know, desire and strive for—these were all crucial for sharing and sustaining what we came to know together.

With deep gratitude to the Biate community, I remain responsible for finding more ways to narrate—together—stories that resist simplification, romanticisation and exoticisation. As I look at the Biate picture book, I am reminded that knowledge co-creation is, above all, about relationships with those who make our process of knowing possible.

Perhaps, then, the future of this kind of collaboration depends less on our institutional strategies and more on our willingness to imagine otherwise—to pause at the hearth, to listen to stories, to trust the quiet, relational work that sustains both research and life. The end of the book, after all, is not the end of their story. It is only the beginning of a shared one, told and retold, as we continue learning what it means to know together.

Academia may continue to demand that we demonstrate 'impact' or 'participation,' but the deeper measure of collaboration lies elsewhere: in the mutual recognitions that happen off record, in the unspoken stories that testify to trust. To co-create knowledge is not simply to invite participation into researchers' interests; it is to risk transformation—to be changed by those who let us in. Lived collaboration teaches us to be included. Between those two lies a path forward—one where research no longer merely extracts meaning but listens its way into it.

For all its talk of inclusive participation, we still seem to cling to ownership. It is time to release that grip—to see collaboration not as inclusion, but as shared authorship.

(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).

The Naked Truth

By Joseph M. Kharkongor

We live in a highly hypocritical and judgmental world. Hypocrisy happens when people say one thing but do another. It often leads to frustration because it involves double standards. A wealthy person often tells others that money doesn't bring happiness. Yet, they work tirelessly to earn more, prioritize wealth over relationships, and judge others based on income.

People present themselves as highly moral and upright. They criticize others for dishonesty, greed, or selfishness. However, behind closed doors, they engage in shady business deals, lie when it benefits them and only act kind when people are watching. A public figure builds their reputation on supporting strong family values but is later caught having multiple affairs. A preacher or religious leader speaks about morality, telling others to avoid sinful behaviour. Yet, they secretly engage in the very actions

this group of people without understanding where they come from.

Sex workers, here are diverse and come from different backgrounds and histories. The hate they endure is due to perpetuated and unsubstantiated myth about who they are and what they do. These reasons are mostly based in misogyny and toxic philosophies of discrimination. Most people would question why they even exist. Well, that's mainly because society and economies fail to provide material support for many people. While waiting for justice and human rights advancements, people die. So they work doing what is available or what is best for them, so they don't die. Ask yourself: Why would people deliberately choose to be in danger from the hatred that is focused on them? Why do people continue to do sex work generation after generation no matter what hate increases happen?

True, sex work is a degrading job, leaving women

Confessions reveal that women mainly become involved as a last resort. Some are coerced into it through a forceful or violent partner. For others, addiction to drugs forces them to earn money in any way they can. Women who find themselves in a social circle where their friends or family members are already involved may become sex workers, deceived by the notion that it will be an easy way to make a living.

they condemn. A child counsellor advising children not to watch porn yet spends the entire night downloading sex videos.

Speaking of "sex videos", none (in my opinion) has been judged more in society than the "sex worker." Yes, the sex worker!

Rot, 'thei awria, 'thei nuti, 'thei die met, 'thei sbun, 'thei bun lok... Yes, they go by different names; and what they do may be the world's oldest profession; but no, it is certainly not the most revered. For many, this hidden community is shrouded in a web of fascination and disgust. There are vast misconceptions surrounding prostitution; and women doing sex work here in Meghalaya face great prejudice.

But why do people here hate sex workers so much? What do these "rot" actually do? Why do they do it? And how is it anyone else's business what these women choose to do in their lives? Intrigued by the topic, this author has done some intense digging and even collaborated with a computer hacker to unravel spicy details about the sex industry here and the people in it. And what we found is simply shocking.

The hacker after successfully penetrating into the phone and OneDrive account of a West Khasi Hills-based sex worker, gained access to over 4GB of personal files including nude photos and sex videos of over a thousand customers... 272 of whom hail from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya and also include doctors, lawyers, engineers, policemen and a judicial magistrate. Prior to this, in 2020 and 2023, two pastors of the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian church were also exposed for cheating on their wives with two other sex workers, exchanging obscene photos and videos of themselves via social media platforms. Details of this hack have been published on MegLeaks (<https://megleaks.wordpress.com>).

While reviewing this finding, I couldn't help but question myself: Isn't it funny how respectable people here in our "Ri Tip-Briew Tip-Blei" would publicly judge and humiliate sex workers, yet secretly seek their services? Seriously I wouldn't have uttered this if I didn't have evidence. But trust me... the evidence is overwhelming. This topic has drawn attention for several years here, but our hypocritical and judgmental society has repeatedly failed to understand the root cause of this "problem" degrading

very vulnerable; and there are several reasons why these women even enter the illegal trade, but it is far from being an easy way to earn money. Confessions reveal that women mainly become involved as a last resort. Some are coerced into it through a forceful or violent partner. For others, addiction to drugs forces them to earn money in any way they can. Women who find themselves in a social circle where their friends or family members are already involved may become sex workers, deceived by the notion that it will be an easy way to make a living. Gender issues also play a part, where they are frequently economically oppressed. But once they start working in the sex industry, it is difficult for them to stop.

It is also important to note that many are forced into sex work through issues beyond their control, to lead difficult and dangerous lives. They are plagued by stereotypes and degraded by the attitude of the general public. The health and social needs of women working in prostitution may be complex.

But whatever the case, it is about time we stop judging and start caring for this group of people, keeping in mind their most basic human rights. Doctors and healthcare professionals too have an important role to play in caring for their health needs. They need to understand the issues sex workers face and prejudices they encounter. By doing this they will be better equipped to empathize with women and cater more effectively for their individual needs. By understanding the issues these women face, help should be provided in a non-judgmental and empathetic way, allowing these women to make informed choices. Emotional support should be offered and practical advice with regard to housing, children and health should also be given. It's high time people stopped judging and started helping.

(The author is a private teacher, skill trainer and blogger. He resides at Mawlai Nongkwar, Shillong - 8. Joseph M. Kharkongor writes for MegLeaks (<https://megleaks.wordpress.com>) but is not involved in any of the hacking or uncovering of information. He plays the part of a middleman, passing on data received anonymously via email to the press. For any questions or concern regarding material featured/mentioned in this article or any of the previous articles or letters by this author, feel free to email the hacker directly at roy_marbaniang@protonmail.com)

"A smile is the chosen vehicle of
all ambiguities."
— Herman Melville

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.106 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2025

Ordeal in Shanghai

THE ordeal of Pema Wangiom Thongdok, an Indian citizen from Arunachal Pradesh, during transit at China's Shanghai Pudong airport is symptomatic of the issues plaguing bilateral relations between the two big powers in Asia. Her three-hour transit at the busy airport lasted a tense 18 hours, during an air travel from London, for the simple reason that her passport mentioned her place of birth as Arunachal Pradesh. China never accepted the historical fact that this is a full-fledged Indian state, though it had undergone a change in name in 1972 from what it was till then the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and carried a Union Territory status until it was designated as a state in 1987. The Chinese officials at the airport argued that the landmass was China's Zangnan. There is however nothing new to China's claim. It kept claiming that Arunachal Pradesh belonged to it, though India kept dismissing the claim with the contempt it deserved. It is likely that others from Arunachal Pradesh passed through Chinese airports in the past, but no such issue had ever been raised by the immigration or security officials there. China has now escalated the issue to a new level. The ordeal at the airport for Pema Wangiom was terrible though China claims she was provided with stay, food and water.

Obviously, China was trying to use an opportunity to revive or reassert its claim on the Indian state and alert the international community that this bilateral dispute remains live. India responded by issuing a demarche and reasserted that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India. It is also stressed that under international civil aviation laws, she as an Indian citizen can travel with a valid passport of the kind she carried and which showed her birthplace, rightly, as Arunachal Pradesh. India has also warned China that, by this affront, it violated the Chicago and Montreal Conventions guiding air travel rules. Pema Wangiom managed to extricate herself from the ordeal after getting in touch with the Indian consulate through a friend, leading to its intervention and her safe release late at night. Travel is conceived as a pleasant experience. A detention and provocation at an airport is among the worst experiences during such journeys. For a woman, its impact on her mind would be terrifying. Pema Wangiom is likely to approach international courts for justice and compensation. But this is small comfort.

It is likely that Indian authorities would now respond with a quid pro quo, detaining one or two Chinese nationals at one or other Indian airport citing flimsy reasons. India should also help the harried woman fight the case. India has been having uneasy ties with China for the past over 60 years after the 1962 war. China annexed large swathes of Indian land, much of which still lies with it. China kept provoking India and its other neighbours too off and on. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent attempt to effect a thaw in ties with Beijing might not necessarily be of much help, considering China's proclivity for recurring play of mischief.

Revitalizing K-12 Education in Meghalaya using the Universal Design for Learning Framework

By Carmo deBritto Noronha

The Government of Meghalaya has articulated an ambitious and vertically integrated strategy to overhaul its human capital development, aiming to create a continuous pipeline from early foundational learning to sustainable economic enterprise. This comprehensive architecture is firmly anchored in the mandates of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with a strong emphasis on competency-based learning and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Supported by significant multilateral capital—including a \$64 million loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for secondary infrastructure and \$35 million from the World Bank for adolescent empowerment (MPOWER)—the state's vision links early childhood development (MECDM) directly to technical quality (ADB SHCD) and youth entrepreneurship (PRIME).

Meghalaya possesses a strategically advanced model for human capital development that prioritizes vertical integration from the foundational stage to economic activation. However, this ambitious vision is imperilled by a high dropout rate of 25.83% at the secondary level, compounded by systemic deficiencies and a teaching workforce where almost 30% lack professional qualifications.

This article analyzes these structural challenges and proposes a comprehensive solution centred on integrating the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

Systemic Leakage

The immediate threat to Meghalaya's human capital strategy is the accelerating rate at which students leave the education system. Data from the Meghalaya State Education Commission (MSEC) Report-2025 highlights a sharp, increasing trend in annual average dropout rates (DOR). While the Primary Level DOR stands at 8.10%, and the Upper Primary at 14.43%, the situation becomes most critical at the secondary level, where the average dropout rate surges to 25.83%. This attrition means one in four students in government and aided schools fails to complete Class X. The crisis deepens in certain regions, with North Garo Hills recording an alarming secondary level dropout rate of 43.54%. Furthermore, the system loses the majority of learners during transition: the average Transition Rate from Class X to XI is just 35.28% statewide.

Qualitative analysis points to multiple converging causes for this leakage, including challenging socio-economic conditions, domestic responsibilities (especially for girls), and the persistent issue of student disengagement due to poor quality of teaching. Notably, a consistent pattern across all school levels is that dropout rates are generally higher for boys than for girls.

This attrition is exacerbated by profound systemic administrative weaknesses, which compromise the execution of complex NEP 2020 reforms.

An acute shortage of staff in district offices leads to

system failures and delays in implementation. Many officers manage multiple district roles simultaneously, severely compromising the regular inspections and monitoring of schools and all schemes and programs under the Education Department. The Directorate of Educational Research and Training (DERT), designated as the apex academic authority under NEP 2020, lacks sufficient human resources and a modern organizational structure. This deficit impedes DERT's ability to lead crucial reforms, such as developing State Curriculum Frameworks (SCFs).

The transition mandated by NEP 2020 from activity-based to outcome-based planning is hampered by poor data maintenance and deficient ICT infrastructure. Meghalaya lags in critical resources such as internet access (26.4%) and digital facilities, which are essential for digital inclusion and effective monitoring. Crucially, the absence of a Training Management System (TMS) and online assessment systems prevents DERT from leveraging technology for delivery and monitoring.

Pedagogical Deficit

The quality of instruction, especially in rural K-12 classrooms, is fundamentally compromised by massive capacity gaps among educators, undermining the NEP 2020 focus on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN).

A major concern is that a large proportion of the teaching workforce—totalling 16,428 teachers, representing almost 30% of the entire teaching workforce—lacks any recorded professional teaching qualification. The highest concentration of these untrained teachers is found at the Lower Primary level (9,135). The presence of underqualified teachers directly threatens the NEP 2020 mission to achieve universal FLN.

The NEP 2020 mandates a minimum of 50 hours of annual Continuous Professional Development (CPD). However, the coverage rate is critically low: the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) collectively trained only 18.85% of elementary teachers between 2019 and 2024. This insufficient training leaves educators ill-equipped to implement core NEP pedagogies, such as competency-based assessment and technology integration. Compounding this, nearly 30% of DIET faculty positions remain vacant, creating a barrier for these institutions to transition into multidisciplinary Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering the 4-year Integrated Teacher Education Program (ITEP). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of teachers trained in specialized areas like special education and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

Meghalaya has already instituted several sophisticated programs designed to address these gaps from different angles, demonstrating a commitment to inter-sectoral coordination. These include The Meghalaya Integrated ECD Mission

(MECDM) and the Forgotten Folklore Project, which curates indigenous stories into localized, multimodal AV content. There's ASPIRE Meghalaya which provides intensive soft skills training, while the World Bank-funded MPOWER project (pegged at USD 45 million total cost, with a majority from the WB) directly aims to reduce school dropouts and strengthen mental health and life skills among adolescents, using in-school and out-of-school interventions.

In 1997, a group of pioneering scholars at North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design developed the Seven Principles of Universal Design to guide designers in applying this philosophy across different disciplines. Other path breaking educators adapted this architectural concept to the learning environment, pioneering the framework known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

UDL operates on the same premise as Universal Design: that the curriculum itself, rather than the student, should be flexible and designed to meet the needs of all learners. It focuses on removing barriers from the teaching and learning process, drawing on neuroscience to establish three core principles:

Multiple Means of Representation: Presenting content in various ways.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression: Allowing students to demonstrate knowledge in different ways.

Multiple Means of Engagement: Offering varied options to motivate and sustain interest.

This is what Meghalaya needs to adopt and adapt to give its education sector especially the secondary school system where the critical dropouts are taking place a fresh start. This could take the shape of the following steps.

To address the severe capacity and administrative gaps, UDL training can be systematically institutionalized:

Establish a Central UDL Academy within DERT, to drive UDL implementation and serve as the Project Management Unit (PMU) for teacher education reform. This Academy should utilize the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) as its district-level branches to ensure comprehensive reach and support. This could include partnering with the internationally acclaimed Centre for Applied Special Technology, that developed UDL (CAST.org).

The Academy can ensure UDL principles are explicitly integrated into pre-service curricula (D.El. Ed., B.Ed.) and that the annual 50-hour CPD mandate is met, focusing specifically on practical UDL strategies, differentiated instruction, and technology use. This directly addresses the low CPD coverage rate of 18.85% and prepares teachers as adaptive facilitators.

UDL provides the flexible pathways necessary to move beyond rote learning and intentionally foster the

21st-century skills of critical thinking, creativity, compassion, collaboration, and communication.

Soft skills, already prioritized by the ASPIRE program (emotional intelligence, empathy), must be embedded in the K-12 curriculum through UDL. By requiring students to engage in group projects and present their work using varied formats (audio-visual, verbal, digital), UDL enhances communication and collaboration. Furthermore, UDL's focus on respecting diverse learning needs naturally fosters compassion and empathy.

Scaling Localization: The successful model of Sauramandala's Forgotten Folklore Project must be formally scaled up to develop and contextualize technical and vocational content for ADB-upgraded ITIs and secondary schools. This provides students with culturally relevant, multimodal resources (Multiple Means of Representation), directly countering dropout causes linked to disinterest and irrelevant curriculum.

Addressing the significant infrastructure gaps (only 26.4% internet access) and the lack of robust digital systems requires UDL to drive responsible technology integration.

The UDL Academy must mandate training on using digital platforms for instruction, aligning with the PRIME program's focus on using Technology for knowledge dissemination and enterprise productivity. While implementing AI, the state must use advanced digital tools to personalize learning and assessment, which aligns with the flexible, differentiated learning inherent in UDL.

The focus on socio-emotional and ethical development must extend to technology use. The UDL framework, implemented through the Academy, should include modules that explicitly teach digital citizenship, ensuring students use technology safely and responsibly.

The system must transition fully to outcome-based planning. This requires establishing a dropout early-warning system utilizing UDISE+ and GIS tools for real-time tracking. Furthermore, performance metrics from ASPIRE soft skills training (e.g., career clarity assessment) should be weighted heavily in the selection criteria for PRIME program access and PSREF fellowships, creating a formal, incentivized link between soft skill inputs and economic outputs.

To conclude, UDL provides the necessary pedagogical blueprint to close these gaps, embed 21st-century skills, and ensure that Meghalaya's education system is inclusive, future-ready, and resilient.

(This article has been written through extensive use of AI Platforms such as Perplexity, Gemini, Notebook LM, Google Studio. All data has been sourced from official Government of India and Government of Meghalaya websites, and the Meghalaya Education Commission Report. The aim is to encourage honest debate on the present and future of education in our State)

Meghalaya on the Brink: Rivers Die, Hills Slide and Cities Choke

By Sanjeeb Kakoty

As I sat listening to the speakers in the recently concluded Shillong Literary Festival, discordant thoughts often disturbed my languid reverie of a future seen through the prism of stories, poetry, music, wine, beauty and hope.

Visitors were mesmerised by the beauty of our state and the warmth of the people. They all promised to come back. But the question that remained at the top of my mind was how do we maintain the pristine beauty of our hills and rivers and ensure inclusive growth that ensures smiling people to welcome visitors? This is no trivial question as the signs of things going wrong are too many to ignore and if things are not done now, it will be too late.

Day three of the Lit Fest had the Chief Minister arrive before time and deliver an impressive speech that spoke with his characteristic passion and fluent articulation, the ground below started to shake. It was an earthquake, and he joked that maybe he had spoken a wee bit too loud! To me it was a subtle reminder that all plans of development will come a cropper unless we prioritise climate change and the environment.

It hardly needs to be stressed that Meghalaya, the "Abode of Clouds," is facing an ecological and urban crisis that threatens not only its identity but its very future. The warning signs are screaming to be heard. Lukha has been weeping in agony and turning blue in the process. Its alluring blue is a toxic illusion. The surreal bluish tint of the Lukha River each winter masks a grim reality—acid mine drainage from coal and limestone mining. Fish deaths have devastated local fisheries, and trans-boundary pollution threatens aquatic biodiversity in Bangladesh. The acids running into it have destroyed almost all life forms in it and the water has been rendered undrinkable. If the death of Lukha was not bad enough, Umngot is waiting out in pain. The pristine Umngot, once called the cleanest river in the world, has turned a muddy brown today due to road construction. Infrastructure development that does not incorporate the global best practices of environmental impact, assessment and designing for climate resilience has caused immense damage in India. Examples of the Chardham road project, the recent tragedies in Himachal, Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Kerala are just the tip of the iceberg. Reports about Umngot speak about construction debris from the Shillong-Dawki highway project silting the river, prompting the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board to fine NHIDCL Rs 15 lakh and demanding urgent corrective measures. But the damage has been done and an immediate fallout has been economic. Tourism has plummeted, hitting local livelihoods hard.

In Meghalaya, landslides and fragile roads are emerging as an area of concern. Unscientific hill-cutting for road expansion has destabilized slopes. Experts warn that infrastructure projects that lack climate resilience, make disasters inevitable. Unscientific hill-cutting has destabilized fragile slopes. In April 2025, geologists sounded the alarm near Pynursla when NH-40 expansion began damaging hillsides.

May-June 2025's torrential rains triggered over 70 landslides, killing four people and severely damaging infrastructure along NH-6 and NH-206. Since October 2023, over a dozen fatalities have been reported from landslide-prone regions like West Jaintia and Garo Hills.

It is estimated that more than half of Meghalaya resides in its urban areas and there is neither urban planning nor a wide encompassing urban body to take care of its cities. Municipalities are a pale shadow of what it should be. What we witness daily is an urban nightmare that is choking us with ever growing traffic and waste. The story is the same everywhere, be it Nongstoin, Tura, Jowai or Shillong.

Shillong, once a quaint hill station, is now choking under traffic congestion and unplanned urban sprawl. Narrow roads clogged with vehicles create gridlock daily, while illegal roadside parking worsens the chaos. Meanwhile, the city generates 171 tonnes of waste daily; overwhelming the Marten landfill. Garbage clogs drains, rivers, and public spaces, with little segregation or scientific disposal. Despite Smart City promises, waste management remains a glaring failure.

Agriculture and Soil Erosion is another problem that is hardly addressed. Loss of topsoil due to deforestation and reckless construction has left farmers struggling. Erratic rainfall patterns compound the crisis, threatening food security and rural livelihoods. Meghalaya is not just on the verge of ecological collapse, it is actually living its early stages. Rivers are polluted, hills unstable, cities gridlocked, and waste unchecked. Without strict enforcement of environmental norms, climate-smart planning, and community-led conservation, the state risks losing its natural heritage and livability.

The tremor that morning when Conrad was speaking was simply trying to shake off the complacency of the state. There is no better place to start than with its young and energetic Chief Minister. He has led by example so far and there is no reason why he should not be concerned about climate change and climate resilient planning. If he initiates it there is no reason why Meghalaya should not emerge as the best environmentally managed state. If we do it there is a lot to gain if we don't there is everything to lose. Is the leadership of the state ready for the challenge?

(The author is a faculty at IIM Shillong and can be reached at skakoty@iim-shillong.ac.in)

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Letters to the Editor

The promise and perils of a pan-regional party

Editor,
In the kaleidoscopic landscape of Indian politics, where regional fissures often deepen national divides, a bold experiment is underway in the Northeast. On November 4, 2025, leaders from key regional outfits—led by Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma of the National People's Party (NPP), Pra-dyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma of Tripura's TIPRA Motha, Daniel Langthasa of Assam's People's Party, and former BJP spokesperson Mmholntmo Kikon—unveiled plans to forge a single pan-Northeast political entity. This merger, set to crystallize within 45 days,

marks a seismic shift: a deliberate bid to consolidate fragmented voices into one flag, one symbol, and one unyielding advocate for the region's 45 million souls. For a corner of India long sidelined by Delhi's gaze—plagued by insurgencies, floods, and the gnawing fear of cultural erasure—this could be the clarion call for self-assertion. Yet, as with all such unions in the Northeast's volatile terrain, the road ahead is riddled with thorns.

At its core, this nascent alliance is a rebellion against isolation. The Northeast's political mosaic, with over a dozen state-specific parties, has long diluted its bargaining power at the national table. Sangma, whose NPP has buoyed the BJP-led NDA in Meghalaya, articulated the frustration succinctly: "We are not here to fight with anybody... but the Northeast today needs [this]

entity." Echoing him, Debbarma invoked secularism as a constitutional bulwark, vowing to champion rights "regardless of religion or ethnicity." Their manifesto is refreshingly pragmatic: safeguarding tribal land rights under the Sixth Schedule, curbing infiltration from porous borders, preserving languages and cultures, and combating the racial slurs that North-easterners endure in metros like Delhi and Mumbai. Kikon, the wildcard from Nagaland, framed it as "an idea whose time has come," signalling a pivot from BJP dependency toward independent electoral forays.

This is no pipe dream born of whimsy. The NPP and TIPRA Motha, both NDA allies, bring proven muscle: Sangma's party governs Meghalaya, while Debbarma's outfit upended Tripura's BJP dominance in recent polls. Layer in Langthasa's

Assam base, and you've got a cross-state spine that could redefine alliances ahead of 2026 assembly elections in Assam and beyond. Imagine a unified front contesting Lok Sabha seats in 2029, channelling grievances over the Citizenship Amendment Act or the Armed Forces Special Powers Act into a coherent national narrative. For the first time, the Northeast might not just react to Delhi's policies but shape them—demanding equitable funds for infrastructure, not tokenistic "Act East" photo-ops.

Yet, optimism must temper with realism; this merger teeters on a "fragile foundation." The region's diversity—Assam's Bengali-Hindu heartland versus Tripura's tribal Kokborok speakers, Nagaland's Naga nationalism clashing with Meghalaya's Khasi matriliney—isn't easily fused. Historical precedents haunt: the 2019's

United Democratic Front in Manipur splintered amid ethnic rows, and even the BJP's Northeast Democratic Alliance has frayed under Manipur's Meitei-Kuki violence. Critics like CPI(M)'s Jitendra Chaudhury dismiss it as "old players" recycling power grabs, pointing to the signatories' BJP dalliances as proof of opportunism. Will the new party's secular tilt alienate Christian-majority states like Mizoram or Nagaland? And with the 45-day clock ticking toward mid-December, can they iron out a name, manifesto, and leadership without egos derailing the train?

In an era where national parties treat the Northeast as an electoral ATM—courted during polls, forgotten post-victory—a homegrown colossus could force accountability. It honours the legacies of icons like P.A. Sangma (Conrad's father) and Biju Patnaik, who

dreamed of regional solidarity without secessionist shadows. But success hinges on inclusivity: rope in voices from Arunachal's BJP rebels, Manipur's valley tribes, Darjeeling and Sikkim's overlooked hills. Shun the BJP's orbit only when it serves, not out of spite; leverage it for now to build muscle.

Three weeks post-announcement, whispers of progress are faint, but the intent endures. If this single party emerges not as a fleeting pact but an enduring force, it could herald the Northeast's renaissance: from periphery to powerhouse. Fail, and it risks reinforcing the cynicism that unity here is but a mirage. The ball is in their court—let them play not for thrones, but for the people who have waited too long for one collective roar.

Yours etc.,
Anil Thapa,
Via email

Excessive noise from construction work near Bethany Hospital

Editor,
I am currently attending to my husband, who is admitted at Bethany Hospital on the first floor of the new building. As an attendant, I was deeply disturbed by the continuous noise caused by construction activity taking place nearby. A JCB has been operating since around 9 a.m., and to my dismay, the work continued unabated even at 10 p.m.

I cannot imagine the distress this must have caused to the patients, many of whom require rest and a quiet environment for recovery.

It is disheartening to see that such work is permitted so close to a hospital without any consideration for the well-being of the patients. Have we lost our sense of responsibility? Do the contractors not realise the impact of their actions? It appears that, if allowed, the work would continue 24 hours a day, regardless of the disturbance inflicted upon vulnerable patients.

I am also concerned that the authorities seem indifferent to this severe noise pollution. It is unfortunate that patients—already suffering—have to endure such additional discomfort.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

"Wrinkles will only go where the smiles have been."

— Jimmy Buffett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 107 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2025

Border Problems Hanging Fire

IT'S been 50 plus years since Meghalaya was created out of the state of Assam but the boundaries remain contentious. The Khasis are an oral history people and most claims on territories within the Khasi-Jaintia chieftainship are agreed upon through the spoken word. In any case the idea of territory at the time was not within the purview of the present nation-state. Post independence states were created according to language spoken. Firstly, India's North East continues to be a colonial baggage where boundaries between the region and its extended landmass towards the South East Asian country of Burma (now Myanmar) was drawn leaving out large swathes outside what is now India. The Nagas and Kuki-Zo people of Manipur have their kin beyond the designated boundaries between India and present day Myanmar. To those on either side of the international border a visit to their kin is considered illegal migration, an act which is punishable by law.

Along similar lines but on a smaller scale is the problem of those residing at areas bordering Assam and Meghalaya. While Meghalaya became a state only in 1972, the Khasi, Jaintia or Garo people residing at the borders have done so much before the Indian nation state was formed and even before the arrival of the British. But these histories have not been considered when the state of Meghalaya was bifurcated from Assam. Before granting statehood it would have been pragmatic for both the leaders of Assam and Meghalaya to study the map, visit the border areas to take stock of the situation of the ground and only after both parties agree to the respective territories should the two states have been bifurcated. But everything in India is based on political populism. A state was created even before its borders were realistically drawn. As a result we have repeated violence at the borders when one state decides to resolve the contentious border problems using the force of arms as had happened in Mukroh bordering West Karbi Anglong in Assam in 2022. Five people were killed on account of Assam Police firing on them on the plea that they were timber loggers transgressing into the Assam side and were selling it on the Meghalaya side. The fact that Assam Police is well armed and has a functional border outpost at the Mukroh-Karbi Anglong-Assam border while the nearest outpost on the Meghalaya side is at Barato which is 12-13 kilometres away from the border at Mukroh is also problematic.

The Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) has rightly questioned the slow progress of the inquiry into the 2022 shooting incident by Assam Police. Why is the CBI enquiry not completed yet? Is "shoot to kill" a normal police rulebook? Also, what is the fate of the one-member inquiry commission, appointed by the Assam governor on November 23 2022 headed by Justice Rumi Kumari Phukan which was tasked with unravelling the circumstances leading to the death of five persons on November 22, 2022 in Mukroh, a village claimed by both Assam and Meghalaya. This is 2025, so why is a report dating two years earlier not made public yet by the Assam Government? The MDA Government has to pursue this matter vigorously and demand that the judicial commission report be made public.

Letters to the Editor

Appeal to Strengthen Meghalaya's School Education

Editor,

This letter is prompted by the insightful article published in today's edition of The Shillong Times, titled "Revitalising K-12 Education in Meghalaya using the Universal Design for Learning Framework", authored by Carmo de Brito Noronha.

The article raises timely and important questions about the direction of education and human capital development in our State, and it offers readers an opportunity to reflect on both achievements and areas needing further attention.

At the outset, it is only right to acknowledge the sincere efforts being made by the Government of Meghalaya. Initiatives such as the ADB-supported Supporting Human Capital Development (SHCD) project, the World Bank-backed MPOWER programme, and the large-scale infrastructure work under Mission Education-IV demonstrate a clear and committed vision to improve the school environment across Meghalaya. These programmes deserve appreciation as they signal a strong focus on long-term improvement.

However, the findings presented in the Performance Grading Index (PGI 2.0,

2023-24) serve as a gentle reminder that the foundational years of schooling still require greater collective effort. Meghalaya's ranking, particularly in foundational learning, infrastructure, and governance, does not in any way reflect a lack of dedication among teachers or education officials. Rather, it highlights systemic challenges that must be addressed with sustained focus and support.

The Government's own assessments under Mission Education-IV have identified several lower primary schools that require urgent rebuilding or repair due to old, damaged, or unsafe structures. The decision to prioritise more than 150 such schools in the first phase is a commendable step. Continuing this effort with an emphasis on lower primary schools, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas, would significantly enhance safety, attendance, and learning.

Similarly, national Samagra Shiksha review reports have noted occasional delays in the distribution of free textbooks and uniforms in some northern eastern states, including Meghalaya. For many young learners, especially from low-income households, receiving these essentials on time provides both motivation and readiness for the school year. Ensuring timely availability would greatly support early learning.

Teacher development remains central to educational progress. Meghalaya has

In Meghalaya, people love to discuss development. The subject usually makes front page news reports; the amount allotted for a scheme or else the agenda for heated discussions between politicians, wannabe politicians and pressure groups (the so called Seng Bha Lang). Surprisingly however such discussions are carefully crafted so as not to cross preconceived taboo boundaries and the issue of Human Development Index (HDI) forms one such taboo that is carefully avoided. The (HDI) is a composite statistic used to measure a state's or community's overall achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: health, education, and standard of living.

The elephant in the room that often inhibits meaningful discussions on the standard of living, by all three tribes of Meghalaya is the topic of love, teenage sex, traditionally accepted live-in arrangements and the perplexing and apparently unsolvable saga of the abandoned single teenage mothers. It is no exaggeration to state that more than 60% of tribal families, irrespective of status, social standing, of urban or rural backgrounds or faith followed, have been subjected to the trauma of a pregnant teenage daughter and also the trauma of what to do with a juvenile son who allowed his overactive libido get the better of his judgement. This is no sudden development or social change that has caught us unawares. Instead it is an age old custom of our respective tribes, tolerated and put up with because of tradition, but which has now become an economic millstone around our necks; one which demands modification as per demands of the times. As our societies struggle to cope with the issue of poverty and social destitution, we find single teenage motherhood one of the singular reasons that constantly contribute to this social malaise. So how do we tackle it?

For a change let's keep aside the travails and anguish of the unwed, abandoned single mother and shift focus to the child or children of such mothers. First question—are children of a poor abandoned single unwed mother entitled to the basic human rights enjoyed by children of normal families? Are such children entitled to education, health and nutrition issues, protection from the cold and the elements, entitled to innocent children's games and fun like any other child? The answer is a loud and definite "Yes." The realistic fact however is that such children don't

even realize such rights exist! The only right they know since birth is their right to struggle and fight to simply stay alive. These are the hallmarks of poverty; a state of existence these children are made aware of from their birth. So the next question is—who is responsible for bringing such children to life and to such a miserable existence? Obviously the parents who created life through sexual intercourse. Now in the matrilineal society that we in Meghalaya follow, lineage passes through women, though this doesn't always translate into economic or social empowerment. The traditional support system for unwed, single and abandoned mothers usually comes from the Kur or the clan the woman belongs to. Today we find the Kur system has collapsed or is on the verge of collapse. The joint family system usually managed by the kni (maternal uncle) and the Khatduh, the usual refuge for the less fortunate members of the Kur or Kpho, has more or less ended. Today individual members of the Kur, especially the economically weak, are expected to take care of themselves in a cold, indifferent, uncaring world. In an abandoned family, the welfare of the kid(s) remains the responsibility of the mother. What then is the responsibility of the father?

Attempts to answer this question within the social context we live in today will entail one to walk through a controversial, social minefield. There is the conservative traditional view that the responsibility of the father ends with the birth of his child, whom he perceives as an addition of numbers to his wife's clan. His obligation ends there and he can then, if he so wishes, simply walk away as a carefree bachelor, free perhaps to impregnate and father another child from another innocent female somewhere. Appallingly he can continue with such irresponsible behavior ad infinitum. A flawed social acceptance is that a delinquent father, especially in a live-in relationship, can simply walk away from his parental responsibilities; return home and is welcomed back by his parents. On the other side of the fence is the other tribal male adult, educated or uneducated, Christian or niam, tynrai, who takes pride in his role as head of his family; who like any other caring father the world over, takes pains to ensure that he is able to provide the best to his wife and children. He realises that a father's responsibility goes

far beyond financial support, but also includes being a role model, protector, teacher, and emotional anchor for his children. Yes, traversing the role of a tribal male, requires the ability to understand and appreciate two distinct types of adult male behavior. I would, however focus on the irresponsible type for he is the main contributor to our subject of discussion—the neglected fundamental rights of an abandoned child. The matrilineal system is not the problem. The tragedy is in the unreasonable clinging to outdated tradition and customs and reluctance to introduce social reforms that conform with the demands and needs of the 21st century. So who will do it?

Now within the topic of a father with the wandering eye, do we have legislation or laws to enforce the right of the child? Surprisingly, it seems we do. Section 144 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, deals with the maintenance of wives and children. Under Art 21 of the Constitution, the father has the responsibility to protect a child's fundamental rights (life, dignity, health, development). The father has legally enforceable duties towards financial maintenance, support, care and protection together with ensuring the child's dignity and well being. Its obvious the law of the land has not failed its children and it has also identified the institutions that are supposed to enforce and implement these protective measures. The mandate of three state level institutions towards protecting and maintaining the rights of a child in India is legally quite clear. These three institutions are (a) The Social Welfare / Women and Child Development Department ((WCD) (b) The State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) and (c) The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under the 6th Schedule. The time has come for us to analyse how these three agencies have performed in their duty towards enforcing the Rights of the Child.

First let's turn to our ADCs and the powers granted to them under the 6th Schedule for such necessary changes in our tribal customs and practices. These Councils have legislative, executive, and judicial powers over specified subjects including marriage, and social customs of the local tribes. Sadly only silence, lack of empathy and indifference has emerged from our ADCs over the plight of

our unwed single mothers and their children. Political correctness by holding on to outdated tradition seems to have taken precedence over the need for social reforms. ADCs have failed us in the only sad conclusion one can arrive at!

How about our state government? It has an agency known as the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR). It is an oversight and watchdog body. It monitors government systems relating to enforcement of child rights issues; inquire into complaints of child abuse and child rights violations while also recommending prosecution when the need arises; It is also mandated with an advisory role to government by suggesting new laws, policies or reforms needed to enforce child rights. So is SCPCR aware of the non-existing rights of poor abandoned children of Meghalaya and if yes whether it has advised the state government of the need for special laws on the matter, especially on ways to restrain absconding fathers? Sadly information on such positive action by the SCPCR remains a state secret.

The next state level institution is The Social Welfare / Women and Child Development Department (WCD). It is the main government agency responsible for implementing children's rights on the ground. One of its duties is support to orphaned, abandoned, or vulnerable children. Here too the question arises as to whether the WCD has performed its duty towards the welfare of these abandoned children and to implement their rights? Again we come across a disappointing silence.

Now if poor, illiterate, teenage mothers bring forth children, ignorant of the rights their abandoned children are entitled to, it is my belief that it's the duty of the SCPCR and the WCD to take appropriate legal steps to set right a social wrong. Often it might involve a juvenile male but if a boy feels old enough to father a child, he should also be old enough to know (actually the duty of his parents, school or church to inform him) of the legal circumstances that are bound to follow. POCSO or abuse of child rights are some of the laws that might be attracted. As a society the time has come to call a halt to this irresponsible behaviour of our men running round like untamed scrub bulls, without responsibility or accountability for their actions. No one, whoever they might be has the liberty, in the name of custom and tradition, to override the rule of law.

Indian vernacular literature. Figures like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Michael Madhusudan Dutta were "Macaulay's Children"—highly Anglicized and educated in English—who eventually returned to their mother tongue (Bengali) and modernized it, creating the first modern Indian novels and epic poetry. Despite the literary boom, the status of Indian languages suffered. English became the language of power, courts, and high-paying jobs. Vernaculars became the language of the poor and uneducated. This created a linguistic tier system that persists today: the "English-medium" elite vs. the "Vernacular-medium" masses. Post-independence, too little was done by successive governments to reverse this due to various compulsions. However, Macaulay also must have known that nothing is permanent. No language is inferior or superior. English language, though necessary, is not absolute as rightly exhibited by countries like Japan, China, Russia, Korea etc. Diverse India is now at a language crossroads, however, the present union government is seized of the matter and hopefully Indian languages will revert to its past glory.

Yours etc.,
Arshad Bastavi,
Mumbai

Children's obsession with mobile phones

Editor,

Children's growing addiction to smartphones has become a serious concern. Excessive screen-time is affecting their mental health, weakening their concentration, and causing behavioural issues. It also harms their physical well-being, disrupts their studies, and hinders their overall growth and understanding. Parents must set clear limits on smartphone usage and ensure that children engage in healthier activities such as reading, outdoor play, and creative learning. Responsible guidance at home can help protect children from the long-term negative effects of phone addiction.

Yours etc.,
Arshad Bastavi,
Mumbai

Thomas Macaulay and Indian languages

Editor,

The onslaught of invaders over the last roughly 600 years have tirelessly and significantly compromised Indian culture and its various languages. No less were the efforts of the British raj to undermine Indian languages and impose English as a superior form of instruction in academic institutions, including in governance. The contribution of the Englishman, Thomas B. Macaulay is controversial as he aggressively attacked India's classical languages (Sanskrit and Persian). Macaulay's primary target was not the spoken languages of the common people, but the literary languages of the elite: Sanskrit and Persian. Before Macaulay, the British East India Company funded the printing of Sanskrit and Arabic books to win the favor of Indian elites. Macaulay halted this. He famously argued that the historical and scientific information contained in Sanskrit and Arabic was myth and superstition. His quote in Macaulay's Minute (1835) "I have never found one among them [Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". Moreover, he stopped the funding for printing Oriental works and shifted all financial support to English education.

Macaulay's policy had an ironic effect. By forcing English literature on the Indian intelligentsia, he inadvertently sparked a renaissance in

our unwed single mothers and their children. Political correctness by holding on to outdated tradition seems to have taken precedence over the need for social reforms. ADCs have failed us in the only sad conclusion one can arrive at!

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Yours etc.,
Dr HS Ranhotra,
Shillong

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From Anarchy to Alignment How Crypto Grew Up & Why It Might Finally Belong Inside Government

By Marutey Mani

If someone had told me back in 2007 that a strange digital currency, posted anonymously on the internet would one day push governments to rethink how money works, I honestly wouldn't have believed it. At that time, Bitcoin didn't look like an invention that would last a long time. It felt more like a protest, a bunch of people fed up with banks and institutions trying to build a parallel world where code had more power than authority. Crypto didn't begin as a polished idea. It started as frustration, rebellion, and the belief that technology could do a better job than the people running traditional finance.

That origin story actually matters. It explains why crypto always felt a bit wild and idealistic. It wasn't created for mainstream acceptance or digital governance. But the more I read about its journey, the more interesting the shift becomes. Somewhere along the line, the same technology that tried so hard to run away from institutions slowly became useful to them. And today, with governments, especially the Indian government, moving deeper into digital public systems, it's fair to ask whether something born in anarchy can actually make our institutions more transparent and reliable.

To understand that shift, it's important to see what problem crypto originally tried to solve. For decades, financial systems worked in a very centralized way. Banks approved everything. Governments controlled currency. Institutions handled verification. Most of us never questioned this because we didn't really have a choice. But centralized systems, even when they're efficient, come with weaknesses. A single error or hack can affect millions. Corruption becomes easier because one insider can change records. And in many parts of the world, people who don't have documents or access to banks just get left out entirely.

Crypto emerged as a response to this fragility. It offered a huge promise: a ledger that anyone could verify, where transactions couldn't be secretly changed, and where trust didn't depend on any single authority. In theory, this felt like digital equality. But in practice, it came with a new set of issues. A system with no central authority also means no safety net. If you lost your private key, that was it. If an exchange collapsed, you had no regulator to complain to. If scammers tricked people, there was no way to recover funds. Complete freedom sounded exciting, but it didn't always work for real-world users who need stability more than ideology.

This is why early crypto couldn't grow beyond a niche community. The technology was promising, but it wasn't built for ordinary people. Meanwhile, the world was struggling with their own problems. Citizens were demanding faster payments, transparent systems, and corruption-free processes. Many old digital systems, centralized databases, manual checks, and slow banks weren't built for this new digital age. And in a country like India, once people experienced UPI, DigiLocker, Aadhaar, FASTag, CoWIN, and other large-scale digital systems, expectations changed completely. We got used to things being fast and trustworthy. That's exactly where blockchain re-enters the picture, surprisingly not as a rebellion but as a tool for accountability. A blockchain record can't be replaced secretly. Every change is visible. It's time-stamped. It's shared across many participants. For governments dealing with land records, subsidy transfers, identity, and supply chains, this solves a very practical issue: how to create trust without relying on thousands of middlemen.

Of course, this doesn't mean governments should suddenly adopt the unpre-

dictable, anonymous version of crypto that existed in the early days. What's happening globally is more mature: permissioned, regulated, or hybrid systems. China has a national blockchain network. Countries in Europe are using blockchain for healthcare and document verification. The UAE uses it for business licensing. And India has already run pilots for blockchain land records, certificate verification, agricultural supply chains, and more.

The clearest example of this shift is Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). India's Digital Rupee is already in pilot mode. A CBDC isn't like Bitcoin; it's not volatile or speculative. It's stable, backed by the government, and runs on block-chain-inspired infrastructure. It takes the strengths of crypto (speed, transparency, programmability) but removes the risks (scams, instability, lack of control).

This leads to the main debate: Should block-chain stay totally decentralized and anarchic, or should it be shaped into something governments can use responsibly? Crypto purists say that government involvement destroys the original purpose. But honestly, a technology only makes a real impact when it gets adopted at scale. And scaling safely needs policies, guardrails, and trust, the things only governments can provide.

This is where the Engagement/Participation Model from SciComm becomes relevant. The future is not about authorities dictating technology to people or people rejecting everything. It's about collaboration. Governments, developers, companies, and citizens together decide how digital systems should work. Block-chain fits this model well because it encourages shared participation by design.

If governments adopt block-chain responsibly, the impact on daily life could be huge. Land records that cannot be faked. Scholarships or subsidies reach people instantly. Identity systems that protect privacy but remain verifiable. Cross-border payments in seconds. Academic certificates that employers can check in one click. These aren't just nice ideas; pilot projects in India and other countries already show they work.

Crypto has also surprisingly influenced financial literacy in India. Many young people learned about digital wallets, private keys, and security through crypto apps, sometimes even before understanding traditional banking. With proper education and regulation, this curiosity could grow into a stronger, more informed financial culture.

But all of this only works if safety is guaranteed. People are scared of scams, volatility, and misuse, and that fear is completely valid. Block-chain itself isn't unsafe; it becomes unsafe when there are no rules. When governments collaborate with industry and set clear frameworks, block-chain becomes both open and protected. That balance, not extreme decentralization or extreme control, is how crypto's chaotic beginning can turn into something useful and reliable. For the common Indian citizen, the benefits could be very real: faster payments, clearer records, fewer intermediaries, safer documents, better privacy, and more accessible financial tools. In a country as big and diverse as ours, even small improvements can transform millions of lives.

Crypto may have been born as a rebellion, but its future, if used wisely, lies in helping systems become more transparent and accountable. The real success isn't crypto escaping the system. It's block-chain helping the system work better for everyone.

And maybe that's the irony of it all: a technology built to avoid governments might be the one that finally helps them earn public trust.

(The author is a First Year Student, Plaksha University).

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No.108 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2025

Struggle for Congress

WHILE the results of the Bihar assembly elections were agonizing to the Congress, the party is now faced with another serious pain in Karnataka, where it held power for the past over two and a half years. Two stalwarts behind the party's big electoral win there in 2023, namely Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar are at loggerheads. Shivakumar wants to head the government for the second half of the present five-year term, but the chief minister is in no mood to oblige. Kumar argues that such an understanding had been reached at the time of formation of the Congress ministry in 2023. Now he feels it's time for him to assert and even bay for Siddaramaiah's blood. The party's central leadership finds itself in a quandary also as both these leaders command strong backing from sections of the legislators and different social segments. The party's national president Mallikarjun Kharge, a former Karnataka chief minister, does not have a major say in such situations as the central control of the party rests with the Nehru-family triumvirates, Rahul, Sonia and Priyanka.

The May, 2023 victory of the Congress in Karnataka was a huge morale boost to the party, at a time when the principal national opposition was finding itself in a corner due to the overarching influence of the ruling BJP across most states. The saffron party now rules 14 states while the Congress rules tiny Himachal Pradesh where it won the 2022 polls, Telangana, where the party wrested power from the regional Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) in the 2024 assembly polls and Karnataka. The others who run state governments are regional parties. The Congress party's plight in the North-East, where it once held sway, is evident from the fact that it lost its sole MLA in the Meghalaya Assembly four months ago in a defection to the ruling NPP.

The repeated drubbing for the Congress party in Bihar was thanks to several factors. It had no strong regional leader to project in the elections, unlike the JDU or the RJD or even the BJP. The grand old party no longer has a strong organizational network in the state, as also in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh and most other states. Projection of Rahul Gandhi or his long padayatra by themselves did not help. The Congress victory in Telangana was made possible by the aggressive campaigns of the youthful yet seasoned Revant Reddy against the TRS government. He went on to become the chief minister. So too with Karnataka, where the collective might of Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar was supported also by the doles that the party promised to women, like a monthly financial assistance, free travel to them on state buses etc. Such tempting offers were made by Revant Reddy in Telangana and Chandrababu Naidu in residuary Andhra Pradesh and they laughed their way to success. Nitish Kumar's offer of a hefty Rs 10,000 each to women from some 23 lakh families on poll-eve helped him retain power for a fresh term. The Congress party's central leadership must learn from the successes of others and reorient its policies and strategies.

Letters to the Editor

Mental health & societal response

Editor,

The number of suicide cases is alarming. But even more alarming is self harm potential among school children. Be it peer pressure or failure to meet up with the expectations of the parents to secure high marks, harassment, as alleged, by teachers speaks volumes of the mental condition of our young minds. Going back to post COVID - 19, we noticed that students pursuing higher education (colleges and universities) suffered from panic attacks. I cannot recall that I or any of my classmates ever experienced such panic attacks as students. Of course, we dealt exam pressure but not at the scale that young people these days are experiencing.

Panic attacks as is generally understood is when a person experiences an intense surge of fear accompanied by different physical symptoms and discomfort like racing heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness, exhaustion and a sense of deep fear even when there is no impending danger. Besides the physical symptoms what is worrisome is the fear that engulfs the person, as it signals that our children are disturbed. There must be something that is troubling them deep within that they either have no concrete knowledge and

understanding of and even if they did there is something that holds them back from sharing those feelings with their parents, siblings or friends.

Fear is a natural and universal human emotion but it can also become overwhelming when it is irrational or persistent. Physically, fear triggers increased heart rate, sweating, muscle tension, and heightened alertness. In the case of those with panic attacks fear appears to be imagined dangers or even some social situations that could make one feel judged or vulnerable. Psychologically, fear affects thoughts and behaviour, sometimes causing anxiety, apprehension or insecurity.

Anxiety and apprehension are accompanied by mental stress among school and college-going children. Mental stress has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns for parents, teachers and the society at large. Young people these days are no longer living in a carefree phase of life as the reality for many today is more complex. Academic pressure, social expectations, emotional challenges, and the rapid influence of digital culture have created an environment where stress is not only common but, at times, overwhelming. Tragically, in extreme situations, this stress may push some young individuals toward self-harming thoughts or suicide—an outcome that society must work collectively to prevent.

From an early age, children are trained to equate

success with marks, ranks, and achievements. Board examinations, entrance tests, and the race for scholarships often leave students feeling inadequate or constantly under scrutiny. Failure to meet expectations—whether their own or those of their families—can create deep emotional strain. Instead of viewing education as a process of growth, many students experience it as a battlefield where one misstep is seen as disastrous.

Social pressures add another layer of complexity. Peer pressure, bullying, and comparison—whether in physical spaces or online—can severely affect their self-esteem. The rise of social media has magnified these pressures, creating unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and happiness. A teenager may feel inadequate simply because their life does not match the carefully curated images they see online. For some, this constant comparison transforms into chronic stress or feelings of worthlessness.

At times the age-old adage: charity begins at home may sound clichéd but if one thinks deeply the adage has a lot of meaning and worth. The home indeed is no longer only one of the three basic needs of food, clothing and shelter as we normally understand it to be. The home is the hearth that is to provide its inmates love, warmth and comfort and a place where one feels safe in. Where there is love and peace of mind there will be an abundance of calm and

serenity within oneself as well as among the rest of the members of the family. A human being finds solace and comfort in one's home with one's family. Or that is what a home should be. Hence the home plays a very important role in a human being's life. As a child, the home and the family members are the ones that the child recognises and begin to engage with. The proximity that is felt at that time is a bond that keeps the spark of love and life alive and burning. While many families provide emotional security, there are others where children struggle with misunderstanding, communication gaps, or unrealistic expectations. Parents who themselves face economic or emotional pressures may unknowingly transfer their anxieties onto their children. In such situations, young people may feel isolated, unheard, or burdened by responsibilities they are not prepared to handle.

Mental health challenges, when left unaddressed, can escalate. Students may struggle with anxiety, depression, or emotional exhaustion. Feelings of hopelessness or the belief that they cannot cope with the demands around them sometimes push vulnerable individuals toward dangerous thoughts. It is important to note that these situations are preventable and that young people experiencing such struggles can be supported with understanding, care, and professional help.

Preventing such outcomes requires a compassionate and

collective approach. Schools and colleges must create environments where emotional well-being is given as much importance as academic success. Counselling services, peer support groups, and mental health awareness programmes can empower students to seek help without stigma. Parents, too, play a crucial role. A home where children feel safe to express their fears, failures, and uncertainties can significantly reduce mental stress. Encouraging open conversations, celebrating effort rather than only outcomes, and reassuring children of unconditional support can build resilience.

Mental stress and the rising risk of suicide among young students is not merely an individual struggle but a profound societal challenge that demands urgent attention. We must recognise the immense pressures children and the youth are going through academically, emotionally and socially. We need to respond with empathy, awareness, and collective responsibility. By strengthening support systems, nurturing a culture that prioritises mental well-being, and creating safe spaces where our children feel heard and valued, we can protect vulnerable young minds. These efforts will not only save lives but build a future generation that is emotionally resilient, mentally healthy, and truly empowered.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Rising mental health issues

Editor,

Mental health problems are increasing rapidly and affecting people of all ages and backgrounds. Anxiety, depression, frustration, and emotional instability have become common concerns. Although the entire world has shrunk into the palm of our hand through technology, people are feeling more isolated than ever. Excessive use of social media and smartphones is weakening real relationships and creating emotional distance within families. The government should organise counselling and awareness programs to address this growing crisis. Parents must pay close attention to their children's emotional well-being, and families should set aside quality time to bond and communicate with one another. Schools also need to conduct regular sessions on mental health to support students and teach them coping skills. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and it must be treated with equal urgency.

Yours etc.,
Arshad-Bastavi,
Mumbai

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

Rethinking Landlessness in Meghalaya: Tradition and Policy Gaps

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

the image of Shillong as a most-sought destination for all kinds of cultural activities, there are those who are always complaining. To support the claim of benefits accruing from the various cultural activities, like the Cherry Blossom festival which always comes in for criticism, he revealed that the government was able to earn more than 120 crore after spending just over 20 crore on those events, a gain of more than 400%. This, he claims, the state earned directly, i.e., GST collection, and indirectly, i.e., livelihood of local entrepreneurs. Among the local entrepreneurs who saw an increase in their income, he mentioned the local vendors (street).

GST collection can be assessed through official data but how did the government get data on the income generated, for e.g., the vendors? Was it not long ago that the street vendors were evicted from their place of business which, as seen from reports in the newspapers, has drastically affected their earnings? So, who are these street vendors who got the benefit of all these cultural activities? Furthermore, how was the income gained from livelihood support measured? I did not hear of any survey as such, for I would love to read a report on it and look at the methodology. But to deny that the state gained any revenue is also stupid. It is similar to believing the 76% landless figure as accurate. We need to be critical but it has to come from a place of facts, not petty politics. But landlessness does exist. So, what should be done about it? In this regard, the 'The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Act, 2021' can be quite useful.

The Act recognizes two kinds of land ownership, Ri Kynti or private land, and Ri Raid or community land. Ri Kur or clan land has been categorized under Ri Kynti, while Ri Raid has been defined to mean "lands set apart for the community over which no person(s) has proprietary, heritable or transferable rights excepting the right of use and occupancy. Heritable and transferable rights over the Ri Raid lands accrue when

the occupant has made permanent improvements on the land. These rights lapse if the occupant completely abandons the land continuously for more than three years or for a period as the Dorbar Raid and the Executive Committee deem long enough". So, two things become clear from this definition: first, Ri Raid cannot be owned but only utilized for occupancy or agriculture by all members of the Raid or community; and second, Ri Raid can be transformed into Ri Kynti when someone makes permanent improvements on the land.

It is this conversion of Ri Raid into Ri Kynti which has been responsible for the privatization of community lands which has ultimately led to the growing problem of landlessness in the rural community. Since permanent improvements are usually made by the more affluent members, it is also creating a class difference seen in the housing pattern in many areas now: houses of poor households sitting alongside those of richer households. Very soon, they will become separate localities. In the city, gentrification has already begun and one can see that clearly in some of the new areas that are being developed, e.g., the Mawroh-Sanker area. The problem is made worse in the rural areas because affluent and influential families from Shillong are buying up land either for making a farmhouse or hoarding it to be sold when the land is acquired by the government for some project. Ri Bhoi has been notorious for this, but it appears places like Mairang and others are also going to experience it very soon.

A simple way to prevent the growing landlessness is to include a clause that states that Ri Raid cannot be transformed into Ri Kynti despite any improvements made by the user. However, that would go against customary norms and KHADC is the upholder of customary norms, not its violator. So, another way has to be found. And indeed, there is a section in the Act which allows that possibility.

According to Section 15 (1), the "Executive Committee may, with the consent

of the Chief and his Dorbar, Dorbar Raid, Dorbar Shnong or the Land Owner or clan(s) as the case may be, declare and set apart any area of land as Land Bank ... (and) the Declared Land Bank shall be allotted only to a landless person or persons who are below the poverty line (BPL) belonging to the Khasi Tribe, to sustain their livelihood, for settlement ...". This is a very progressive provision and ensures that no member of the community is left without a roof over their head or land to grow their food.

Taking the concept of Land Bank further, an amendment can be made to the Act that could state that the community can also create Land Banks by buying back land from private individuals and converting it into Ri Raid which can never again be appropriated by private individuals by having the Dorbar Shnong or Dorbar Raid pass such a resolution. Villages like Nongraw in East Khasi purchased land in the past, categorizing it as VDC (Village Development Council) land, earmarking it for farming for all the members of the community. Support can also be provided to certain communities to buy land for a Land Bank where the entire village is owned by absentee landlords. Nongraw's neighbouring village of Dewlieh is such a case. This amendment will complement the section on 'Fixation of Ceiling on Raid Land Holding' where it has been provided that "the ... Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Raid and the Dorbar Hima may by notification, fix a ceiling over the settlement, allotment or setting apart of raid land made by it ...". This will ensure that no individual families, especially the affluent ones, can hoard land and that enough is available for everyone in the community.

Landlessness is a growing problem and the 2021 Act is a very important tool to tackle that. What is now required is political will to implement the Act by the present KHADC. Granted that comprehensive change may not come immediately, but incremental progress has to be seen. I hope, therefore, that we can rise above petty politics to tackle this very important issue.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Time to Fix the Oil Leak...

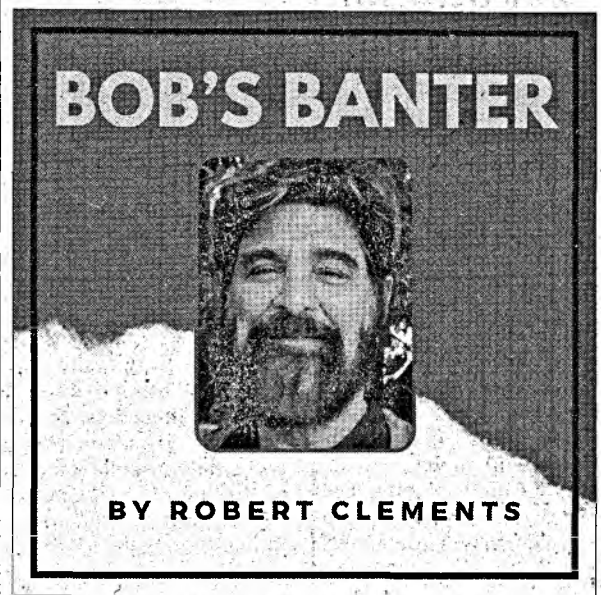
Somewhere in the nineties I bought what I believed was the most elegant machine on the Indian road. It was the Tata Estate and I must say that vehicle looked like a dream. It stood outside my house like royalty. People passing by slowed down to stare. Children pointed. Neighbours envied. And I must confess that I puffed my chest out every time I walked to it with the key in my hand. I felt like a king approaching his chariot. I believed I owned something that finally proved India had arrived on the world stage.

But my joy was short lived.

Not five years. Not even one year. Five months. Five months and the trouble began. First the engine

tea. They have seen flyovers fall days after inauguration. They have seen the data. They have seen the rankings. And though we will soon shout pilot error the world hears design flaw. They hear negligence. They hear mismanagement. They hear corruption.

The gleaming Tata Estate that once stood proudly in my driveway soon became the embarrassment of my neighbourhood. People smirked. Friends sympathised. Mechanics laughed. And finally I surrendered my pride and sold it at the price of scrap. The Tejas crash has now become the embarrassment of a nation that wanted to strut on the runway like a peacock. We had spread our feathers. We practiced the victory walk. We had written the headlines before the



coughed like it had taken ill after a winter night. Then the brakes behaved like they were meant only for gentle stops at a Mumbai traffic signal and not for the bold ambition of long journeys. The power steering felt like a reluctant bullock that refused to move no matter how much you coaxed or threatened. Every trip took twice the time because I kept watching the temperature gauge like an anxious ICU nurse watching a patient who might collapse any moment. The service centre soon knew me so well that I felt like sending them Diwali sweets and Christmas cake. We spent so much time together that I almost expected an invitation to staff picnics. They smiled cheerfully each time I drove in. I groaned. And every time I sat in the driver's seat I prayed more fervently than I prayed in church. And I often wondered who had designed it. What kind of engineers had put it together. Were they chosen because they were brilliant or because they were somebody's nephew or cousin or roommate or the son of a powerful union leader? Was it ability or was it favour? Was it competence or was it quota? Was it talent or was it adjustment?

And today when the world watches the Tejas crash and we rush to defend ourselves with an array of explanations and excuses my mind goes back to that proud gleaming vehicle outside my door. Once again I hear the same loud claims. We are one of the top engineering nations. We are an emerging superpower. We are the envy of the world. And we laugh at western reports that call us one of the most corrupt nations. We laugh at poverty statistics. We laugh at poor education rankings. We laugh at warnings about declining research standards. We silence critics. We admire ourselves so loudly that we drown out the truth.

But in one tragic second the world sees what lies beneath the paint. One crash and the questions arise. Are we pretending? Are we over-selling? Are we standing on shaky ground pretending it is marble? Are we painting rust and calling it gold?

The world is not fooled. They have seen our bridges collapse. They have seen our trains derail. They have seen construction crumble like a biscuit dipped too long in

take off. But an oil leak always tells the truth. A loose bolt always betrays the boast. A poorly trained mechanic always exposes the lazy system. Quality cannot be faked. Skill cannot be substituted with slogans. Pride cannot replace performance.

And maybe this is our national weakness. We love to cover the cracks with fresh coats of paint. We love to decorate broken foundations with bright banners. We love speeches more than repair work. We love celebrations more than corrections. We love applause more than improvement. We love pretending that everything is fine while the oil quietly drips on the ground.

I remember once sitting on the side of the Mumbai Pune highway with the bonnet up and cars whizzing past me. A truck driver leaned out and shouted with a laugh, "Saab, gaadi acchi dikhti hai, par chalti kam hai." And I, sweating and humiliated, nodded.

Somebody needs to say the same to us today. The nation looks good on the outside. The paint shines. The chrome sparkles. The speeches glitter. The slogans sound heroic. But when the bonnet is lifted the wires are loose. The oil is leaking. The engine is gasping. And the brakes are unreliable.

It is time to fix the oil leak. It is time to repair instead of argue. It is time to improve instead of boast. It is time to appoint engineers for their brains, not their connections. It is time to reward talent not obedience. It is time to build pride in performance not propaganda.

Because if we do not fix the engine now the next crash will be louder. The next embarrassment will be bigger. And the next silence after the explosion will be filled not with excuses but with tears. Let us stop posing like a superpower on the runway and start working like a mechanic in the garage. Let us remove the banners and pick up the toolbox. Let us repair. Let us rebuild. Let us become worthy of applause instead of begging for it.

It is time to fix the oil leak.

You can request for Bob's Banter by Robert Clements as a daily column on your whatsapp by sending him your name and phone number on bobsbanter@gmail.com.

"Happiness is not something ready made.
It comes from your own actions."

— Dalai Lama

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 109 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2025

ONE: A Bold Move

ONE North East (ONE), a political movement that seeks to bring together a united voice of the indigenous tribes of India's North East under a single political platform, started in August this year. Since then it has picked up steam and is drawing large crowds wherever meetings are being held in one or other of the eight states which includes Sikkim. The latest gathering happened in Agartala where huge crowds participated and where the voices of the leaders seemed to resonate with the thousands of ordinary citizens. The stance taken by those who have come together to start the ONE movement is that the region needs to play on its strong points and to ensure that the spirit of federalism that is embedded in the Constitution of India is followed in letter and spirit.

The key players of ONE as of now include Pradyot Manikya from the royal house of Tripura who leads the Tipra Motha Party (TMP), Conrad Sangma, the leader of the National Peoples' Party (NPP) and currently the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Mhonlumo Kikon, former minister in the Nagaland cabinet and spokesperson of the BJP Party until he resigned in August this year and Daniel Langthasa former Member of the Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council. Recently, Hemochandra Singh, former Speaker of the Manipur Assembly, a minister and an MLA representing the Singjamei Assembly constituency for many years from the Congress Party and had earlier resigned from the party in 2024 also joined the One North East Party.

These leaders have been having several strategy meetings and are trying to convince the regional parties in Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Sikkim to join hands with them to defeat attempts by national parties to subsume the voices from this distant periphery and to only use the political parties from this region to keep the national parties alive here. A clear evidence of the lack of concern of the central government is in how the Manipur crisis is being handled. The Prime Minister only visited Manipur this year and that without any significant change in the status quo. Victims of the ethnic conflict of May 3, 2023 between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei are still unable to return to their homes. Victims on both sides of the divide have no homes to return to since those in the hills cannot return to Imphal valley and vice versa. Quite a few homes of people of both communities have gone up in flames. But no attempts have been made so far to rehabilitate the displaced people and to assist in constructing low cost homes so the displaced can return to some semblance of normalcy. This apathy of the central government towards the Manipur violence is what has made the leaders of regional parties in the region revisit their priorities.

The Central Government has signed agreements with TIPRA Motha's Pradyot Manikya on restoring the land rights of indigenous tribals of Tripura – a right that all other tribes of the North East enjoy but there has been no response as yet from the Home Ministry. Similar is the fate of the Nagas who have been waiting for the Government of India to decide on their demands since 1997. This is what has triggered the need for a common platform for the North East.

A Battle We Must Win: Protecting Meghalaya's Children From the Drug Menace

By Jairaj Chhetry

There are moments in a society's life when silence becomes dangerous, and looking away becomes an act of harm. Meghalaya has reached such a moment. Today, what we face is not just a law-and-order challenge, not just a social problem—it is a slow, silent threat creeping into the lives of our children, our families, and our future.

And nothing captured this painful truth more sharply than the report published on (November 21, 2025) in The Shillong Times. It revealed something that shook even the strongest among us—children being used as couriers in the drug trade. Children... the ones we pray for, the ones we send to school with hope in our hearts, the ones whose dreams brighten our evenings.

To imagine a child carrying drugs instead of school-books... a child trembling at a trafficker's command instead of playing with friends... a child trapped in a world they don't understand. It hurts. It frightens. It compels us to ask whether we, as a society, have protected our young enough. This is not just a newspaper headline. It is a cry rising from the heart of Meghalaya.

And as I write this—with a worried mind but a hopeful heart—I pray that we still have time to shield our children before more are lost.

A State at the Crossroads: A Future at Stake

The report was not an isolated story. It was a symptom of a deeper wound. On (November 22, 2025), another analysis revealed an even more distressing truth: Meghalaya is no longer just a transit corridor for narcotics; it has become a major consumer.

Let that sink in. Half of the drugs entering our State stay within our State. Heroin is now the most consumed substance. Shillong alone absorbs 30% of these trafficked drugs. And beneath these numbers lie faces—young faces—of boys and girls who might have laughed a little louder, dreamed a little bigger, lived a little longer if someone had protected them sooner. More than 1,150 peddlers have been arrested. Police are upgrading technology. Volunteers are stepping forward. The battle is ongoing.

Yet the enemy has slipped inside our homes, our schools, our neighbourhoods. To admit this hurts. But refusing to admit it will cost us our children. The First Places Children Should Feel Safe Are Now Shaking. When traffickers begin using children, it reveals not only their cruelty but also our cracks.

1. Homes Struggling Under Pressure

Parents are overwhelmed—by work, financial strain, emotional burden. Some days are so heavy that small signs go unnoticed. Traffickers know this. They wait for the weak moments.

2. Schools Handling More Than They Can Carry

Teachers are working

hard, often with too many responsibilities. Some schools lack counsellors who can detect early behavioural changes.

3. Neighbourhoods Losing Old Bonds

Once, neighbours knew one another and watched over each other's children. Now, life has become hurried. Streets feel more anonymous.

4. Youth Under Emotional Strain

Unemployment, peer

children to: heal; rejoin school; receive therapy; regain confidence; rebuild childhood

3. Awareness in Schools Teachers trained to identify early signs. Parents included in awareness sessions. Students guided gently toward safe choices.

4. Speeding Up NDPS Trials

Swift justice sends a message that traffickers will face consequences—and that children will be protected.



pressure, loneliness, confusion, the lure of "trying once"—all these create tiny openings that traffickers push their way through. The UNODC warns that 13 out of every 100 drug-abuse victims in India are below 20. Thirteen children died to substances means thirteen futures slipping away. This is a human crisis. A wound that needs healing—not blame, not shame, but healing.

The Hard Numbers We Cannot Ignore
Throughout 2025, The Shillong Times published a series of reports that together reveal a frightening picture.
(April 23) — Over 1,000 arrests and 564 NDPS cases, but only 15 convictions in five years.
(August 9) — Drug use starting as early as age 10.
(August 21) — Drugs worth Rs 412 crore seized, 1,061 arrests.
(October 13) — More arrests in West Garo Hills for psychotropic drugs.
(October 21) — Meghalaya officially shifts from transit to User State.
(November 20) — Children used to sell drugs.
(November 21) — Half the drugs entering Meghalaya consumed locally.
(November 26) — National spotlight on trafficking networks connected to North eastern routes.

Behind every statistic, there is a life, a family, heartbreak.

Government's Response: Strong, Sensitive, and Urgently Needed

Amid the darkness, there are also rays of hope. The Government of Meghalaya has taken steps that reflect both firmness and deep human understanding.

1. De-Addiction Centres in Every District

These are lifelines for families drowning in fear and confusion. They say, "You don't have to fight alone. We are with you."

2. Children Treated as Victims, Not Criminals This approach is vital. It allows

The government's actions show a rare combination of discipline and compassion.

Both are needed. Both are essential.

The Real-Life Heroes: Police, NGOs, Faith Bodies, Community Leaders

Meghalaya Police — Standing Between Children and Danger. Day and night, they walk into the unknown. They conduct raids in dark, risky corners. They chase leads that could endanger their own lives. They face threats so that our children may be safe. Often they work without applause, without rest. Their courage deserves recognition.

NGOs — Quiet Angels of Healing.

They sit with mothers who cry silently. They counsel children who don't know whom to trust. They visit homes where hope is almost gone. They track recovering youth long after others forget. NGOs repair hearts the law cannot reach.

Faith Institutions — The Soul's Shelter

In moments of fear and confusion, many young people turn to churches and faith communities. They provide: emotional support; spiritual reassurance; guidance; a sense of belonging

Their compassion is a light in dark corridors.

Dorbar Shnongs & Nokmas — Protectors of Community Strength

They know every lane, every family, every child. Their vigilance is priceless: night patrols; emergency meetings; youth guidance; coordination with police; alerting communities to danger. Without them, much of the battle would be lost before it began.

Where We Must Improve: Honest Reflections

To win this fight, we must admit what still holds us back: parents fearing stigma instead of seeking help; schools lacking trained counsellors; youth without sports fields or activity centres; mental health treated as shame; communities avoiding difficult conversations; neighbours

the pinch, while financial institutions could face indirect inflationary stress.

Most experts agree the pain may be temporary. A possible India-US trade deal could reduce the trade deficit and help stabilise the currency. Key triggers for a recovery include softer crude prices, a cooling dollar, and steady RBI intervention to manage volatility. If these align, analysts expect the rupee to find a more stable range over the next three to four quarters.

On the losing side, import-heavy sectors will face immediate margin pressure. Aviation and oil marketing companies deal with higher fuel and crude costs. Electronics, consumer durables and autos with large import components also see profitability squeezed. What must be noted also is that power utilities dependent on coal imports and capital goods manufacturers may also feel

staying silent even when something feels wrong. Nothing changes until the truth is spoken.

Shillong: A City Under Growing Pressure

Shillong is changing faster than we realise. More people, more movement, more vulnerability.

Yet the city has only 12 Village Defence Parties. For a growing city with rising drug activity, this is frighteningly small. Motphran, once filled with pride and vibrancy, now feels overshadowed.

Parts of West Shillong—areas full of family warmth—are being targeted quietly. We cannot let more corners fall into silence.

A Path Forward: Six Steps to Protect Our Children

1. Drug Education in Every School—Knowledge is armour. Children must learn the truth early.

2. Community Vigilance

Let churches, neighbourhoods, women's groups, and youth organisations form protective circles.

3. Healing, Not Punishment

Children who fall into the trap need comfort and guidance—not fear.

4. Mental Health Support Without Shame

Let counselling become normal, accessible, and respected.

5. Purpose and Dreams for Youth

Sports grounds, music rooms, art workshops, skill centres—these keep young hearts strong.

6. Zero Tolerance for Traffickers

Those who exploit children must face firm, uncompromising action.

A People's Movement: Because Every Child Matters

The government is trying. Police are fighting. NGOs are healing. Churches are comforting. Community leaders are guarding.

But the battle cannot be won unless families rise.

Let parents speak openly with their children. Let youth protect each other like siblings. Let neighbours speak out. Let community voices be louder than traffickers' whispers. Drug networks grow in silence. They crumble when people stand together.

My Final Appeal to Meghalaya

I write this with a heart that is heavy, but not hopeless. Let not a single child be lost because we kept quiet. Let not one trafficker succeed because we were afraid to act. Let this be the moment when Meghalaya rises as one—as parents, neighbours, believers, leaders, and citizens. We will fight this battle because our children are worth every effort. And we will win because the future of Meghalaya deserves nothing less.

(The author is a retired Headmaster and a 2022 state Awardee in the field of education)

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

Trump's Ukraine Peace Plan: Consequences for India

By Dr Malgorzata Bonikowska

American President Donald Trump has asked his overseas envoy Steve Witkoff to hold talks at the Kremlin next week to push for a deal to end the war in Ukraine. This after he recently unveiled a 28-point peace plan for Ukraine, which has sparked global debate over how the international community should address Europe's largest armed conflict since the Cold War. Presented as a pragmatic roadmap to end hostilities, the plan places significant obligations on Ukraine while offering Russia a pathway toward de facto recognition of its territorial claims.

While its proponents frame it as a realistic attempt to halt the bloodshed, reactions across Europe have ranged from scepticism to criticism. For India, balancing ties with both Russia and the West while consolidating its presence in the Indo-Pacific, the plan warrants attention. It reflects shifting priorities in Washington, exposes divisions within Europe, and could shape the broader strategic environment in which India operates.

Key Provisions of the Plan

At its core, Trump's proposal anticipates major concessions from Ukraine. Kyiv would need to formally acknowledge Russian control over Crimea, as well as the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk occupied by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. The plan also calls for a reduction in Ukraine's armed forces, from roughly 880,000 to around 600,000, limiting its capacity to deter future aggression. Additionally, Ukraine would be expected to forgo any ambition to join NATO, though European Union membership might remain possible.

The proposal mandates national elections within 100 days of a settlement—a compressed timeline for a nation still grappling with active hostilities and displacement. It envisions a broad non-aggression pact among Russia, Ukraine, and selected European states, along with mechanisms to monitor compliance and provide security guarantees. Economic incentives for Ukraine are mentioned but remain vague, while Russia is not explicitly required to withdraw forces from occupied territories before recognition of its territorial gains.

Kyiv's Standpoint

From Kyiv's perspective, Trump's plan is highly contentious. Ukrainian leaders are likely to view it as favouring Moscow, undermining national sovereignty, and sidelining Ukraine in decisions over its own territory. Public opinion may reflect scepticism, with concern over rapid elections, troop reductions, and concessions that could provoke backlash and polarization. Many Ukrainians remain committed to defending territorial integrity, and measures perceived as externally imposed could weaken public trust in institutions and complicate post-conflict reconstruction.

European Responses: Concern and Division

European governments, particularly those along NATO's eastern flank, have reacted with alarm. Poland, a steadfast supporter of Ukraine and a neighbour directly exposed to potential Russian pressure, has categorically rejected any settlement negotiated without Kyiv's full involvement. Alongside the Baltic states, Warsaw emphasises that rewarding territorial conquest would undermine Europe's security architecture and set a dangerous precedent.

Western European powers, including Germany and France, have been more cautious but remain critical. They stress that any durable peace must respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. A solution imposed through bilateral negotiations between Washington and Moscow—particularly if Ukraine is marginalised—risks fracturing transatlantic unity at a time when Europe faces escalating security threats.

This divergence in the West has implications for India. It signals a reorientation of Washington's priorities that may reduce U.S. focus on European security while accelerating engagement in Asia. A fragmented Europe, uncertain about American reliability, could find it challenging to coordinate policy toward Russia and China, shaping a more complex strategic context for New Delhi.

Implications for India

India's strategic calculus is shaped by three core considerations: maintaining stable ties with Russia, deepening engagement with the United States and Europe, and preserving space for strategic autonomy. Trump's plan intersects with all three dimensions.

One, Russia remains a crucial partner for India, particularly in defence cooperation, energy supplies, and broader geopolitical balancing. A settlement that formalises Russian territorial gains could strengthen Moscow's global bargaining position and reinforce its pivot toward Asia. This may create opportunities in sectors such as technology, nuclear energy, and resource collaboration. Yet a more confident Russia could also deepen military alignment with China—a scenario New Delhi must monitor closely.

Two, a swift resolution of the Ukraine conflict—regardless of fairness—could free U.S. diplomatic, military, and financial bandwidth for the Indo-Pacific. This could benefit India, provided Washington sustains its commitment to supporting New Delhi's regional capabilities and balance. However, the plan's marginalization of European partners raises questions about U.S. predictability, a factor India must consider when calibrating posture.

Three, India positions itself as a leading voice of the Global South, advocating diplomacy, sovereignty, and negotiation. A settlement seen as imposed on Ukraine without broad participation may resonate poorly among developing nations. If the plan reduces global economic uncertainty and stabilizes energy markets, India and other emerging economies could gain materially. New Delhi will therefore weigh both normative principles and economic outcomes in assessing the plan.

Potential Risks for India

Despite possible opportunities, the plan carries significant risks. A peace deal that legitimizes territorial conquest could normalise similar behaviour elsewhere—a notable concern for India given its own border disputes. Additionally, a strengthened Russia-China axis could complicate the strategic environment, even if Russia seeks to maintain balanced relations with India.

Another concern is the precedent of great-power bargaining over smaller states' sovereignty. India has consistently opposed such arrangements, advocating inclusive diplomacy and multilateral engagement. A settlement crafted mainly through secret negotiations between Washington and Moscow may therefore conflict with principles India routinely defends on the global stage.

In conclusion, Trump's 28-point peace plan, framed as a pragmatic roadmap to end a costly conflict, signals a notable shift in the United States' approach to global security, prioritizing rapid conflict resolution over principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. While it unsettles Europe and raises questions about Western cohesion, the plan also has broader implications for international norms and the strategic balance across Eurasia.

For India, it is neither solely an opportunity nor purely a threat; it underscores the fluidity of geopolitics and the importance of navigating the emerging order with clarity, autonomy, and foresight. Developments in Ukraine offer vital lessons on balancing principles, diplomacy, and national interests in a multipolar world while highlighting the interconnectedness of European security with Indo-Pacific stability and strategic decisions New Delhi must make in response to a rapidly evolving international landscape. —INFA

(The writer is President, Centre for International Relations, Poland)

Letters to the Editor

Free fall of rupee against dollar a cause for concern for the country

Editor,

The fall in value of the Indian rupee as compared to the US dollar is a cause of concern for the country and requires drastic steps to be taken to control further devaluation as it will adversely impact the economy of the country. The message from the Reserve Bank of India to the market is clear - It cannot always support the currency.

The latest fall of 98 paise was owing to negative cues

from global and domestic equity markets because of trade-related concerns, said forex analysts who highlighted the fact that this was the biggest single day fall of the INR in over 3 months. Global risk-off sentiment has spilled into currency markets after a sharp overnight sell-off in crypto-currencies and AI-linked technology stocks. The sudden unwinding of risk trades is weighing on emerging-market currencies, including the Indian Rupee.

In the near term, factors such as risk-off flows, a firmer U.S. Dollar Index, and uncertainty surrounding the trade-deal with the US keeps the bias upward, with the pair potentially testing the 90.00 mark. Ever since the imposition of the 50% tariffs on Indian imports which came into effect in

late August, the rupee has continuously struggled for three months.

Now the rupee has breached the 89-per-dollar mark for the first time and economists say the currency's weakness is far from over and this process can continue further and we have to prepare for it. But now even if India finally seals the long-pending trade agreement with Washington which the markets have been waiting for weeks then the lift to the rupee will likely be temporary because there is need for structural changes and for it the central bank has to take the initiatives otherwise all planning will be in vain.

Right now India's private sector activity hit a six-month low. Manufacturing PMI slipped to 59.9. Com-

posite PMI dropped to 57.4, a nine-month low. A higher-than-expected trade deficit is adding further pressure on the rupee and these combined global and domestic cues created negative sentiment, leading to the sharp fall we saw on November 21 (Friday). A steep rupee slide usually filters into equity sentiment, and a record weak rupee creates risk-off sentiment in the equity market as investors worry about higher imported inflation, rising corporate input costs, pressure on margins of import-dependent sectors.

The pressure tends to be more acute in midcaps and small caps, where valuations and leverage are higher, and FIIs typically turn defensive when the rupee hits new lows, as dollar-adjusted returns shrink and volatility

rises. The weakness typically creates short-term caution in equities and may trigger selective FII outflows from rate-sensitive and high-valuation pockets. The currency's slide creates clear sectoral winners and losers. Export-oriented industries stand to benefit, with stronger dollar revenues boosting rupee earnings.

On the losing side, import-heavy sectors will face immediate margin pressure. Aviation and oil marketing companies deal with higher fuel and crude costs. Electronics, consumer durables and autos with large import components also see profitability squeezed. What must be noted also is that power utilities dependent on coal imports and capital goods manufacturers may also feel

the pinch, while financial institutions could face indirect inflationary stress.

Most experts agree the pain may be temporary. A possible India-US trade deal could reduce the trade deficit and help stabilise the currency. Key triggers for a recovery include softer crude prices, a cooling dollar, and steady RBI intervention to manage volatility. If these align, analysts expect the rupee to find a more stable range over the next three to four quarters.

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Via email

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ChatGPT effect: How AI chatbot has changed lives

Three years ago, if someone needed to fix a leaky faucet or understand inflation, they usually did one of three things: typed the question into Google, searched YouTube for a how-to video or shouted desperately at Alexa for help.

Today, millions of people start with a different approach: They open ChatGPT and just ask.

I'm a professor and director of research impact and AI strategy at Mississippi State University Libraries. As a scholar who studies information retrieval, I see that this shift of the tool people reach for first for finding information is at the heart of how ChatGPT has changed everyday technology use.

Change in searching

The biggest change isn't that other tools have vanished. It's that ChatGPT has become the new front door to information. Within months of its introduction on November 30, 2022, ChatGPT had 100 million weekly users. By late 2025, that figure had grown to 800 million. That makes it one of the most widely used consumer technologies on the planet.

Surveys show that this use isn't just curiosity - it reflects a real change in behaviour. A 2025 Pew Research Centre study found that 34 per cent of US adults have used ChatGPT, roughly double the share found in 2023.

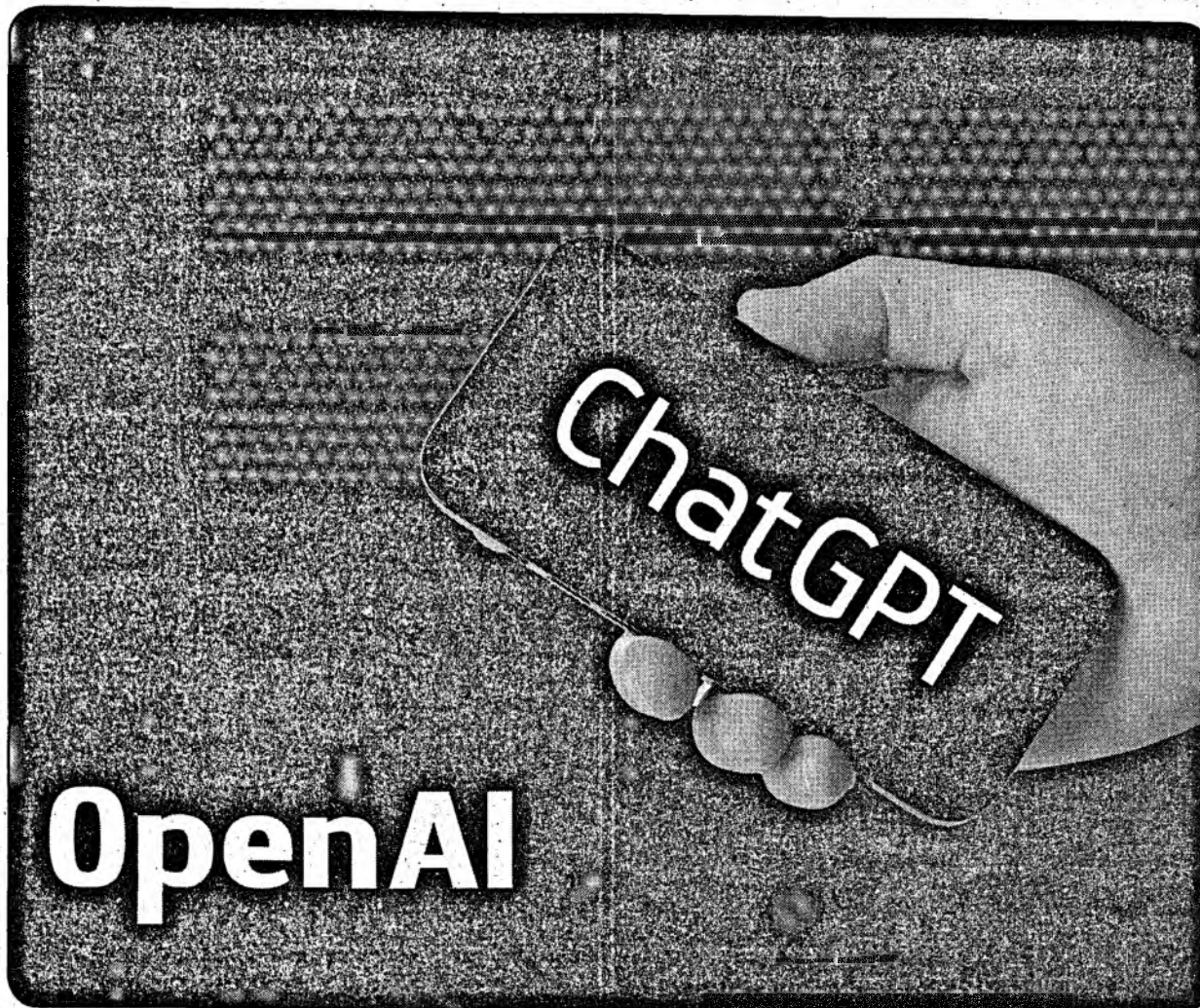
Among adults under 30, a clear majority (58 per cent) have tried it. An AP-NORC poll reports that about 60 per cent of US adults who use AI say they use it to search for information, making this the most common AI use case. The number rises to 74 per cent for the under-30 crowd.

Traditional search engines are still the backbone of the online information ecosystem, but the kind of searching people do has shifted in measurable ways since ChatGPT entered the scene. People are changing which tool they reach for first.

For years, Google was the default for everything from "how to reset my router" to "explain the debt ceiling." These basic informational queries made up a huge portion of search traffic. But these quick, clarifying, everyday "what does this mean" questions are the ones ChatGPT now answers faster and more cleanly than a page of links.

And people have noticed. A 2025 US consumer survey found that 55 per cent of respondents now use OpenAI's ChatGPT or Google's Gemini AI chatbots about tasks they previously would have asked Google search to help them with, with even higher usage figures for the UK.

Another analysis of more than 1 billion search sessions found that traffic from generative AI platforms is growing 165 times faster than traditional searches, and about 13 million US adults



have already made generative AI their go-to tool for online discovery.

This doesn't mean people have stopped "Googling," but it means ChatGPT has peeled off the kinds of questions for which users want a direct explanation instead of a list of links.

Curious about a policy update? Need a definition? Want a polite way to respond to an uncomfortable email? ChatGPT is faster, feels more conversational and feels more definitive.

At the same time, Google isn't standing still. Its search results look different than they did three years ago because Google started weaving its AI system Gemini directly into the top of the page. The "AI Overview" summaries that appear above traditional search links now instantly answer many simple questions - sometimes accurately, sometimes less so.

But either way, many people never scroll past that AI-generated snapshot. This fact combined with the impact of ChatGPT are the reasons the

number of "zero-click" searches has surged.

One report using Similarweb data found that traffic from Google to news sites fell from over 2.3 billion visits in mid-2024 to under 1.7 billion in May 2025, while the share of news-related searches ending in zero clicks jumped from 56 per cent to 69 per cent in one year.

Google search excels at pointing to a wide range of sources and perspectives, but the results can feel cluttered and designed more for clicks than clarity.

ChatGPT, by contrast, delivers a more focused and conversational response that prioritises explanation over ranking. The ChatGPT response can lack the source transparency and multiple viewpoints often found in a Google search.

In terms of accuracy, both tools can occasionally get it wrong. Google's strength lies in letting users cross-check multiple sources, while ChatGPT's accuracy depends heavily on the quality of the prompt and the user's ability to recognise

when a response should be verified elsewhere.

Smart speakers and YouTube

The impact of ChatGPT has reverberated beyond search engines. Voice assistants, such as Alexa speakers and Google Home, continue to report high ownership, but that number is down slightly.

One 2025 summary of voice-search statistics estimates that about 34 per cent of people ages 12 and up own a smart speaker, down from 35 per cent in 2023.

This is not a dramatic decline, but the lack of growth may indicate a shift of more complex queries to ChatGPT or similar tools. When people want a detailed explanation, a step-by-step plan or help drafting something, a voice assistant that answers in a short sentence suddenly feels limited.

By contrast, YouTube remains a giant. As of 2024, it had approximately 2.74 billion users, with that number increasing steadily since 2010. Among US teens, about 90 per cent say they use YouTube, making it the most widely used platform in that age group. But what kind of videos people are looking for is changing.

People now tend to start with ChatGPT and then move to YouTube if they need the additional information a how-to video conveys. For many everyday tasks, such as "explain my health benefits" or "help me write a complaint email," people ask ChatGPT for a summary, script or checklist. They head to YouTube only if they need to see a physical process.

You can see a similar pattern in more specialised spaces. Software engineers, for instance, have long relied on sites such as Stack Overflow for tips and pieces of software code.

But question volume there began dropping sharply after ChatGPT's release, and one analysis suggests overall traffic fell by about 50 per cent between 2022 and 2024. When a chatbot can generate a code snippet and an explanation on demand, fewer people bother typing a question into a public forum.

So where does that leave us?

Three years in, ChatGPT hasn't replaced the rest of the tech stack; it's reordered it. The default search has shifted. Search engines are still for deep dives and complex comparisons. YouTube is still for seeing real people do real things. Smart speakers are still for hands-free convenience.

But when people need to figure something out, many now start with a chat conversation, not a search box. That's the real ChatGPT effect: It didn't just add another app to our phones - it quietly changed how we look things up in the first place. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 30, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Venus on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results for the whole year. You will be rewarded for your efforts. And will receive acclaim and appreciation from your peers and superiors. Your pet projects will be completed. And you will work with focus and determination. You will be goal oriented and will work in team spirit. You will take people along with you. You will also be very positive in relations with your mate. He/she will provide all support and help you need in difficult situations. And will prove able companion. Financially you will have no major worries. You can invest in shares, mutual funds, debentures and bonds. And it will make good profit. Your business income too will rise. Students will get success in exams and interviews. Your faith in God will increase and you will attend religious gathering and visit holy places. Business trips will keep you busy. And you will interact with several people.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration this week indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains, and your energy increases for projects at work. Your job environment is teeming with activity. You take small yet sure steps towards your financial goals. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. Children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and or structure. There are some contentious issues that are laid to rest as you tackle them and take a bold stand.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) New friendships are likely to emerge during this time: supportive and easygoing ones. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you are indicated. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. Do not allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains is on the cards but analyze data at hand before you invest. Energy is high and things happen swiftly and decisively.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You will have to face challenges at every step. But you will prove equal as the task. Financial struggles and adjustments will continue. Money will come in after putting in a lot of effort. Take proper care of your health. You will defeat your enemies with courage, wisdom and cleverness. Your work will start getting completed. You may sign some agreements to bring an element of newness into your work. The results of job-related tests, departmental tests, competitive tests will favour you. You will use this trick in your family. Your family members will support you in the most demanding circumstances. You will enjoy a good time with them. Loved ones will come closer to each other.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) You would be blessed with good health, love in relationships and harmony at the workplace. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract opportunities which hitherto seemed out of reach. You desire to learn and improve on your practical skills. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you that enable you to quicken the pace at your workplace. Tension could run high and reach an emotional peak. Do not get carried away without first getting the facts. Yoga and walking would prove to be beneficial.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful people who could prove to be helpful as they extend a helping hand. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training or to further your education. Happiness and fulfillment through close friendships and relationships is indicated. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to aim for a sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) The planetary combination this week tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring, and this brings about a new awareness. You are more determined

to achieve your personal goals and are more strategic in the manner you go about doing so. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. New projects excite you but remember that bringing them to a completion is just as important. A little attention on fitness and health related programs would be helpful.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a realistic approach to business and finance. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement and professional activities. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is more intense. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you currently. You look to networking to leverage your contacts. You may be quick to anger and can antagonize some whom you want to win over.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) This phase is good for money, status and enhancing your standing this week. Your entire focus shifts in this direction. You take on new responsibilities but enjoy the challenges it presents. Your belief systems and personal philosophies are especially important to you, but do not often coincide with your methods. This dichotomy will inculcate new attitudes towards finances, and social relationships before you strike a balance. It is an excellent time for travel, higher education and communications. The family is supportive and helps you look at the larger picture.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach towards your life, and you cultivate true friendships. It is a time when you need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, act and start afresh during this week.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You would be able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility in personal and professional relations this week. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding and are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You must maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects are going ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit this week.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) You feel on top of things in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition from younger ones. It is time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your unselfishness and willingness to listen will help boost your magnetic appeal. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Overseas visitors and news are positive and inspiring. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) Business projects and associations are opening and widening your horizons, so you need to think expansively this week. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well on your own rather than place trust upon others. You are generous with friends and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. A business venture could be fruitful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You are involved in multiple tools of creativity that you possess. A gentle and softer approach can resolve an old conflict this week.

Air pollution may reduce health benefits of exercise, finds study

A new study led by researchers at University College London (UCL) shows that chronic exposure to toxic air can significantly diminish the health benefits of regular physical activity.

The study analysed data from more than 1.5 million adults tracked for more than a decade in countries including the UK, Taiwan, China, Denmark and the United States.

The team found that the protective effect of regular exercise on people's risk of dying over a specific period - from any cause and from cancer and heart disease specifically - appeared to be reduced; but not eliminated, for those who lived in high pollution areas.

The researchers looked at levels of fine particulate matter - tiny particles known as PM2.5s with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres across. These particles are so small they can get stuck in the lungs and enter the bloodstream.

The health benefits of exercise significantly weakened where the yearly average level of PM2.5s was 25 micrograms per cubic metre (mg/m³) or higher, the team found. Nearly half (46%) of the world's population live in areas exceeding this threshold.

The lead researcher, Professor Po-Wen Ku of National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan, said, "Our findings emphasise that exercise remains beneficial even in polluted environments. However, improving air quality can greatly enhance these health gains."

Co-author Professor Andrew Steptoe, from UCL's Department of Behavioural Science & Health, said: "Our study shows that toxic air can to some extent block the benefits of exercise, although not eliminate them. The findings are further evidence of the damage that fine particle pollution can do to our health."

"We believe clean air and physical activity are both important for healthy ageing and



Commuters make their way as a layer of smog covers New Delhi amid deteriorated air quality. (PTI)

so we encourage greater efforts to curb health-harming pollution levels."

For the study, the research team looked at data from seven existing studies, including three that were unpublished, combining the summary statistics from each study into one overall analysis. For three of these studies, they re-analysed the raw data at the level of individual participants.

Combining the data from seven studies, they found that people who did at least two and a half hours of moderate or vigorous exercise* a week had a 30% lower risk of dying during the study period than those who did not meet this exercise threshold.

However, if people in this very physically active group lived in an area with high fine particle pollution (above 25 mg/m³), this reduction in risk halved to 12-15 per cent.

At higher levels of fine particle pollution, above 35 mg/m³, the benefits of exercise weakened further, particularly for risk of death from cancer, where the benefits were no longer robust. About a third of the world's population (36 per cent) live in areas whose yearly average PM2.5 levels exceed 35 mg/m³.

For study participants in the UK, the average yearly PM2.5 levels were lower than these thresholds, at 10 mg/m³. However, levels of fine particle pollution vary a lot and spikes in pollution in UK cities do exceed 25 mg/m³, the critical threshold identified in the study, mainly during the winter months.

Co-author Professor Paola Zaninotto, from UCL's Department of Epidemiology & Public Health, said, "We don't want to discourage people from exercising outdoors. Checking air quality, choosing cleaner routes, or easing off intensity on polluted days can help you get the most health benefits from your exercise."

In their section on limitations, the authors noted that the study was mostly conducted in high-income countries, so the findings might not apply to low-income countries where fine particle pollution is higher, often exceeding 50 mg/m³. Other limitations included a lack of data on indoor air quality as well as participants' diets.

However, a wide variety of other factors were accounted for, including income and education levels, health behaviours such as smoking, and the presence or not of existing chronic diseases. (ANI)