

"Time is what we want most, but what we use worst."

— William Penn

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Community Just a Figment

THAT the community residing along the Lum Shyllong and adjoining areas like Raid Laban would only wake up now after over 540 trees have been cut down to make way for the much-touted Ropeway Project is an indication of what 'community' actually means and whether such a community even exists in Meghalaya. For indigenous people being part of the community is as natural as breathing. At funeral homes everyone congregates irrespective of wealth ranking to pay respects to the deceased and offer condolences to the family. Indeed, this is the single event that brings people together for the common cause of expressing sadness at the loss of a life. But that is where this community spirit ends. When Government schemes are proposed within a locality under a Dorbar Shnong, only the office bearers take it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the entire shnong. Is that really how a democracy functions, especially the much-touted Khasi democracy where consultations are at the root of decision-making?

Then there are environmental pressure groups that pick and choose their issues. If there was a problem in setting up a 5-star hotel in a hillock surrounded by the Umiang Lake, is there no wrongdoing by the Government in cutting down 540 or more trees to make way for a Ropeway Project meant to entertain tourists? Where is GreenTech Foundation when the greenery of Lum Shillong is being murdered? Most Dorbar Shnong look at the income the project will generate and are happy with that. They hardly have any concern for the long term ecological impacts and above all the adverse impact on catchments which supply water to areas downhill. A cause for concern is how the Project was cleared by the Environment and Forest Department only because there is a clause for compensatory forestry elsewhere several kilometres away from Lum Shyllong. Is that really what compensatory forestry is? Under India's forest conservation framework, agencies that divert forest land for projects are generally required to do three things - (a) Pay the cost of compensatory afforestation (b) Provide land on which new trees can be planted (c) Contribute funds for the regeneration and protection of forests.

While the replacement plantation can happen wherever suitable land is available, which may be many kilometres away from the area originally cleared, ecologists have repeatedly pointed out several problems with this approach. They say a mature forest cannot simply be replaced by saplings elsewhere. Also, wildlife loses its habitat immediately, while the new forest may take decades to become established. Besides, the local ecosystem—soil organisms, birds, insects, water sources, and native plant species may be permanently altered. Sacred groves, hill forests, and watersheds have cultural and ecological value that cannot easily be recreated. Planting trees in another location does not necessarily restore the cooling effect, groundwater recharge, or soil stability of the original forest. In a place like Lum Shyllong, these concerns are especially important because the forest is not merely a collection of trees. It is part of a larger ecological and cultural landscape that includes water catchments, wildlife habitats, sacred spaces, and one of Shillong's last major green lungs. The question to ask is not, "How many trees will be planted?" but rather, "Can the ecological functions of the original forest be restored?" In many cases, the answer is 'no'.

The most dangerous masks are not the ones worn by strangers. They are the ones worn by people we admire, respect and trust. They are worn by those whose words carry authority, whose positions command admiration and whose public image appears beyond question. They are worn by those who tell society what is right, what is moral and what is acceptable. Yet, sometimes, behind that carefully constructed image lies a reality that forces society to confront an uncomfortable truth: appearances can deceive.

A reputation built over decades can crumble in a matter of moments. A person celebrated for wisdom, morality or professional excellence can suddenly become the subject of difficult questions. And when that happens, society is forced to look beyond the individual and examine a much larger issue—the uncomfortable gap between what people preach and how they behave when they believe nobody is watching. Recent events in Shillong have once again brought this uncomfortable conversation to the forefront. Allegations involving a senior lawyer and member of the Shillong Bar Association, A H Hazarika have triggered anger, debate and soul-searching. While the truth of any allegation must ultimately be determined through a fair investigation and due process, the controversy has opened a wider discussion about power, trust and the fragile relationship between reputation and character.

It is in this context that the words of one Joseph M. Kharkongor in his thought-provoking article *The Naked Truth* (<https://theshillongtimes.com/2025/11/25/the-naked-truth/>), published in *The Shillong Times* on 25 November 2025, come back with remarkable relevance. His reflections on hypocrisy and the contradictions of human behaviour capture a reality that society has struggled with for generations—the difference between the person we show the world and the person we truly are. Hypocrisy is not a new disease. It has existed wherever human beings have created standards for others while quietly excusing themselves. We demand honesty but sometimes hide our own truths. We speak passionately about morality but become selective when applying those moral standards. We are quick to expose the faults of others while protecting our own imperfections behind silence, excuses and carefully crafted images.

But perhaps the uncomfortable truth is that masks survive not only because some people are skilled at wearing them. They survive because society often rewards them. We are attracted to appearances. We admire success, eloquence, influence and status. We sometimes mistake a respected position for a respectable character. We build images of people without always asking whether the person behind

When the Mask Falls

By Satyaprakash Mehta

the image truly represents the values we celebrate. A person can accumulate titles, honours and admiration, yet the true measure of character is found not in public applause but in private choices. Character reveals itself in moments when there is no audience, no reputation to protect and no immediate reward to gain.

Perhaps what disturbs society most is not merely wrongdoing itself, but wrongdoing committed by those from whom we expect better. When an ordinary person fails, it is often seen as a personal failing. But when someone who represents justice, religion, education, leadership or public service is accused of misconduct, the sense of betrayal is far deeper because that individual is believed to represent values larger than themselves. This is why the collapse of an image can be so shocking. We often confuse status with character. We assume that a person with success, education, wealth, influence or a respected position must automatically possess integrity. But character is not proven by titles; awards or public recognition. It is revealed in moments when there is no audience, no applause and no fear of judgment.

Power, too, carries its own dangers. It can provide influence and respect, but it can also create a dangerous illusion—the belief that ordinary rules do not apply equally to everyone. When people are surrounded by admiration, obedience and protection, they may begin to believe that consequences belong only to others. The greatest danger of power is not only that it can be abused; it is that it can convince people that they are incapable of abusing it. This is why every institution, whether legal, religious, political or social, must constantly examine itself. The greatest threat to any institution is not criticism from outside, but the inability to question itself from within.

Kharkongor's article also raises a difficult debate about exposure. In an age where information travels instantly and digital footprints can be uncovered, leaked or misused, society constantly faces a difficult question: where does accountability end and violation of privacy begin? The episode discussed by him involving a hacker from Shillong, who accessed private digital accounts and obtained intimate/obscene material, brought this dilemma sharply into public conversation. The existence of platforms such as the WordPress blogs <https://megleaks.wordpress.com/> and <https://roymarbaniang.wordpress.com/>, which were discussed in relation to the episode, added another dimension to the debate about technology, privacy and public morality.

The controversy surrounding such incidents is not only about the material itself, but

about what it reveals regarding society's fascination with the gap between public image and private behaviour. When individuals who project morality, respectability or authority are confronted with allegations of conduct inconsistent with that image, people naturally begin asking difficult questions. Is society interested in the truth because it values accountability, or because it enjoys watching reputations collapse? Are we exposing hypocrisy because we genuinely care about values, or because scandals provide a momentary sense of satisfaction?

The argument for scrutiny is understandable. When people occupy positions of influence, especially positions involving moral leadership or public trust, many believe their conduct deserves greater attention. A person who demands certain standards from society while privately appearing to violate those same standards naturally invites questions about sincerity and integrity. However, a society committed to justice must also recognise that the method of exposure matters. The fight against hypocrisy cannot become an excuse for abandoning privacy, consent and fairness. The truth must be pursued, but the pursuit of truth itself must remain ethical. The deeper issue is not merely whether private failings should be exposed.

The deeper issue is why society is often more disturbed by the discovery of hypocrisy than by hypocrisy itself. Why do we react only when the curtain is pulled aside? Why do uncomfortable truths often remain ignored until they become impossible to overlook? Perhaps because society itself sometimes participates in maintaining illusions. We celebrate personalities. We defend reputations. We admire achievements. We often want our heroes to remain perfect, even though perfection is rarely human. Then, when reality challenges the image, we feel betrayed.

There is also the question of selective morality. One of the greatest forms of hypocrisy is not simply failing to follow one's own principles. It is changing those principles depending on who is involved. We demand accountability when the accused is someone we dislike, but search for explanations when it involves someone we admire. We condemn behaviour among our opponents while rationalising similar behaviour among our own. A society that applies morality selectively eventually loses the moral authority to speak about morality.

The public reaction of parading the lawyer accused of sexual misconduct has also sparked debate. To many people, such acts represent frustration with a system where influential individuals are sometimes perceived to escape consequences. When ordinary citizens feel that power protects the power-

ful, public anger often seeks a visible symbol that no one is beyond scrutiny. There is an emotional reason behind such reactions. People want reassurance that respectability, wealth, profession or social standing cannot become a shield against consequences. They want to see that the same rules apply to everyone.

However, public anger must always be balanced with the rule of law. A society cannot replace courts with crowds. True justice is not measured by how loudly people condemn someone, but by whether the truth is fairly established and whether accountability follows through proper institutions. The purpose of justice is not revenge; it is the restoration of trust.

The question that deserves attention is why institutions often respond only after controversy erupts. Why are uncomfortable voices sometimes ignored until a crisis forces attention? Why do communities sometimes defend reputations before examining facts? And why do bystanders remain silent when challenging powerful individuals becomes uncomfortable? Wrongdoing rarely survives, because of one person alone. It often survives because others look away. Sometimes the greatest protection given to misconduct is not active support, but passive silence.

This is especially important in situations involving unequal power. Interns, students, junior professionals and others at the beginning of their careers often depend on those above them for guidance and opportunities. Institutions must create environments where concerns can be raised without fear and where protecting reputation never becomes more important than protecting people.

A healthy society is not one without scandals. Human beings are imperfect, and institutions are imperfect because they are made by human beings. A healthy society is one that has the courage to question itself when uncomfortable truths emerge. The lesson from every such controversy is not that every respected person is secretly dishonest. Nor is it that every allegation automatically proves guilt. The lesson is that no person should be judged only by the image they project, and no institution should be judged only by the reputation it claims.

In the end, every society must decide what it values more—the comfort of familiar faces or the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. A mask can create an illusion. It can earn admiration. It can survive for years. But a mask cannot change reality forever. Sooner or later, every mask falls. And when it does, the question is not only who was behind it. The question is whether we had the honesty to look beyond the mask when it was still in place.

(The author is a research scholar residing in New Delhi, India)

What Students in Delhi Won, Meghalaya's Women Still Await

By A. Kharwanlang

On July 25, 2026, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned from the Council of Ministers. He had held one of the most powerful portfolios in the Union Cabinet, backed by the full weight of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Prime Minister himself. Yet ten days of sustained protest by a youth movement that called itself the Cockroach Janta Party, born out of anger over the NEET-UG paper leak, was enough to force his hand. He wrote to the Prime Minister, acknowledged the anguish of the country's youth, and stepped down. The protesters, satisfied that accountability had finally been enforced, called off their agitation at Jantar Mantar. Whatever one makes of the politics surrounding it, the episode proved something important: even in a system as entrenched and hierarchical as the Union Government, sustained public pressure can still force a powerful man to answer for institutional failure.

The protests were not led by a conventional political party or a seasoned opposition leader. They were driven by ordinary students, many of them first-time agitators, organised under a name that was almost mocking in its irreverence and yet unmistakably serious in its intent. Their other demands, compensation for families of students who had died by suicide after being told to retake exams, and no punitive action against those who took part, were also accepted before the demonstrations were called off. The lesson was plain. When a public wrong is pressed persistently and visibly enough, even the most insulated corridors of power eventually respond.

Contrast with Meghalaya's MCA
Raymond Kharkamni, suspended Honorary Secretary of the Meghalaya Cricket Association and a member of the ruling National People's Party, remains suspended pending disciplinary proceedings subject to High Court outcomes, after the Meghalaya State Commission for Women (MSCW) returned formal findings of negligence and cover-up in his handling of sexual harassment complaints filed by members of the MCA Under-23 Women's Cricket Team. The complaints date back to December 2025. The Commission's findings are not rumour or allegation circulating on social media. They are the product of a statutory body constituted precisely to investigate such wrongs, arrived at after hearings in which Kharkamni himself appeared and was heard. On the basis of those findings, MCA President James P.K. Sangma suspended him and referred the matter to the Association's Ombudsman, a retired High Court judge, for further disciplinary action.

And yet Kharkamni continues to function as though none of this happened. He has contested the suspension through a writ petition filed in the Meghalaya High Court, a matter that remains sub judice. He has defied a stay order issued by the MCA's own Ombudsman and pushed ahead with an unauthorised General Body meeting notice, serious enough to draw an interim order nullifying it. And, most tellingly, he continues to represent the Association in official cricketing business, including a recent meeting of the North East Zone Selection Committee for the Duleep Trophy, sitting alongside representatives of other state associations as though he carries the full authority of an office he has been stripped of. There has been no recusal, no pause, no visible discomfort at occupying a chair from which he has been formally removed. It is the conduct of a man who believes that the protection of his party affiliation will outlast any inquiry, any suspension, any court proceeding.

What makes this more troubling is the near-total public silence that has followed now. The women cricketers who came forward, at real professional and personal cost, are still waiting for the matter to reach any kind of resolution. Where is the outrage that briefly gripped the state when the story first broke? Where are the women's organisations and civil society groups who ordinarily do not hesitate to speak on issues of institutional accountability? Where is the sus-

tained public pressure, the kind that put an end to Dharmendra Pradhan's tenure within days, rather than the months that have now passed here without consequence? A story that should have galvanised the state's conscience has instead faded into the background noise of a news cycle that has moved on, while the women at the centre of it are left to wonder whether coming forward achieved anything at all.

Why is the NPP silent?
The silence of the ruling NPP is the most damning part of this picture. Meghalaya's leaders, across party lines, have spoken often and fluently about the state's commitment to women's safety and dignity. These are not private convictions confined to closed-door meetings. They are public commitments made on public platforms, repeated during campaign season and cited as evidence of a government attentive to the concerns of half its population. If those commitments mean anything, they ought to begin with the ruling party's own members, not end where inconvenient scrutiny begins. Kharkamni is not an obscure functionary shielded by anonymity. He holds a named position in the State's Planning Board and belongs to the party that runs the state government. His continued presence in official meetings, unchecked and unremarked upon by his own party, sends an unmistakable signal about where the limits of that professed commitment actually lie.

With Lok Sabha by-elections now approaching and campaigning underway, the ruling party would do well to consider what credibility it brings to any conversation about women's safety while one of its own remains suspended over findings of covering up harassment and continues to conduct himself as though suspension were a mere formality. A government cannot credibly campaign on the safety and dignity of women in one breath while, in the next, allowing a suspended office-bearer facing findings of institutional cover-up to represent a political party in politics and governance without so much as a public rebuke.

If the party is not prepared to act against one of its own, even when the findings are formal, documented, and unambiguous, then perhaps women's safety should not feature in its campaign messaging at all. Voters deserve consistency between what is promised on the podium and what is tolerated within the party's own ranks.

There are also serious and separate allegations of financial irregularity surrounding Kharkamni's tenure at the Association, reported extensively in the press and still awaiting full institutional resolution. These are not minor bookkeeping disputes but questions that go to the heart of how public sporting funds and grants have been managed, questions that any office-bearer with nothing to hide would ordinarily welcome the chance to answer in full. Yet Kharkamni has never held a press-conference to answer any of these allegations, instead cleaning his image using the testimonies of non-stakeholding members. Taken together with the harassment cover-up findings, they paint a picture of a man who has, for now, managed to insulate himself from consequence through procedural delay and political shelter rather than through any demonstration of innocence. Delhi's students showed what sustained, visible pressure can extract even from a government that would rather have looked away. Meghalaya does not need a movement on the scale of the Cockroach Janta Party to secure basic accountability from a suspended office-bearer facing formal findings of covering up harassment against young women in his charge. It needs its civil society, its NGOs, and above all its ruling party to stop treating the matter as settled simply because the news cycle has moved past it. The women of the Under-23 team are still waiting. The question is how much longer the state, and the party that governs it, intend to make them wait.

(The author is a sporting enthusiast and a former associate of cricket in Meghalaya)

Letters to the Editor

Save Lum Shyllong from Commercial Exploitations

Editor,

I join the concerned mothers and citizens of Shillong to oppose the proposed Shillong Ropeway project at Lum Shillong. As a permanent resident of Lawsohtun at the foothill of Lum Shyllong, we rely solely on it for our drinking water. It is one of the most critical water catchment areas not only for Lawsohtun but for the entire city. It is scary to learn that the Meghalaya Tourism Development Authority (MRDA) has obtained permission to fell 544 trees. The question is: Was there any scientific study done to assess the irreversible damage and impact on the environment because of such large-scale deforestation? We all know that once there are no trees on the slopes, the soil loses its grip, which increases the chances of

soil erosion and landslides. So far, this greenery—the source of water and top-class air quality for a large part of the city, even better than Europe or America—was freely available. Once you disturb this greenery, the damage will be endless. Look at what happened to the Shillong-Dawki Road project. We better learn fast before it's too late.

Already, we are seeing the impact of climate change that has resulted in a serious deficit in rainfall in the city so far this year. The massive deforestation in the New Shillong Township up to Mawkhanu area for several roads, stadium and other infrastructure projects has already caused irreparable damage to the local environment and beyond. Coming back to the Ropeway project, it is not something we cannot live without. I would rather have sufficient potable water and fresh air for generations rather than a ropeway at the cost of serious environmental degradation. This century and beyond, our fight should be to maintain the valuable

source of potable water and fresh air. I urge the MDA government and Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma to let his judgement be governed by the long-term needs of Shillong's citizens rather than the commercial returns. The government should shelve this project once and for all if it comes at such an invaluable cost of degrading the environment. The best place for the ropeway project is from Mawdok Road to the other side. We pray that better sense prevails in the MDA government. To satisfy tourists, you cannot sacrifice us and the generations to come.

Yours etc.

Prof. Lakhon Kma, Shillong-4

An Open Letter: Hi Assam, Meet Gravity!

Editor, Every monsoon, North-

east India performs its most enduring tradition. No, not Bihu, Wangala, or Ambubachi. It's the annual game of "Whose Water Is This Anyway?" Assam looks uphill at Meghalaya and says, "Could you kindly stop sending us your water?" Meghalaya looks back and replies, "We're not sending it. Gravity is."

Somewhere in the middle, Sir Isaac Newton quietly wonders why he's being dragged into state politics three centuries after his death. Let's be fair. Meghalaya sits on a plateau. Assam is downstream. Water has a habit of flowing downhill. It has been doing this long before either state had chief ministers, municipal corporations, or people arguing on social media with satellite images they barely understand.

Imagine living on the first floor of an apartment and filing a complaint because the rainwater from the roof keeps reaching the ground floor. That's essentially the argument. Of course, the

story doesn't end there. Cities expand. Hills are cut. Wetlands disappear. Drains get clogged with everything except the water they're supposed to carry. Rivers fill with silt. Then, when the monsoon arrives exactly as the weather department warned it would, everyone suddenly acts surprised. It's like removing the brakes from your car and then blaming the mountain for being too steep.

Politicians, meanwhile, have perfected the ancient art of hydrological diplomacy. "If the other state did something..." "If only they hadn't..." "If they stopped..." The rain listens patiently before continuing to fall on everyone equally. Perhaps it's time for a revolutionary proposal. Instead of holding press conferences aimed at each other, Assam and Meghalaya could hold one aimed at gravity.

While we're at it, maybe we should ask the Brahmaputra to take a U-turn and politely queue behind traffic signals. Nature is wonder-

fully democratic. Clouds ignore state boundaries. Rivers don't check administrative maps. Rain doesn't stop at interstate checkpoints waiting for permission from the border police. The monsoon has never once said, "Ah, this is Assam. I'd better behave."

In the end, floods don't care about political speeches. They care about drainage, planning, forests, wetlands, river management, and whether humans have left enough room for water to go where water has always wanted to go. So yes, blame Meghalaya if it makes for a satisfying headline. But don't be shocked when the next heavy rain ignores the editorial and continues obeying the one authority it has always respected: Gravity.

Yours etc., Sandaburum Syiemlieh Sohra, Khlieh Shnong

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

Not long ago, air conditioning was widely considered a luxury—an optional appliance reserved for affluent households or tropical climates. Across much of Europe, they were often dismissed as unnecessary, with generations relying instead on thick stone walls, open windows, shaded courtyards and the occasional electric fan to endure the summer months.

That assumption is rapidly melting away.

As relentless heatwaves scorch large parts of Europe, North America and Asia, air conditioning is undergoing a dramatic transformation—from a symbol of comfort to a tool of survival. The debate is no longer about convenience but necessity, forcing governments, climate experts and urban planners to confront a difficult question: how do societies protect people from extreme heat without deepening the climate crisis that fuels it?

The urgency of that dilemma was captured vividly in a recent report by The Economist. In early July, with temperatures forecast to exceed 40 degrees Celsius, desperate shoppers in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, reportedly pushed against the doors of a Lidl supermarket until they gave way—all in a frantic bid to secure the last available portable air conditioner. In another store across the city, two men reportedly fought over the same coveted appliance.

Scenes that would once have seemed unimaginable in Europe are becoming increasingly common.

India's cooling boom

While Europe scrambles to adapt to a hotter future, India is already in the midst of one of the world's fastest cooling revolutions.

According to The Economist, India added around 50 million air-conditioning units between 2019 and 2024—roughly half the total number of units currently installed across Europe.

The expansion is only just beginning.

The India Energy and Climate Centre (IECC) at the University of California, Berkeley estimates that India could install another 130-150 million air-conditioning units over the next decade, driven by rapid urbanisation, rising incomes and increasingly frequent heatwaves.

For millions of Indian households, owning an AC is no longer viewed as a luxury purchase but as protection against temperatures that routinely climb above 45 degrees Celsius across large swathes of the country during summer.



INDIA LEADS THE COOLING SURGE

Why Europe never embraced AC

Europe's relatively low adoption of air conditioning has long puzzled visitors from hotter parts of the world.

According to ScienceInsights, several factors explain this historical reluctance.

For decades, much of Europe enjoyed comparatively mild summers, reducing the perceived need for mechanical cooling. Many homes were constructed long before air conditioning became commonplace, featuring thick brick or stone walls designed to keep interiors naturally cool.

Electricity prices have also played a decisive role. Running an air conditioner in Europe typically costs two to three times more than in the United States because of higher energy tariffs and environmental taxes, discouraging widespread use.

Environmental concerns further reinforced resistance, with many Europeans viewing air conditioning as energy-intensive and incompatible with climate goals.

Yet climate change is steadily eroding those assumptions.

A Euronews report, citing the Inter-

national Energy Agency (IEA), noted that although the European Union still has significantly fewer air conditioners than either China or the United States, the number of cooling units in Europe has more than doubled since 1990 as demand for cooling buildings has surged, particularly across northern Europe.

Researchers also point out that Europeans often experience extreme heat more intensely than people in South Asia—not because temperatures are necessarily higher, but because buildings, infrastructure, daily routines and even public expectations were never designed for prolonged heat. Longer daylight hours and humidity in many regions further amplify discomfort.

Cooling saves lives

The growing demand for air conditioning is not merely about comfort—it is increasingly recognised as a public health imperative.

At the COP30 climate summit in Brazil, cooling technologies were formally recognised as essential infrastructure, placing them in the same category as water supply and sanitation.

That designation reflects mounting scientific evidence about the deadly

consequences of extreme heat.

According to the Lancet Countdown 2025, heat-related illnesses claimed nearly half a million lives annually between 2000 and 2019.

Another study published in The Lancet estimated that by the early 2020s, access to air conditioning was preventing approximately 190,000 deaths every year among people aged 65 and above.

As global temperatures continue to rise, cooling is increasingly being viewed as a life-saving intervention rather than an energy-hungry luxury.

The climate paradox

Yet widespread adoption of air conditioning presents one of climate policy's greatest contradictions.

The very technology that shields people from deadly heat also contributes to the warming planet.

Cooling currently accounts for around four per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, and global demand for cooling is projected to triple by 2050.

Air conditioners consume enormous amounts of electricity, much of which is still generated using fossil fuels in many countries. Older cooling systems

also rely on refrigerants that can be powerful greenhouse gases if released into the atmosphere.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply expanding access to cooling but doing so sustainably—through energy-efficient buildings, renewable electricity, improved grid infrastructure and next-generation refrigerants.

As The Economist observed, countries unable to invest simultaneously in electricity grids and cooling infrastructure risk entering a vicious cycle: rising temperatures increase demand for cooling, which strains already fragile power systems and hampers economic development.

AC and economic growth

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew once described air conditioning as one of history's most transformative inventions.

Writing in 2009, Lee argued that AC made modern development in the tropics possible by creating comfortable workplaces that attracted investment and improved productivity.

While Singapore's remarkable growth was driven by numerous economic and political factors, cooling

technology played a quiet but important supporting role.

Today, that argument is gaining renewed relevance as more tropical and developing nations grapple with rising temperatures.

Children and workers bear the greatest burden

The consequences of inadequate cooling extend well beyond household comfort.

According to UNICEF, nearly 466 million children—roughly one in five worldwide—now live in regions experiencing at least twice as many extremely hot days each year as they did six decades ago.

Extreme heat poses particular risks to infants, children and pregnant women, increasing the likelihood of dehydration, heat stress and other health complications where adequate cooling is unavailable.

Workers are equally vulnerable. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that by 2030, heat stress could erase 2.2 per cent of global working hours, equivalent to 80 million full-time jobs.

The greatest losses are expected in agriculture and outdoor labour, particularly across South Asia and West Africa, where soaring temperatures increasingly make physical work unsafe during daylight hours.

The future of cooling

Despite mounting evidence of its life-saving benefits, air conditioning continues to spark debate.

Critics warn that unchecked expansion will sharply increase electricity demand, intensify urban heat islands and lock countries into higher carbon emissions if cleaner energy systems do not keep pace.

Supporters argue that in a warming world, denying access to cooling is no longer realistic—or humane.

The challenge before policymakers is no longer whether societies should embrace cooling technologies, but how they can ensure that the next generation of air conditioners is cleaner, more efficient and powered by renewable energy.

As climate change pushes temperatures into uncharted territory, the humble air conditioner is emerging as far more than a household appliance. It is becoming one of the defining technologies of the twenty-first century—caught at the intersection of public health, economic productivity, energy security and the global fight against climate change. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, AUGUST 2, 2026

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon opposite Venus on your solar return chart and it will give excellent results for you. You may get involved in an exciting romantic tie with a person known to you. It will be an intense and passionate affair leading to marriage. You will be put in situations where you will have to take quick decisions. You will show maturity in dealing with different problems of life. You will get an opportunity to show your creative skills at your place of work. Your distinct style of thinking will help in meeting lot of challenging situations. You will interact and spend a lot of time with people on one-to-one level. And will also coordinate with those people with whom you work or share your thoughts. Your financial situation will remain strong. You will undertake lot of business-related trips. You could be drawn to spiritualism in a big way and will develop religious inclination.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) Time is extremely favorable. You will have financial gains. A problem which has been bothering you for a long time will get solved. You will also excel at your workplace. Your bosses will have a good impression of you. Your disputes with brothers will get resolved. The placement of Jupiter will give you benefits. You will also spend quality time with your family members. And will undertake a program to move out from home. Your advice will be important for the family. You will receive the blessings of your elders. Your love life will be amazing. It will be a time for mental peace. Property disputes will be resolved with talks. You will have a positive attitude towards life.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Your income will increase. Students will focus on their studies. In competitive exams, hard work may be required to achieve favorable results. In the interview also extra preparation is required. Your ideas will be revolutionary, and you will be liked by one and all. Your bosses will also have a good opinion about you. You will get success in whatever you do. Your business problems will get solved. You will gain a lot from good and nice people. Your personality will attract people towards you. A person working in your office will show interest in you. And will have liking too. The plan for journeys outside the country can be made. You will have opportunities for advancement. You will plan for your future. The journey to a religious place is expected.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) It is time for gains in business and job. Your work will be completed. You will have financial gains. Your name and fame will spread far and wide. Your importance too will increase in work. You will do your work with concentration. You will get result of your hard work done earlier. As the business situation is good, your sales will increase. You will have profits and gains. It is a good time for students. They will get success in exams. There can be a plan for unmarried people to engage in the house. There is possibility of good work. It is a favorable time to start a new project. You will also go out with your family for lunch or dinner. You will enjoy a wide range of cuisine.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is time for a change which you were thinking for a long time. You will do your work with full dedication and will remain in a wonderful position. Your enemies will be unable to harm you. You will make new investments. You will have gains. There will be a change in your lifestyle and routine for the better. You will gain success in income and profit matters which will increase your morale. There will be a sense of security. You will have reasonable employment opportunities. The mind will be drawn towards fulfilling ambition. It will be a pleasant week for marital life. Work will be done as per your will. You will fulfill all the responsibility of the family very well.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) The results that you will get this week will please you a lot. You will be dedicated to your work. You will also be able to complete the task on time. A property dispute will get resolved with help from a third person in mediation. In the job or business, you will achieve your goals. The excess of hard work will keep you busy and exhausted. You will be happy with your bosses. Your relations with spouse too will remain balanced. You will have lot of joy and cheer in family ties. You will also be able to keep your mind under control. You will also keep all your important files properly and start a new systematic routine. You will get a promotion in job. Students will do well in exams. Overall, you will enjoy a peaceful atmosphere.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Your work will show signs of growth. It will be a great time. Whatever work you want to do will get completed with ease. Meeting with people, enhancing social activities will give you success. Your professional circle will also be widened. Your income will increase. Welfare work will also a lot to you. You will also move forward in the matters of money and finance. You will also come to understand the importance of

your loved ones in life. Your spouse will be a source of inspiration. You will also avoid arguments with someone close. You will get victory in debates. You will show lot of patience. Your time will be spent on productive tasks. Time is good. You will be praised by one and all.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) It is a favorable week. Some work that has been stuck for a long time and giving you stress will now finish without any hitch. Successful vibrations will resonate with you. You will sort out all difficult problems. You will also take part in seminars and conferences. Your perspective towards life will become more positive. You will move with time. You will share good understanding and bonding with your spouse. You will also prove yourself as a true friend. You will help your family members. There will be increase in love between brothers and sisters. You will be gentle towards your colleagues. You will have lots of profits in business. Your mood will be good because of which you will excel in your work. The good news which will gladden your heart will come from somewhere.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) Time will have a positive effect on you. You will become active and will be full of zest and zeal. Your doubts in your mind will be cleared. You will face no difficulties. You will also get all the credit for your hard work. You can also change your job for your betterment. You will receive feedback from your colleagues. Destiny will support you a lot. You will share amazing bonding with your spouse/partner. And will also spend lot of time enjoying each other's company. Your time will be spent trying to keep yourself fit and healthy and thus you will concentrate on yoga, exercises etc. You will also join a gym. To meet your extra expenses, you will do extra work. Success is assured.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) It will be a money receiving week. You will get success in your job/work/business. You will also plan about future investments. You will get success in tasks like your children's marriage, career or studies. You will also have financial gains. Your meetings with an important person will be fruitful. You will have a say in official matters. You will also come closer to your partner. You will finally take a breath of relief. You will thank your good times and luck. You will have faith in God. You will carry out your responsibilities well. You will also have success in court-related matters. Those who are jobless will get a good job.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) Your self-respect and dignity will increase. Your colleagues will perform every task in office after taking your advice and consultation. People will value your ideas. You will get lot of importance from your bosses too. There will be stability in your career. Your efforts to acquire money will be successful. The time will be successful achieving. Your government-related matters will gain momentum. You will also get your pension in time. You will be victorious in court cases. Your self-confidence will be high. You may receive the awards in the form of monetary benefits or gifts. Lovebirds will have an amazing time. You will fall in love with a person working in your office and develop good relationship leading to marriage.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) It is time to relax and enjoy. You will enjoy a very favorable phase in your life. Your financial fortunes will rise. You will also get a good job opening or promotion. You will also plan a major expansion in your business. Additional sources of income will be tapped. You will get an opportunity to meet a very influential person. Enemies will be active but unable to harm you. There will be sweetness in marital life. You will share nice equations with your partner. Relations with neighbors and relatives will be cordial and sweet. Read all documents well before signing them. Bosses and seniors will be satisfied with your work. You will improve relations with bosses. They will be satisfied with your work and praise you a lot.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) You will enjoy a favorable week. You will make plans for your bright future. You will be concerned about the future of your children. Expenditure on child-related activities can be seen. There will be some misunderstanding between close relatives, but it will be resolved quickly. The relationship will improve and bonding will get strong. You will receive the blessings of elders, relatives and senior people. New acquaintances and contacts will be made. You will understand the needs and expectations of your partner well. You will maintain your creativity. You will develop contact with new people and improve your relationship with old acquaintances. Government matters will be solved. You will feel new energy within you.

Now, 'Ozempic Hair' sparks hair loss concern after 'Ozempic Face'

After the widely discussed phenomenon of 'Ozempic Face', dermatologists are now warning of another emerging side effect associated with the growing use, and in many cases misuse of GLP-1 weight loss medications such as Ozempic, Wegovy and Mounjaro.

Popularly referred to as 'Ozempic Hair', the condition involves excessive hair shedding following rapid weight loss.

While these medications have become increasingly popular for managing obesity and diabetes, skin and hair specialists warn that their overuse, unsupervised consumption and over-the-counter use without medical advice are leading to a growing number of people experiencing temporary to significant hair loss.

According to Dr Gaurav Garg, Senior Dermatologist, Hair Transplant Surgeon, Dermato-Surgeon and Medical Director of Dermalife Skin and Hair Clinic, Delhi, the trend has become increasingly common in dermatology clinics over the past year.

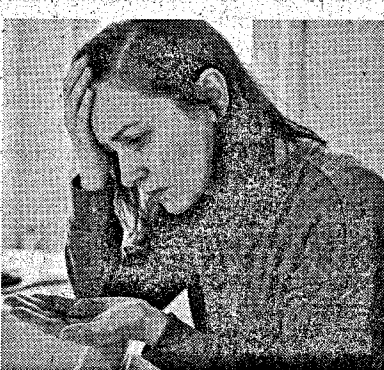
"We are seeing a significant rise in patients complaining of excessive hair shedding after taking GLP-1 weight loss medications. Around 40 per cent of the weight loss drug users visiting our clinics are experiencing mild to significant hair loss, with many noticing hair falling out in large clumps while washing or combing." In most cases, the medication itself is not directly damaging the hair.

The problem is rapid weight loss, nutritional deficiencies and the metabolic shock experienced by the body, he said.

"Unfortunately, we are also seeing people using these medications without proper medical supervision or obtaining them over the counter after being influenced by social media trends. Ozempic isn't the enemy of your hair; malnutrition and metabolic shock are. By ensuring gradual weight loss and proper nutritional support under expert guidance, many of these problems can be prevented," Dr Garg said.

Medical experts explain that 'Ozempic Hair' is not a medically recognised disease but the popular name given to telogen effluvium, a temporary form of stress-induced hair loss.

Dr Neetu Bhari, additional professor in the Department of Dermatology at AIIMS, Delhi said that rapid weight



loss acts as a physical stressor, pushing a large number of hair follicles prematurely into the resting phase, causing noticeable shedding typically three to four months later.

"Reduced appetite during treatment can also lead to deficiencies of protein, iron, zinc and biotin, nutrients that are essential for healthy hair growth," Dr Bhari said.

Recent scientific evidence suggests that the problem may be more common than initially believed.

A 2025 study published in PubMed Central (PMC), titled Prevalence and Predictors of Hair Shedding Among GLP-1 Receptor Agonist Users, found that nearly seven out of ten GLP-1 users reported some degree of hair shedding in real-world settings.

Earlier international estimates had placed the figure between 25 per cent and 33 per cent, indicating that the condition may be significantly under-recognised outside clinical trials.

Dr Bhari said patients often report finding excessive hair on pillows, bathroom floors and hairbrushes, while many notice thinning over the scalp and widening of the hair part.

"Although the condition is generally temporary and reversible, the sudden loss of hair can cause considerable emotional distress and anxiety, particularly among women and young adults," she said. Dr Bhari stressed that drugs should never be taken without medical supervision.

Highlighting the growing concern over self-medication, Dr Garg said, "One of the biggest concerns today is that these weight loss injections are increasingly being viewed as quick-fix cosmetic solutions rather than prescription medicines meant for specific medical conditions. Many people begin taking them after watching social media content or on the advice of friends, without understanding the nutritional

consequences."

Hair shedding in most cases is temporary, but prevention is always better than treatment.

"These medications should never be used casually or without expert supervision. Anyone undergoing medical weight loss should also receive dietary counselling, adequate protein intake and regular monitoring to minimise the risk of hair loss and other nutritional complications."

Echoing similar concerns, Dr Ramandeep Singh, Director, Department of Dermatology, Medanta Hospital said, "The emerging trend of 'Ozempic Hair' highlights the risks associated not only with rapid weight loss but also with the indiscriminate use of these medications without proper medical evaluation. We are increasingly seeing individuals obtaining weight loss drugs without specialist consultation or using them beyond recommended doses in pursuit of faster results."

Hair shedding in such cases usually represents telogen effluvium triggered by rapid metabolic changes and nutritional deficiencies rather than permanent damage to the hair follicles.

The condition is generally reversible with timely intervention, balanced nutrition and medically supervised weight management, but prevention through responsible use remains the best approach, Dr Singh explained.

Dermatologists advised that individuals considering any prescription weight loss medication should first undergo a comprehensive medical evaluation and should never self-medicate.

"Maintaining adequate daily protein intake, avoiding crash dieting, correcting iron and vitamin deficiencies wherever necessary and seeking early dermatological advice if excessive hair shedding develops can significantly reduce the severity and duration of the condition," Dr Bhari said.

With the popularity of GLP-1 medications continuing to rise across India, Dr Bhari said greater public awareness is urgently needed.

"While these medicines have an established role in carefully selected patients under medical supervision, their growing cosmetic use, over-the-counter availability in some settings and unsupervised consumption are creating avoidable complications," she said. (PTI)

"Success is finding satisfaction in giving a little more than you take."

—Christopher Reeve

The Shillong Times

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Sham of a Public Hearing

NEVER before has any Government in Meghalaya shown such desperation as to hold a public hearing where concerned citizens against the setting up of another cement company in East Jaintia Hills were prevented from reaching the venue at Lum Syman in Nongkhlieh. In the early hours of July 31 when landowners and those concerned for the environment attempted to attend the public hearing they were intercepted by police at Lad Shnongrim despite having a written order from the Deputy Commissioner granting affected landowners the right to attend. In fact, the police allegedly told those intending to attend that opponents of the project would not be allowed past the checkpoint. Even senior officials and scientists of the State Pollution Control Board were not present at the hearing. Clearly the MDA Government is hell-bent on allowing Shree Cement's Rs 1800 crore limestone mining project to proceed, regardless of the environmental consequences. Such desperation by any Government to hand over a limestone mining area that passes through a heritage cave system - Krem Liat Prah interconnected with the Um im, Labit, and Rubon passages and measuring approximately 30.4 kilometres in length, has never before been witnessed. This limestone cave system is recognized as the longest natural cave in the Indian subcontinent. How such a project could receive no objection from the Ministry of Environment and Forest Department (MoEF), let alone the State Forest Department is beyond comprehension.

At this rate will projects across Meghalaya that entail public hearings meet the same fate? Is there no Opposition in Meghalaya? What about groups that pledge loyalty to the environment and the sundry pressure groups that take up issues of public interest? Perhaps what Meghalaya needs today is a protest of the scale of the GenZ demonstration in Jantar Mantar, New Delhi. Otherwise, we have a Government that is hell bent on riding roughshod over public sentiments on the single plea that the cement company will provide jobs for the locals. There are already about 10 cement companies in East Jaintia Hills. What has been their contribution in terms of employment and in reducing the economic burden of the people around those companies and the mining areas? What measures have been taken to offset pollution from the cement plants? Has anyone cared to do an environmental impact study yet?

What is unbelievable is that the Police which is meant to assist the public, became instead an arm of the Government, just like the Delhi Police in recent times. Access roads to the public hearing venue at Lad Tongseng were physically dug up overnight to prevent anti-mining vehicles from reaching the hearing. Clashes broke out; there was stone pelting and some vehicles were damaged. An ambulance belonging to the Jaintia Students' Union meant to provide medical assistance to injured protesters was attacked by a mob evidently siding with Shree Cements. That the hearing took just about 45 minutes is evidence enough that there were no negative voices. It was intended to look like a public hearing where everyone was of one opinion - to allow Shree Cements an opposition-less entry into Meghalaya. Will the people of Meghalaya turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the bulldozing tactics of the MDA Government? If this is the MDA Government's playbook, Meghalaya will face unprecedented environmental destruction in the near future.

Letters to the Editor

GenZ Not a Homogenous Group

Editor,
Binodan Sarma's article 'Thou Shalt Not Pass' (ST, 30 July 2026) is a rhetorical attempt to portray Gen-Z as uniquely courageous, morally superior and enlightened, resting on sweeping generalizations, unsupported assertions and a romanticized view of an entire generation.

Its fundamental flaw is the assumption that those born within roughly fifteen years form a homogeneous group with shared values, intellect and moral outlook. A generation is merely a demographic category. It does not yield a common worldview, uniform political beliefs or superior wisdom. To speak of "the entire Gen-Z" as though it thinks and acts with one voice is sociologically untenable. The claim that Gen-Z "debunked archaic moral values of subservience" fallaciously equates traditional values with blind obedience. Respect for elders, civility, restraint, responsibility and peaceful conflict resolution are not "archaic" but enduring virtues that have sustained societies across civilizations. Moral reasoning is shaped by family, education, culture, religion, philosophy, personal experience and institutions, not just by peer groups.

Access to information must also not be mistaken for knowledge - nor knowledge for wisdom - a distinction the writer fails to grasp. The weakest aspect of the article is its repeated use of absolutes such as "the entire Gen-Z in India." On what empirical basis does the author conclude

that millions of Indian Gen-Z participated in, supported, or approved these protests? How can a few thousand protesters be presented as the voice of an entire generation? Silence cannot be equated with support and participation by some cannot be attributed to all. Video footage of abusive slogans, obscene gestures and personal attacks by protesters debunks the claim that Gen-Z as a whole is uniquely free from "toxicity" and filled with "positive aura." One should therefore keep in mind that every generation has strengths and blind spots. Neither deserves blanket glorification nor blanket condemnation.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

Appeal to MPSC to Conduct a Fair and Transparent Examination

Editor,
Apropos the above heading, I, as a concerned citizen of Meghalaya, would like to share a few thoughts and make a humble appeal to the members of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC). It has been announced that the examination for the post of Lower Division Assistant (LDA) will be conducted in the last week of August 2026. More than 50,000 aspiring candidates have applied for over 100 vacancies. With such intense competition, the examination is expected to be highly challenging, and every candidate deserves a fair and transparent opportunity. I sincerely request the MPSC to en-

The last week of July 2026 revealed the true priorities of our Chief Minister and, perhaps more importantly, where his heart really lies. It is often said that what lies deep within a person eventually reveals itself, sometimes unintentionally or even unconsciously. The Chief Minister may portray himself as an ardent defender of the environment, but two incidents in the past week have removed away that image. His actions, more than his words, revealed where his real priorities lie.

The Last State Wildlife Board Meeting

The first incident was the meeting of the State Wildlife Board. Out of the blue, I received a notice informing me that a meeting of the Board would be held on July 27 at the State's new guest house. My first reaction was one of surprise. I did not even know that I was a member of the Board. I had neither received an appointment letter nor had I been informed that I had been reappointed as a member of the Board.

I was first appointed to the State Wildlife Board during the tenure of the MUA Government. Even then, only one meeting of the Board was convened under the chairmanship of Dr. Mukul Sangma. That meeting was called because of a proposal to widen the National Highway from Guwahati to Silchar, which passes through the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. The proposal had to be shelved because the law does not permit such construction inside a wildlife sanctuary.

It therefore came as a surprise when I received this latest notice through WhatsApp. Nevertheless, because I have always devoted my time and energy to environmental protection and conservation, I decided to attend the meeting in good faith.

The Urgency of Convening the Board

It was only after I looked at the agenda that I understood why the government had hurriedly convened the meeting. The Board had been constituted in haste, without even issuing appointment letters to its members, because it needed to consider the proposed Development of the Greenfield High Speed Corridor, a 166.80 kilometre stretch of NH 6 from Mawlyngkhong near Shillong to Panchgram near Silchar in Assam.

As the old saying goes, history repeats itself. Once again, the Board had been convened primarily to facilitate approval of the project. The agenda contained only three items. The first two related to Package III and Package IV of the National Highways and Infrastructure

Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) project, while the third was "Any Other Matter."

In both instances, the Board was not convened to protect, preserve, or promote wildlife. Instead, it was called to facilitate a construction project that passes through the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. The priority was not wildlife, but infrastructure.

A Meeting without Civil Society Members

A day before the meeting, members were informed through WhatsApp that, because of the Chief Minister's busy schedule, the meeting had been advanced from 3.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m. We arrived before the scheduled time, only to be told that the meeting had already begun. Fortunately, Dr. George Chyrman, Secretary of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board, recognised me and escorted me directly to the meeting hall.

I raised the issue with the Chief Minister, pointing out that members had been informed that the meeting would begin at 2.30 p.m. I received no response, even though the mistake was clearly not ours. The meeting lasted only a few minutes after I entered. More significantly, it had proceeded without several members representing civil society. After the meeting ended, we found some of these members arriving, only to be informed that the meeting was over and asked to sign the attendance register.

The Not So Green Greenfield High Speed Corridor

After the meeting, Forest Department officials briefed some of the civil society members about what had transpired. They informed us that a joint inspection by NHIDCL and the Forest Department had identified two sections where the proposed alignment passes through the eco sensitive zone of the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary. One section covers Dona Skur, Dona Umbluh, and Ratacherra, while the other includes Borsara, Hingaria, Huroi, and Kuliang. Both areas consist primarily of mixed deciduous forest.

Despite the absence of civil society members during the meeting, the Board recommended that the project proceed. Officials assured us that mitigation measures would be implemented to minimise adverse impacts on wildlife.

However, the reality is that such a large infrastructure project will inevitably affect wildlife. Since the highway passes through the eco sensitive zone, the animals

inhabiting the sanctuary will certainly be disturbed.

A Cement Plan and the One Sided Hearing

The second incident that revealed the government's priorities was the public hearing at Nongkhlieh regarding the proposal to establish a cement plant. It should be noted that this was the second public hearing organised for the same project.

Why were those opposing the project prevented from reaching the hearing site? What exactly were the police doing? Is it true, as alleged by the farmers whose paddy fields would be affected, that they were stopped on their way to the hearing? Does the government believe they have no right to defend their farmland?

Law and Order Situation of Government's own making

Most importantly, why did the police allow a JCB to dig up the road simply to prevent those opposing the project from reaching the hearing? Does this not amount to the destruction of public property? Photographs show police personnel standing near the excavated road while the JCB remained at the site. Why did the police not arrest those responsible for this act? Can any citizen just dig the public road at his whims and fancy?

Video evidence and press reports have shown that what unfolded in the Nongkhlieh area on July 31 was nothing short of lawlessness. Throughout the incident, the government remained a silent spectator and, by its inaction, appeared to have become a willing participant. Videos from the ground showed injured people and damaged windshields of several vehicles that had been stranded while trying to reach the hearing site. The footage also showed that even an ambulance was not spared by the unscrupulous elements.

The Deputy Chief Minister's Justification

The sensitivity of the issue was evident from the fact that, even a day before the hearing, the police had to use tear gas to control the crowd. Commenting on the incident, Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong stated that while there was a list of people opposing the project, there were also many who supported it.

The real question, however, is this: despite deploying a large police force in the area, why could the government not ensure that those opposing the project were allowed to attend the hearing? Instead, allegations from the opposing groups, supported by videos

that went viral, suggested that the police prevented them from participating.

The Deputy Chief Minister also argued that cement plants would bring economic growth to the region. Yet, despite the presence of ten cement plants in the Narpuh area, why does the local economy remain weak? Why has East Jaintia Hills District not experienced the promised economic growth? Why do so many young people in the district remain unemployed?

The Absence of Senior Officers

Despite the seriousness of the issue, the Deputy Commissioner did not attend the hearing. Instead, it was conducted by a junior officer. The Deputy Commissioner's absence raises more questions than it answers, especially given the prevailing law and order situation.

Similarly, the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board was represented by a junior officer. Why was neither the Secretary of the Board nor experienced officers such as W. R. Kharkrang present? It is also interesting to note why Kharkrang the senior most scientists in the Board was never involved in the hearing, instead MSPCB was led by an officer from the Forest Department who had been transferred to the Board?

An Environment Left Behind

In his closing remarks at the State Wildlife Board meeting, the Chief Minister expressed his desire to see big cats return to Meghalaya's forests. That is certainly an admirable aspiration. However, if the government's current approach to nature and environmental protection continues, we may lose even the little wildlife that still survives in the State.

If the government continues to permit cement plants and mining in the Narpuh area, the remaining wildlife of the Narpuh Wildlife Sanctuary will be further threatened. If a cement plant is established in Nongkhlieh, the State will not only lose the unique and exotic caves that it has, but also the wildlife that still survives in the Saipung Reserve Forest.

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly evident that environmental protection and conservation have taken a back seat under the NPP led government. The priorities of the government under the leadership of Conrad K. Sangma appear to lie elsewhere, and certainly not in protecting Meghalaya's environment. The events of last week told a story that no speech or promise could hide. They revealed where the Chief Minister's heart and priorities truly lie.

Beyond the Disaster: Floods in Upper Assam Demand Ecological Accountability & People's Proactiveness

By Gobinda Taid

The recent floods that ravaged the districts of Sivagang, Jorhat and Charaideo have left behind a trail of devastation unparalleled in recent years. Thousands of families have been displaced, standing crops destroyed, roads and bridges washed away, public infrastructure crippled and normal life brought to a standstill. The economic losses, running into hundreds of crores of rupees, are only one measure of the catastrophe. The human suffering, the loss of livelihoods and the prolonged socio-economic paralysis inflicted upon the people of Upper Assam are beyond monetary estimation.

While exceptionally heavy rainfall undoubtedly triggered the floods, attributing the disaster solely to the vagaries of the monsoon would amount to ignoring a far more disturbing ecological reality. Increasing evidence suggests that extensive land-use changes in the hill catchments bordering Assam, particularly in parts of Nagaland, have significantly aggravated the flood situation downstream. Reckless hill cutting, unscientific mining, indiscriminate tree felling and large-scale degradation

hundreds of crores of rupees, while the social costs—displacement, uncertainty and psychological distress—will continue to be felt long after the floodwaters recede.

Flood management in Assam can no longer remain confined to embankments, relief camps and post-disaster compensation. It must begin where the rivers begin. Watershed conservation, scientific catchment management, restoration of degraded forests, strict regulation of mining activities and land in the hills and floods in large parts of Assam progressive schemes that could hold back effective monitoring of land-use changes should become central pillars of flood mitigation policy. Equally important is close and constructive cooperation between the Governments of Assam and Nagaland, supported by the Union Government, to ensure that ecological concerns transcend administrative boundaries.

As someone entrusted with the responsibility of conserving forests and safeguarding ecological integrity, I believe that environmental protection must no longer be viewed as an obstacle to

"The recent disaster should therefore be an eye-opener for policymakers and the public. If illegal mining, indiscriminate tree felling and environmentally destructive activities in the sensitive hill catchments along the Assam-Nagaland border are not effectively checked, the floods witnessed today may become an increasingly frequent reality in the years ahead. Every monsoon could repeat the same cycle of destruction, displacing families, crippling livelihoods and imposing enormous economic costs on the State."

of natural forests have altered the hydrological behaviour of these fragile landscapes, diminishing their ability to absorb and regulate rainwater.

Recent satellite imagery and remote-sensing assessments have further highlighted the alarming extent of forest degradation and landscape disturbance in several upstream catchments. These observations have reinforced long-standing concerns that widespread deforestation and unregulated mining have accelerated surface runoff, intensified soil erosion and increased the sediment load carried into rivers flowing into Assam. The resulting siltation has progressively reduced the carrying capacity of many rivers and tributaries, making them increasingly vulnerable to overflowing during periods of intense rainfall. Although continued scientific assessment is essential to quantify the relative contribution of each factor, the ecological warning signs are too compelling to ignore.

Forests are far more than reservoirs of biodiversity; they are vital natural infrastructure. Healthy forest ecosystems intercept rainfall, bind fragile hill soils, recharge groundwater and moderate the flow of water into downstream rivers. Their degradation weakens these ecological services, transforming heavy rainfall into destructive floods with increasing frequency and intensity. Every tree felled indiscriminately in an ecologically sensitive watershed represents a reduction in nature's capacity to protect downstream communities.

The devastation witnessed this year extends far beyond damaged property. Agriculture, the principal source of livelihood for thousands of families, has suffered enormous losses. Educational institutions remained inaccessible, transportation networks were disrupted, businesses suspended operations and public services were severely affected. The cumulative economic losses amount to

development. Sustainable development is possible only when economic aspirations are balanced with ecological responsibility. Forests are not expendable resources; they are natural assets whose ecological services sustain agriculture, water security, biodiversity and disaster resilience for millions of people.

The recent disaster should therefore be an eye-opener for policymakers and the public. If illegal mining, indiscriminate tree felling and environmentally destructive activities in the sensitive hill catchments along the Assam-Nagaland border are not effectively checked, the floods witnessed today may become an increasingly frequent reality in the years ahead. Every monsoon could repeat the same cycle of destruction, displacing families, crippling livelihoods and imposing enormous economic costs on the State.

Nature has repeatedly warned us that ecological degradation carries consequences extending far beyond the forests where it begins. The floodwaters that inundated Upper Assam are a reminder that environmental decisions made in upstream catchments ultimately shape the fate of downstream communities. The choice before us is clear: continue responding to annual disasters with temporary relief, or address their ecological drivers through scientific management, strict enforcement of environmental laws, landscape restoration and genuine inter-state cooperation, especially between the Govt. of Assam and Nagaland with active support from the Union Home Ministry and the bordering states as a whole as in the geography of the North-East, Assam lies at the bottom of a Bowl, making it inevitably vulnerable to ecological disturbances in the surrounding hill states!

(The author is Range Forest Officer, Assam Forest Service, WFO, LAC, Guwahati. Email: gobindatid24@gmail.com)

A fair recruitment process will not only reward deserving candidates but also contribute to stronger and more efficient public administration. I write this appeal based on the experiences and concerns shared by many candidates who have appeared for MPSC examinations over the years. My sincere hope is that this recruitment process will be conducted fairly and transparently, thereby upholding the confidence of all aspiring candidates and the people of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request.
Via email

Two Deaths in Septic Tank

Editor,
A security guard and a worker died of asphyxiation inside a septic tank on Sunday, August 2, while cleaning a sewage treatment plant (STP) tank at a residential society in Noida's Sector 150. According to police, Shashikant Sharma (40), a resident of Rajasthan's Karauli district, entered the STP tank to clean it but lost consciousness inside. A security guard, identified as Akash (22), a resident of Firozabad, entered the tank in an attempt to rescue Sharma but also fell unconscious. Despite being banned in 2013, manual scavenging continues in India, with hundreds of deaths reported in recent years. The latest tragedy highlights systemic

failures in enforcing laws, lack of mechanisation and safety measures, and the persistence of caste-based labour. Experts say these preventable deaths reflect deep social inequities and demand urgent policy action and accountability.

These are only the latest in an unending stream of deaths that have continued to occur across India even as it preens on the world stage as the fourth largest economy. In the Rajya Sabha, on a question raised by Left MP John Brittas, the nation learnt that as many as 315 people had died between 2021 and 2025 while cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Maharashtra and Haryana topped the list. The two states, along with Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, were responsible for over 77 per cent of such deaths.

Manual scavenging was outlawed in December 2013, when the 'Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act' was enacted. It not only prohibited the employment of people as manual scavengers in the construction and cleaning of sewers and septic tanks but also mandated their rehabilitation with skill development and financial assistance. Offences were punishable with imprisonment of up to two years or fines up to Rs one lakh, or both. However, there are hardly any records of the law being implemented, especially in the states that have several deaths of manual scavengers in the past few years.

Let alone the elimination of this slavish and shameful practice, urban local bodies and the local police, where the deaths have occurred, are guilty of not mechanising the process and not implementing

safety compliances. Clearly, the Swachh Bharat Mission has meant little to the lives of manual scavengers. This points to the inescapable truth that the governments and society avoid acknowledging caste-based and discriminatory occupation patterns. Manual scavengers are, overwhelmingly, Dalits or Shudras, the lowest of castes, but a caste-based count of deaths is not available. Their marginalised social status is, undeniably, a factor in the continued practice of manual scavenging. These deaths are not mere accidents; they are entirely preventable if only governments are willing to enforce the existing legal obligations and responsibilities, adopt modern and mechanised cleaning processes, and rehabilitate those who have been historically condemned to this work.

The SC/ST Act additionally transforms this from a standard negligence case into a case that directly addresses the caste dimension of manual scavenging overwhelmingly done by Dalit workers who are sent into septic tanks, sewers, and drains without safety gear, while upper-caste supervisors and hospital administrators watch from a safe distance. A 2023 government survey under the Manual Scavengers Act found—officially—zero manual scavengers in any district in India.

That is not an accident. It is a system failure.

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.

"Change is the end result of all true learning."

— Leo Buscaglia

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Nightmare for Trump

THE world's most powerful leader is blowing hot and cold, climbing up and climbing down on his stated positions with rare ease -- and keeping his own nation, his military's principal target Iran and the people across continents on edge for as long as five months. Donald Trump's warning on Saturday was that the "USA is locked and loaded" to strike Iran with "military terror, strength and power not seen since World War II." However, by then the world had come to take his high-pitched declarations as the rants of a senile old man at age 80, past his prime. As expected, he cooled down by Sunday to say that he was cancelling his attack, "with the perimeters of a deal agreed to," with the Iranians. The Iranian leadership, for the umpteenth time, feigned ignorance about any deal. Tehran said Trump's claim that Iran had sought a "pause" in the US attacks on it was "nothing but a lie" and rather, the Iranian forces were on "high alert and ready for any eventuality."

America carries with it a history of winning wars, overthrowing a 'dictator' as in Iraq in 2003, catching a governmental head by the scruff of his collar and airlifting him straight to America and jailing him along with his wife as has happened in Venezuela at the start of this year, and overthrowing the repressive Taliban regime by facing no resistance whatsoever in Afghanistan shortly after the Twin Tower attack by the al Qaeda in 2001. America also cut and ran from a war in Vietnam in 1975 after thousands of bodybags reached back the US shores and raised public anger against the US Administration from within. Today, Trump is caught in a major predicament. He cannot afford to land his well-equipped soldiers to Iran, which is itching for such a moment if only to stage a bloodbath of epic proportions. Realisation is increasingly dawning on the American president that he cannot also afford to win this war and extricate himself out of the present predicament without sending the soldiers to a fight on the ground. Caught between two positions, Trump is now having an uneasy go. He knows not the way forward to extricate himself and mighty America from this predicament. Obviously, the bitter lesson from Vietnam stares him in the face with no solutions whatsoever.

As diplomat Henry Kissinger wrote decades ago, the 21st Century belongs to Asia -- just as the 19th Century with its thrust on the Industrial Revolution was Europe's; and the 20th Century was America's very own. The US reigned supreme in the latter half of the last century, becoming a dreamland for people from around the world. Even today, its economy is at the top with a GDP swell of nearly \$33 trillion -- against nearest rival China's \$20 trillion. The present four-month war has obviously hurt the American economy while chances are that China will catch up with or outwit the US in another decade. With Presidents like Donald Trump at the helm, it would be a hard task for the US to retain its supremacy for long.

Letters to the Editor

Time to Demand a Referendum

Editor,
Under Indian Environmental Law, a village or community vote is not legally recognized as a direct substitute or replacement for a mandatory public hearing under the standard Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006.

However, the Supreme Court of India has exceptionally ordered community referendums under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act and Forest Rights Acts, 2006. These are distinct legal mandates protecting tribal consent, not a bureaucratic swap for an EIA public hearing.

In the Niyamgiri case of 2013, the Supreme Court ordered village-level referendums in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha. The local Dongia Kondh tribe unanimously voted against Multinational Company Vedanta's proposed bauxite mining project protecting their land and setting a landmark global precedent for indigenous rights and environmental consent.

In the context of the "public Hearing" for the proposed Shree Cement Ltd. Lime Stone Mining project at Lum Syran, Elaka Nongkhlieh, East Jaintia Hills, press reports, several videos circulating on social media and testimonies from affected stakeholders and NGO leaders show that the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) have been blatantly violated through "grievous assault on civilians who opposed the project, sabotage of public infrastructure to prevent access to the public hearing site and

illegal detentions." Overall, it seems the authorities went all out to ensure the concerned corporate entity got what it wanted, violating the rights of tribals.

Under the circumstances, I think it is time for the stakeholders whose interests will be hurt beyond repair to approach the court of law and seek redress.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2

Lovlina Borgohain's Stand Deserves the Nation's Appreciation

Editor,
It was deeply disturbing to learn about an incident during the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, Scotland, where athletes were invited to dinner at an Indian restaurant that displayed an incorrect map of India. The map, printed on napkins and displayed on the restaurant wall, omitted the entire North-East and parts of Jammu & Kashmir. Such an error, whether intentional or accidental, is unacceptable because a nation's map is a symbol of its sovereignty, unity, and identity.

What deserves wholehearted appreciation is the prompt and courageous response of Commonwealth Games 2026 gold medalist Lovlina Borgohain, who hails from Baro Mukhia village in Golaghat district of Assam. Instead of ignoring the mistake, she immediately brought it to the notice of the restaurant management and firmly stated that the North-East cannot be separated from India. Her

Something happened to me personally -- just three months ago. I walked into a government office in Shillong with documents, a prepared argument, evidence, a legitimate concern -- a public grievance not for my personal interest -- the kind of thing you'd normally take straight to a department head. I wasn't nervous because I was prepared and well-versed with the grievance. I'd done this before.

Then someone looked up and said -- politely, almost kindly -- "Sir, please speak with the consultant. He handles this."

I didn't move for a second. The director was in that building. Career officers with twenty years of field experience were somewhere down that corridor. And I -- a citizen with a legitimate grievance -- was being routed around all of them, towards someone I never elected, never knew existed, and had no formal way to hold accountable.

Kafka wrote about this. Not Meghalaya specifically, obviously. But that particular feeling -- of a system that has answers everywhere except where you're standing -- he mapped it perfectly. Joseph K. would've recognised that corridor.

Let me ask the question that apparently makes certain people in Shillong uncomfortable.

Who actually runs Meghalaya?

In February 2026, the Chief Minister told the Assembly the State had engaged 36 individual consultants and 59 consultancy firms, spending Rs 4.35 crore annually on individual consultants alone. In March 2025, those numbers were higher -- 39 individuals, 69 firms. In 2023, the government defended Rs 244 crore spent over five years across projects worth Rs 16,000 crore.

Now, I want to be clear about something before I go further. I am not against consultants. Expertise matters. Technical knowledge matters. If you're designing a watershed system or negotiating an externally aided project, fine -- bring in the specialists.

But here is the thing I cannot get past. If consultants are purely advisory, purely technical, purely background support -- then why are ordinary citizens being re-directed to them and away from elected representatives and career officers? Why are department heads, in some

action reflected not only patriotism but also a deep sense of responsibility.

As a daughter of Assam and one of India's finest sporting icons, Lovlina spoke not only for the people of the North-East but for every Indian who believes in the unity and territorial integrity of the nation. Great sportspeople inspire us not merely through the medals they win but also through the values they uphold. On this occasion, Lovlina proved that she is a true champion both inside and outside the boxing ring.

The restaurant owner's apology and assurance to replace the incorrect maps are welcome. Nevertheless, this incident should serve as a reminder to organisations and businesses across the world that India's map must always be depicted accurately and respectfully.

Lovlina Borgohain has once again brought honour to the nation -- not only by winning a gold medal at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games but also by standing firm in defence of India's dignity and unity. Her vigilance and patriotic spirit deserve the appreciation of every Indian.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

The Education System Needs Overhaul

Editor,
Even as several significant reforms are implemented in the education sector, many basic level shortcomings prevent the overall progress of school education. The Union Ministry of Education has disclosed in Parliament that over one lakh schools across India are

cases, asking members of the public to contact the consultant for information? That isn't support. That's substitution. And those two words are not the same. Not even close.

Noam Chomsky said, power never announces itself. It doesn't hold a press conference. It normalises quietly, through process, through accumulated procedure, through the slow language of mandates and frameworks -- until the people who were supposed to govern become managers of a machinery they no longer control.

I'm not saying that's happened here. But I'm asking whether the signs feel familiar.

Think about a career director. Someone with two decades of service. Someone who has sat in village meetings that went nowhere, written recommendations that were shelved, and still showed up. That person is now, in certain departments, effectively bypassed by a consultant who arrived with a World Bank checklist, a DPR template, and very little local knowledge.

The consultant doesn't need to know this land. The consultant needs to know the format.

Ambedkar understood something our current establishment seems to have quietly set aside -- that systems built without genuine representation of the people they're meant to serve will always, without exception, curve back toward serving themselves. Always. Institutional power without democratic accountability isn't governance. It's an occupation in the language of development.

Now here's what nobody is pressing hard enough on. Why are consultants concentrated almost entirely in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills? Why does Garo Hills barely appear in this consultancy picture?

VPP MLA Brightstarwell Marbanian raised the issue of locals being sidelined. The Opposition flagged it. But the geographic disparity -- the near-total absence of consultants in Garo Hills was never interrogated with any real force. And it deserves to be.

Either Garo Hills isn't attracting the same projects. Or it doesn't come with the

single-teacher schools. While the government and educationists emphasize the New Education Policy (NEP) such stark realities are staring us in the face. More than 3 million students with an average of 34 students under a single teacher, present a grim picture of school education at the basic level. A large number of primary school children show poor learning abilities such as reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. Lack of sufficient teachers in schools makes matters worse. As primary education lays the foundation for higher levels, negligence in imparting quality education at this level will imperil the future of our children. These schools lack adequate resources. In addition, the single teachers are under immense pressure to fulfil the NEP outcomes and meet the children's thirst for learning. The government must take measures for the progress of such schools.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

Single-teacher Schools in India

Editor,
Across rural India, millions of children attend "schools" where one teacher does everything -- from teaching multiple grades to cooking meals. This single-teacher model, entrenched by neglect, erodes learning and fuels dropouts.

While children in metro cities sit down in air-conditioned classrooms with smart boards, interactive modules and specialised subject teachers, millions of their peers in rural, tribal and remote areas have already faced their first edu-

same funding machinery attached. Or -- and this is the uncomfortable possibility -- the consultancy ecosystem has simply grown where the administrative and political gravity already sits: Shillong, East Khasi Hills, the capital's orbit. Civic groups in South Garo Hills are still raising basic alarms about connectivity and power supply. They're not complaining about consultant overreach. The consultants haven't really gone there.

What does that tell us about whose development this actually is? It tells me the consultant boom isn't neutral (as the Chief Minister of Meghalaya defended them). It isn't needs-driven in any equitable senses. It follows proximity to power. It follows the pipeline of external funding and funded projects. It clusters where the World Bank's attention falls, where the "global competitiveness" narrative gets written. Garo Hills doesn't fit that geometry. And it quietly shows.

Paulo Freire wrote that a dominant class never calls itself dominant. It calls itself professional. Expert. Qualified. It speaks the language of competence to justify its position -- and gradually, the people at the receiving end stop trusting their own experience; stop trusting their own officers; start deferring to the framework, the consultant, the DPR written by someone who flew in and flew out. The CM told the Assembly that when this programme started, only 2-3% of consultancy roles went to locals. Today it's 30%.

That's progress. Genuinely. But Wittgenstein would slow us down here -- what does it mean to call something "for Meghalaya," when 70% of the people financially benefiting from it aren't from Meghalaya? Words carry weight. "Transparent" carries weight. And when the CM admitted he couldn't determine total consultant compensation because of "heterogeneity of payment periods" -- that isn't transparency. That's the performance of transparency. There's a difference that matters enormously.

I think about a young graduate from Nongpoh. An engineer from Tura. A law graduate from Jowai. Sitting with their qualifications, their local knowledge, their genuine stake in this

place -- watching someone from outside earn multiples of their monthly salary to explain Meghalaya's "social impact," to a funding officer who has never walked a village path here.

That image of the reality of our State doesn't leave me easily. Joost Meerloo, writing about something darker but structurally similar, described the slow process by which institutions stop believing their own people are capable, where every decision needs external validation. Where the elected representative, the career officer, and the grassroots worker all exist in a kind of suspended irrelevance, waiting for the consultant's note before any moves.

That's what I'm watching, slowly, in parts of our government. And I'm not sure we're naming it clearly enough.

The CM says the system works. He says Meghalaya has secured Rs 7,427 crore in externally aided projects, partly through this machinery. Fine. I accept that.

But I still have questions. The Greeks understood this long before us. That -- Prometheus gave humanity fire. The gift was real. Transformative. But the moment people forgot how to make fire themselves, forgot the flint, the friction, the patience, they became dependent on the next gift. And the one after that. That's not development. That's a more comfortable form of dependency.

We have the right to know who these consultants are, what they're paid -- fully, not approximately. What decisions they influence and whether that influence is binding or merely advisory? Why the person we elected cannot answer a citizen's question without first checking with someone we never elected?

Public money is public accountability. Fellow Meghalayans, that isn't radical -- yes it isn't. That's just democracy -- our democracy -- the kind Ambedkar built with his blood and intellect, the kind Orwell warned we'd lose not loudly but incrementally, sentence by sentence, office by office, corridor by corridor.

I'm asking these questions clearly. In public. In print. Because frankly, someone has to.

(The author is an advocate based in Ri Bhoi district, Meghalaya. Views expressed are personal.)

Assigning non-teaching duties only worsens the situation. Teachers are reporting mounting stress and exhaustion, while students are left with diminished instruction and fewer opportunities for individual attention. The Election Commission of India's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is drawing criticism for its impact on government schools.

The worst sufferers are the single-teacher government schools that cater to education in villages and remote areas, where children of poor and marginalised communities study. How can education happen when the teacher is busy elsewhere?

Progressive Democratic Students' Organisation (PDSO) has raised the pertinent question of who will compensate for the lost learning. India's national average teacher-student ratio is supposed to be 1:30. But the reality is different. Over 110,000 schools operate with only a single teacher, who juggles multiple classes and subjects. The burden is immense. Assigning non-teaching duties only worsens the situation.

PDSO contends that assigning teachers for SIR work is unlawful and a violation of students' fundamental right to education. The Organisation insists that teachers be relieved of SIR responsibilities and that alternative government staff be appointed to carry out the special intensive revision of electoral rolls.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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Heading: Who will reap the dividends from Gen Z's victory over Narendra Modi?

By S. N. M. ABDI

Sonam Wangchuk was physically lifted from Jantar Mantar by policemen on the twenty-first day of his fast-unto-death and taken to a government hospital. His forcible removal triggered an invasion of the satyagraha site by a sea of 20-25 year olds. The protestors; a mixture of men and women; were mostly students and researchers of Delhi University and various affiliated colleges. They were aged between eight and 13 when Narendra Modi first became Prime Minister in 2014. Hence none of them were voters in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. May be some of them were first time voters in 2024. And those who hit the streets to agitate against NEET question papers leaks were class 11-12 students barely touching 18.

What's of utmost impor-

protests were not led by the Congress Party or the INDIA bloc. Modi backers believe that the Congress Party and Cockroach Janata Party are not on the same page. According to them, Rahul Gandhi would have been far happier if the protests had taken place just before the elections so that the dissatisfaction could be channelized into the ballot boxes. But, as things stand, people have given vent to their dissatisfaction long before the elections, resulting in a reprieve for the BJP for the time being at least.

But unlike the Congress Party, leaders of the Samajwadi Party and left parties were on the Jantar Mantar dais. They clearly believe that they stand to gain politically and electorally by standing with the agitators. But they couldn't take the

He was criticised, rebuked and lampooned. The onslaught even turned abusive and unparliamentary, descending into women-centric expletives. All told, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Modi was mauled and hammered as never before. It was heart-wrenching for bhakts but euphoric for others who were simply ecstatic.

stance is that the youths who rose so openly against the Modi government in Delhi and elsewhere in the country will be eligible to vote in the 2029 parliamentary polls.

Post 2014, Modi had emerged as the Bharatiya Janata Party's biggest political-cum-electoral asset. The PM's extraordinary personality and seeming invincibility became the trump card of Hindutva forces. His appeal decided the outcome of election after election even before votes were cast. But all this has been shattered by the anti-Modi slogans, banners and posters in the heart of the capital -- which were heard and seen across the length and breadth of India -- during Gen Z's 36-day-long revolt. He was criticised, rebuked and lampooned. The onslaught even turned abusive and unparliamentary, descending into women-centric expletives. All told, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Modi was mauled and hammered as never before. It was heart-wrenching for bhakts but euphoric for others who were simply ecstatic.

As it is, after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP was forced to seek the help of allies to form the government. The fear of forfeiting Gen Z's vote in 2029 clearly forced the Modi to take the unprecedented step of throwing in the towel! It is the first time that Modi had to concede defeat and bow before his adversaries in 24 years -- almost a quarter of a century. Modi was Gujarat chief minister for 12 years before becoming the PM 12 years ago. During his long rule, whether in Gujarat or Delhi, never before was Modi forced to remove a minister from his cabinet under public pressure. But he succumbed to the tremendous pressure exerted by Gen Z and had no option but to get rid of Dharmendra Pradhan -- an unimaginable surrender!

The big questions today are: what will be the fallout of Modi's surrender before India's youth? Can the opposition take advantage of the situation and reap the benefits? Or will Modi succeed in getting the better of his political foes after making peace with his youthful, apolitical challengers? What are Modi's chances of standing tall once again on the very ground which has so obviously turned slippery and treacherous?

Modi loyalists admit that his image has taken a bad beating. But they are confident that the setback, though unprecedented, is temporary and he will recover the lost ground pretty soon because the Jantar Mantar

reins of leadership in their hands. This works well for the BJP. The BJP is in an advantageous position if amateurish CJP or Gen Z leaders are at the helm of the protestors instead of an opposition leader like Gandhi. The BJP can then tell the world that India's youth placed certain demands before Modi and as an elder statesman he conceded some. This projection takes out whatever little wind there is in the opposition's sail, whether it is the Congress Party, Samajwadi Party or the left, making them practically irrelevant in the agitators' clash with the Modi regime.

Now, let us consider another scenario from not too long ago. In 2012, the Nirbhaya gang rape had unleashed a youth-led, anti-government mass movement. Earlier, in 2011, Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal's campaign against the alleged corruption plaguing the Congress Party government had brought the middle class to the streets. Both the movements weakened the United Progressive Alliance dispensation and benefited the BJP hugely. The BJP channelized the popular discontent these movements brought to the fore to come to power with Modi at the helm.

The twin movements also propelled the Aam Aadmi Party's victory in the Delhi assembly elections. These precedents have naturally brightened the Congress Party's prospects in today's scenario, when Gen Z's zeal and resoluteness could lead to fresh demands after Pradhan's ouster, further weakening Modi and the BJP. Nitin Gadkari, for example is a sitting duck. Hardeep Puri is another. The Congress Party stands to gain from demonstrations to sack more BJP ministers. There could be demands for an overhaul of the higher judiciary too as it is perceived to be too pro-government by the exacting standards of a democracy. Gen Z's depredations in 2026 and beyond could well weigh the electoral scale against the BJP in the 2029 parliamentary polls.

It's not surprising at all if the opposition's hopes are soaring after the 440-volt electric shock Gen Z has administered the BJP in general and Modi in particular. After all, today's protestors are tomorrow's voters! And elections in Uttar Pradesh, whose significance can't be over-emphasised, are less than a year away. Only time will tell whether Modi will bounce back or lose the plot. (END)

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

"Humans have both the urge to create and destroy."

— Hayao Miyazaki

The Shillong Times

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Defeated BJP

FOR many years, Narendra Modi contributed to the growth of Hindutva and its political arm the BJP with its epicentre in the Hindi belt. These in turn promoted the Modi brand in politics. Both sides benefited through a quid pro quo. Today, with the Modi image seemingly losing its shine, the BJP could face the brunt. Evidence is also in the results of three assembly by-polls, where the BJP lost one seat each in its traditional stronghold of Madhya Pradesh and its extended fiefdom of Bihar. In an urban seat in the capital, Patna (Bankipur), which was vacated by new party chief Nitin Nabin and previously held by his father, voters deserted the BJP and embraced a new face in Prashant Kishor, who recently floated the Jan Suraj Party. This was the first assembly by-poll in Bihar after veteran Nitish Kumar handed over the CM's post to the BJP's Samrat Choudhary. The unexpected defeat for the party sends its own message to Delhi.

While Congress defeated the BJP in Datia, Madhya Pradesh (ruled by the BJP for many years), the saffron party managed to win the Manjalpur assembly seat in Vadodra, Gujarat. The Manjalpur victory reinforced Modi's and the BJP's continuing hold on the state, where the assembly polls are slated for December next year. More than the BJP, the Modi card sells there. As Prime Minister for the past 12 years, he brought massive economic development to his home state, which also created many job opportunities. This would hold the BJP in good stead there for many years. Had Modi taken the same interest in developing the nation, India would now be an economic superpower. Gujarat's new-found glory is also reflected in this week's announcement that the next Asian Games would be held there. This would significantly boost the state's infrastructural build-up—just as the 1982 Asian Games gave Delhi a huge economic and infrastructural boost.

Now, however, assumptions are that Modi's undoing has begun. The Patna results showed alienation of the urban middle class and major sections of the traditional Hindu vote banks from the lower segments of the population, away from the BJP. The poor were being lured by the BJP in the name of religion. But the Ram Temple loot of epic proportions raised questions about the sincerity of the Hindutva brigade and by extension the BJP regarding 'protection of faith' as the anchor of its social philosophy. The urban-bred middle class was apparently unhappy with the Modi government for, among other things, causing the NEET disaster that affected the future of some 23 lakh students. The government was found wanting. Its aggressive response to the protests led by students in the national capital also did not go down well with informed segments of the population. Fact is also that an anti-incumbency mood is building against the Modi establishment, which has carried on for three terms and failed to build a new momentum for national growth.

Laitumkhrach: Inspiration at Every Corner

By Kyntiewborlang Kharakor

While everyone complains about the pushing and the jostling in the midst of the chaos (huri hura) of Don Bosco Square during peak school hours, for one specific reason, I find this holy, chaotic confluence of little studious saints strangely enjoyable and appealing. Their black soles had that faint trace of tungrymbai, a familiar scent potent enough to make this writer wag his tail deliciously.

Life is better with a touch of humour. With this thought in mind, we began reading O. Henry's Confessions of a Humorist during English class. The narrator possesses considerable wit, a gift he cultivated and improved with constant practice. His humorous articles in the columns "made some stir" in the weekly, and he earned a reputation for being "fresh in the line of humorists." It brought him a decent amount of income. But as time passed, spontaneity betrayed his humour. He ran out of fresh ideas and clever quips. Desperation transformed him into a vampire. He preyed on his acquaintances and didn't even spare his family. Whenever someone uttered something clever, it became a ready sale for him. He carried a notebook wherever he went and stored his pilfered quips for future use. Eventually, he quit and became business partners with an undertaker.

What Halley's Comet is to Earth, I am to the Shillong Times. I am not a seasoned literary veteran, blessed with Plato's or Aristotle's insight and political wisdom to comment on every political and social event happening in our little hamlet. But that does not mean that I am desperate. I do not steal content from acquaintances. I, on the contrary, simply harvest it from Laitumkhrach. The chaos of Laitumkhrach, like the scent of tungrymbai, has always drawn my senses because my world revolves around it. It is my literary muse.

During another English class, as I scribbled on the board the pointers and the format of Formal Letters—Letters to the Editor—to begin the lesson, an idea struck me. In practical terms, I suggested to the students that we should write about

that one small open hole, with its blue pipes exposed beneath—probably a gift from the contractor over his uncleared dues—on the road beside the open drain adjacent to the wall of 'Jeeves Rit' (Small Jeeves Restaurant). Maybe it will prompt the authorities to cover it or turn it into a footpath. Like the Panama Canal, Shillong College—St. Mary's Road sees a lot of traffic. The junction where it coincides with Upland Road and Don Bosco Square is pandemonium during rush hours. I pity the Margaretians and Marianas who have to bear the stench from the drain and angle their shoulders as they navigate through the crowd, oncoming traffic, alu-muri sellers, and the roadside-two-wheeler-parking parents on their way to school in the morning. Ironically, after school, I saw the same Marianas and Margaretians, whom I had sympathised with earlier, turn Alu-murians. They turned Dada's makeshift shack into their Chamber of Secrets. On August 1, last I saw Kong Ampareen with a couple of gentlemen on that very spot. For now, I guess I'll have to find another uncovered drain and pothole for my practical letter-writing lesson.

During the opening days of school, I had the opportunity to shepherd a herd of students to graze—not on grass, but on the delights of the festive sports season—in the lush green field of our generous neighbour, Principal Fr. Anthony. As they crossed the road, an unfortunate SUV driver invited my ire by nudging a couple of students with his bumper. I yelled at the top of my voice, marched twice around his vehicle trying to square him up, and finally slammed the bonnet with my storytelling hands. The little spectacle drew the attention of everyone gathered at Don Bosco Square. My cousin was leaning against the railing, patiently waiting for her turn to buy tea from Jeeves Rit, and she enthusiastically cheered me on. When I later drove the school's SUV, I realised just how vertically challenged I am. Behind

the wheel, I was practically dwarfed by the driver's seat. Looking back, the driver could easily have flattened me without ever noticing I was there.

Much to my dislike, this chaos is, at times, disrupted by the men in blue and khaki. These professional herders direct traffic and humans like Border Collies. With crab hands dangling on their belts like cowboys with their polished guns, they ride their horses around and strike terror into the hearts of ignorant riders riding through and parking in questionable areas.

On my return journey from True North's Interscholar Swimming Competition event at Pohkse, I passed through the winding street of Ghoralane/Gorolane/Garoline/Caroline (enlighten me, residents!). To escape the ugly, oversized-wheeled Thar slowly plodding in front of me and the traffic jam on the road towards Police Point, I took a shortcut through the restricted one-way lane from Nazareth Hospital to DHS with the intention of heading towards Upland Road. A seasoned member of the traffic police with a walrus moustache stopped me before the DHS junction and demanded my driving licence and ID. I tried to reason with him, stating that I was in a rush for my English class. I showed him proof of the inter school event and that I was on official school duty. I openly admit that my hasty decision amounted to a traffic violation. After checking my work ID, the man understood my plight.

The Officer-in-Charge, however, was utterly unimpressed and adamantly insisted that I should pay the fine—Rs500. I opened my wallet, but it showed great reluctance to part with the only Rs 200 note that had been its sole companion for the past few weeks. Then I took out my two shiny debit cards—the shameless crooks! They never leave a stone unturned in embarrassing their master. Both were declined due to insufficient balance. I opened the banking app only to find single digits in my balance.

The khaki lad showed great excitement as he wanted to ride my Bajaj Avenger all the way to the police station.

Like a guardian angel, a neighbour saved my skin, and he happened to be good friends with the kind traffic personnel. I sacrificed the day's English class, and when no other offender was around, I fully unleashed my persuasion skills. It worked. Hesitantly, I was let off with just a verbal warning. The kind man must have pleaded my case to the Officer-in-Charge later on, for when I encountered him face to face again in Dhankheti while leading the herd of students in an Anti-Tobacco Rally, he was smiling from ear to ear when he saw me.

In solidarity with the multitudes of youths across the nation, a peaceful protest was staged at the Police Point Parking Lot a few days ago. Young girls and boys, too, joined in with their placards. In the midst of this seriousness, I fought hard to stifle my laughter when I saw a few creative, witty memes and quotes directed at the national leaders on posters. Gen Z's mantra of life is obvious—even when dealing with a grave "National Issue", they are capable of adding masala to it. As for our Alu-murians here in Don Bosco Square, it was business day as usual. They were so engrossed in their chewing spree and classroom complaints that even Fr. Anthony's handsome minions struggled miserably to get their attention.

Gen Z's outlook on life and their light hearted shenanigans during the peaceful protest inspired me the most. Laitumkhrach, being the hub of these creatures and the newest upgrades—Gen Alpha—serves as the signature condiment in this dish that I am cooking for the readers. From our stuffy classrooms, the soon-to-be covered drain and pothole near Jeeves (we will miss you dearly), the Alu-murians and their secret Anthonian admirers, the cab drivers, khaki men, and unmanned scooters in the middle of the road come the stories that colour our everyday lives. Let us embrace this everyday chaos with a pinch of humour. It is as soothing as a hot cup of chai on a bright sunny day.

Cementing a cement deal

By Toki Blah

News items appearing in newspapers of Meghalaya in the recent past gave two poles apart narratives of interesting stories regarding what is actually happening within our state. First is the reported deficiency of rains this monsoon and its likely impact on the state. The heavens apparently have become quite niggardly about how much rain they should pour into our state. At the other end of the spectrum, the second story is about the sordid manner in which the Government of Meghalaya conducted a Public Hearing at Nongkhlieh, East Jaintia Hills on a proposal to set up yet another cement plant (TPD unknown) in that district. From reports available it seems that the State Government openly poured its "Showers of Blessings" on the attempts of Shree Cements Ltd to get environmental clearance for the proposed cement plant at Nongkhlieh.

Apparently the law mandates that setting up major industries—especially smoke-belching units, units dependent on extracting mineral resources from an area, industrial units planning to establish near or beside a declared wildlife sanctuary, or units capable of negatively impacting farm or agricultural land and practices—require an Environmental Clearance (EC) before any permission can be granted for such an establishment. There is a set procedure on how an EC can be issued by the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) Meghalaya and a Public Hearing is one such required step. A Public Hearing on the application of Shree Cements was conducted on July 31, 2026. The State Government has described the hearing as "Very Positive." However, after news reports and very disturbing video posts, one is inclined to question this optimism of the Government. So let's try and do an analytical assessment on this Government claim, shall we?

A critical question needs to be raised at this point. What is a Public Hearing and why is it necessary to have one? A Public Hearing is a legally mandated forum where citizens can voice concerns about a proposed project's environmental and social impacts. Let us agree here that every project had, has and will continue to have its own supporters and opponents. In a democracy both sides of the story must be heard. Public concerns over pollution, waste disposal, land acquisition, threat to heritage and historical sites, livelihood impacts, and environmental risks are issues expected to be raised at every such Public Hearing. Simultaneously the pro-project lobby is also expected to raise its own optimism and vision over the enabling social and economic benefits the local community is likely to derive from the project. The point being driven home is that both the pros and cons should be given an equal opportunity to be heard. The State Pollution Control Board (SPCB), with its technical expertise and experience, is to listen to both sides, make its own assessments and submit its fact based report to the Government for further necessary action. Did this happen at Nongkhlieh? Did the SPCB play the honest broker by not taking sides? Let's try to find out.

According to reports emotions were running high in both the Pro and the Anti project groups. The District Administration seems to have been apprehensive of a major breakdown of law and order if both camps were allowed to confront each other. This is understandable. Common sense then should have dictated that since the atmosphere was not conducive to a peaceful Public Hearing, it should have been postponed. Allow things to cool down before

holding the next hearing. Surprisingly none of the above steps were taken. Instead, the District Administration went to great pains to ensure that the views, opinions and wishes of only the Pro-Project lobby were recorded. The road leading to the public hearing site was dug up; people and community members were physically stopped, tear gas and lathi charge were resorted to, in order to prevent the Anti-Project group from attending the meet. Here is where the Government's stand needs examination. How can a "Very Positive Hearing" happen if one side is forcibly prevented (by a supposedly unbiased District Authority) from airing its views while only the views of the Pro-Project side are heard? Apparently no Administrative application of mind was resorted to. The hearing is therefore prejudiced, biased and one-sided and hence it is void in the eyes of the Law.

Why do I say this? It is simply based on common sense. The SPCB and District Collector are legally bound to conduct the hearing fairly by hearing both sides and with bias to none. Such hearing behaviour ensures transparency and accountability on the agencies entrusted by Law to provide proper governance and service to the Community they have sworn to serve and protect. Hence a Public Hearing is the community's safeguard in the environmental clearance process. It ensures that industrial projects like the Shree Cement plant in EJH cannot proceed without local voices being heard and recorded. This is the Legal Basis Mandated under the Environment Protection Act, 1986 and EIA Notification, 2006. Skipping, bypassing or implementing it in a biased manner can lead to cancellation of clearance by the National Green Tribunal (NGT). Here I believe a Quote from a National Paper will be in order. It says, "If a Public Hearing on a project is not conducted fairly or in an unbiased manner, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) usually quashes the Environmental Clearance (EC) and directs authorities to conduct a fresh public consultation. The NGT treats procedural lapses in hearings as serious violations, often requiring the process to restart from the stage of public consultation."

Now that is interesting. The SPCB report of the Nongkhlieh Public Hearing, lauded as a "Very Positive" hearing by the State Government is now all set to be sent to the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA), Meghalaya for Environmental Clearance. The question that now arises is: if the SEIAA is convinced of malpractices at the hearing venue, by both the EJH Administration and the SPCB, will it bow down to political pressure and money power or will it take a stand on the side of the Law? It has now become abundantly clear that if the SEIAA issues a positive EC, it will in all probability be quashed by the NGT. It is therefore incumbent on the Anti-Cement Plant group to submit their objections, in writing, to both the SEIAA and the NGT. Their addresses, both postal and digital are given below. Write to these official authorities, citing the biased manner in which the hearing was conducted and let's wait for action from their side. SEIAA address is: SEIAA, MEGHALAYA, 'Silviculture Building' (Adjacent Sylvan House), Lower Lachumiere, Shillong - 793 001 while the Address of the NGT is - National Green Tribunal, Eastern Zone Bench, Finance Centre, 3rd Floor, Block IIIB, New Town, Kolkata, West Bengal. - 700157. Their mail ID is: registranrgt-kolkata@gov.in

Letters to the Editor

Government Should Invest in Smart Classrooms

Editor,

Through the columns of this newspaper, I wish to express my views regarding the Meghalaya Government's recently announced proposal, as reported in the media, to distribute laptops to meritorious students who successfully passed the Class X and Class XII Board Examinations in 2026. The Government's commitment to recognising academic excellence and promoting digital education is much appreciated. Such initiatives undoubtedly encourage students to strive for higher achievement and deserve appreciation. However, as a teacher and educationist, I believe that while rewarding meritorious students is important, a parallel investment in establishing Smart Classrooms across government and aided schools would create a far greater and more enduring educational impact for present and future generations.

Education is not merely about providing digital devices; it is about creating an environment where quality teaching and meaningful learning can flourish. Public investment in education should focus on creating sustainable educational infrastructure that benefits the largest number of learners.

According to the official MBOSE examination results, 42,228 students passed the SSLC Examination and 20,882 students passed the HSSLC Examination in 2026, making a total of 63,110 successful candidates. If each laptop costs

approximately Rs 15,000, the expenditure for MBOSE students alone would amount to nearly Rs 94.67 crore. Since the Government has announced that meritorious students from CBSE, ICSE and ISC boards will also be covered under the scheme, the total expenditure is likely to be substantially higher.

While recognising academic excellence is commendable, a comparable investment in Smart Classrooms would create permanent educational assets that would benefit thousands of students every academic year for many years to come.

Meghalaya has made encouraging progress in school education under the Performance Grading Index (PGI) 2.0. The state's overall score has improved steadily from 401.62 in 2022-23 to 417.90 in 2023-24, 448.00 in 2024-25, and 525.71 in 2025-26, reflecting the Government's sincere efforts to strengthen the education sector.

This remarkable progress deserves appreciation. However, significant challenges remain in digital education and ICT infrastructure. Earlier official reports indicated that only 4.3% of schools had functional Smart Classrooms and only 19.7% of schools had access to computers, highlighting the urgent need for greater investment in technology-enabled learning. Many schools continue to function with limited digital resources, making it difficult to provide students with the quality of education envisioned under the National Education Policy 2020.

As a teacher, I found it deeply disheartening that my own school, which caters to more than 1,500 students, received a score of zero under the "Smart Classroom" indicator in the Me-

ghalaya School Report Card 2025-26. While our school continues to perform well in several educational parameters through the dedication of its teachers and students, this assessment clearly highlights a significant gap in digital infrastructure. It reinforces the urgent need to prioritise Smart Classrooms so that schools with large student enrolment are equipped with the modern teaching facilities essential for quality education in the twenty-first century.

A Smart Classroom is far more than a room equipped with a projector or an interactive display. It transforms the teaching-learning process by making education engaging, interactive and experiential. The traditional chalk-and-talk method, although valuable, often depends heavily on memorisation and imagination. Audio-visual teaching enables students to see, hear and understand concepts more effectively. Scientific experiments, mathematical principles, historical events, geographical phenomena and language lessons become easier to comprehend through videos, animations, simulations and interactive presentations. Educational research has consistently demonstrated that students learn more effectively and retain knowledge longer when multiple senses are engaged during the learning process.

Smart Classrooms also empower teachers rather than replace them. They provide access to digital lesson plans, presentations, recorded lectures, educational videos, virtual laboratories and interactive learning resources that enrich classroom instruction and reduce the burden of preparing teaching materials from scratch.

Even in schools where internet connectivity is limited, pre-loaded educational content can be used effectively in offline mode. Where internet facilities are available, teachers and students can access platforms such as DIKSHA, NCERT digital resources, SWAYAM and expert lectures from leading institutions across the country. This is particularly valuable for students in remote areas of Meghalaya, where access to specialised teachers and quality educational resources remains limited.

Furthermore, investing in Smart Classrooms promotes educational equity. A laptop benefits one student for a limited period, whereas a Smart Classroom benefits every student who studies in that school for many years. It serves not only the present batch of learners but also future generations, ensuring that every child, irrespective of economic background, has access to technology-enabled education. Such an investment aligns perfectly with the vision of the National Education Policy 2020, which advocates experiential learning, digital literacy, critical thinking and the meaningful integration of technology into classroom teaching. It would also strengthen Meghalaya's digital education ecosystem and contribute significantly towards sustaining the state's improving performance under the PGI framework.

In this context, I humbly suggest that the Government may consider allocating a substantial portion of its investment towards establishing Smart Classrooms in every government and aided secondary and higher secondary school. Such an initiative would create a lasting educational legacy by empowering teachers,

enriching classroom instruction, improving digital literacy and providing quality learning opportunities to every child, irrespective of geographical location. I also believe that seeking the views of teachers, headmasters and educationists, who work directly with students every day, would help ensure that investments in digital education are aligned with the actual needs of our schools and yield the greatest long-term benefit.

The Government deserves appreciation for its continued efforts to improve education in Meghalaya. My intention is not to oppose the distribution of laptops or any initiative that encourages academic excellence, but to advocate for an investment that delivers broader, deeper and more enduring benefits.

Awards recognise excellence, but infrastructure creates excellence. A laptop rewards today's achievers; a Smart Classroom nurtures tomorrow's achievers. Investing in Smart Classrooms is therefore not merely an investment in technology—it is an investment in the future of every child in Meghalaya. I sincerely hope the Government will consider this suggestion in the larger interest of strengthening our education system and building a brighter future for generations to come.

Yours etc.,
R. Wanshngong
Shillong

Political Parties & Their Double Standards

Editor,
The proposed amendment

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

"Sometimes your disappointments make you a stronger person for the future."

—Blanka Vlasic

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya's Environmental Terrorism

THE series of decisions made by different actors in the Meghalaya Government points to an anti-people attitude because if the environment is destroyed, the consequences will be borne by the people of this state. The irony is deafening. Those elected to govern the state and its people are instead obsessed with destroying its fragile ecology. It's also the fault of the citizens of Meghalaya for not staying on top of things and making the right noises at the right time. Many are unaware that there is such an institution as the Meghalaya Ropeway Development Authority (MRDA) and what its mandate is. The MRDA operates under the Meghalaya Ropeway Act (MRA) 2022. The Chairperson of the MRDA is a Secretary-level officer of the State Government. Below him is the Joint Chief Executive Officer (Jt. CEO) - a senior state civil servant (MCS). There's a Technical Cell Head - a specialized wing headed by the Chief Engineer, PWD, who handles all technical oversight, operations, safety protocols, and mechanical maintenance of the ropeway projects.

Then there's the Inter-Departmental & Project Leadership (The Licensing and Project Committees). While the MRDA manages the day-to-day execution of the Shillong Peak Ropeway project, its statutory permissions are overseen by co-existing committees set up by the state government under the MRA. The Empowered Committee (Licensing Authority) works in tandem with the MRDA to authorize operations and is chaired by the Chief Secretary with representatives from the Tourism, Forest & Environment, Transport, Home (Police), Urban Affairs, and Public Works (PWD), with the Chief Inspector of Ropeways as the Member Secretary. The District Level Project Committee is headed by the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills and works closely with the MRDA. It includes representation from the local Dorbar Shnong in this case the Riat Laban Dorbar Pyllun, to manage land and site requirements and it is the core local partner for the project. From information gathered it is learnt that in January 2023, the Dorbar officially signed a land lease agreement with the state government, handing over 7,416.95 square metres of land to house the lower terminal of the ropeway at the forest nursery area in Riat Laban. The partnership involved direct financial disbursements. The state government handed over Rs 1.5 crore to the Riat Laban Dorbar Pyllun as part of the formal lease agreement.

Interestingly, local MLA Sanbor Shullai also backed the Dorbar Shnong, arguing that the lower terminal would create local employment and business opportunities such as food courts and recreational facilities to be managed by the local community. The interesting part is that the community who are part of Riat Laban Dorbar were in the dark about all these transactions and agreements and have only now realised that about 544 trees would be cut to make way for the ropeway and that this would affect their water catchments. This has been the general trend across Meghalaya. The Dorbar Shnong does not feel the need to consult residents on projects that involve deforestation. They also quietly alienate land for mining and quarrying. Later it is the people who suffer ecological disasters. Clearly this system of taking people for granted is no longer tenable. It's high time the Dorbar Shnong is held accountable for its actions and learns to respect the tenets of democracy. They have to compulsorily consult the residents on all projects within their jurisdiction. They are not empowered to take decisions for the entire shnong especially when money changes hands.

What After Victory? The Next Challenge for the Cockroach Janta Party

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The protest against the NEET paper leaks and the demand for education reforms ended after the government accepted all of the Cockroach Janta Party's demands, viz., the resignation of the Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, compensation of one crore rupees to the families whose children committed suicide, and the withdrawal of all actions against the students. However, not long after, the government tried to muddy the waters by tacitly encouraging certain BJP-ruled states to take action against the agitating students, e.g., Bihar. While it is expected that any cases will ultimately be dropped, before that happens it is likely that the students will be harassed for a while, e.g., by being called to the police station to be given a warning or detained for a few days. There are reports of both happening.

The legal action against the protestors is being taken to inflict punishment and deter them from participating in future movements. This is also being done in an attempt to create a divide between those against whom action is being taken and those, especially the more well-known leaders, who are not facing any legal action. Anticipating this, Kapil Sibal, a senior Supreme Court lawyer and senior Congress leader, has pledged one crore rupees to support legal aid for CJP protestors arrested by the Delhi Police. This is an important initiative to maintain the morale of the supporters by assuring them that the movement will continue to fight for them.

Another method of dividing the movement is by alleging that some protestors have a criminal background and therefore cases will proceed against them but not against others who do not. This is ironic considering that, according to reports by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), based on self-sworn election affidavits, 63 Lok Sabha MPs from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) face serious criminal charges, with a total of 139 BJP lawmakers across both Houses of Parliament reporting pending criminal cases. So, people with criminal cases can become lawmakers but not protest against injustice.

For the protestors facing legal action, there are two ways to respond. The first is to become perturbed by it and treat their participation as a one-time "mistake," swear-

ing off participation in any future such movement. This is a completely reasonable reaction, given that for many, the only reason they joined the protest is because they wanted a normal life where the effort they put in gets a commensurate outcome, i.e., if you study hard, you will pass your exams and get a decent job in the future. Many young people came out to fight for that, but the burden of ensuring it cannot be carried by them forever. There is a life beyond all this as well. So, a choice to withdraw is perfectly understandable.

The second reaction, however, is to become more radical, realizing that they are now marked for life and may never be allowed to have a normal life in the future. If the same party stays in power, the government may come after the protestors when they apply for jobs or other opportunities by matching their credentials with the ones already in the database. It has been reported that the Delhi Police deployed photographers to photograph and film protestors, alongside AI-enabled CCTV cameras, AI-powered mobile surveillance vehicles, and smart glasses. So, even if the cases are ultimately dropped, the protestors' details will remain in the database, and a vindictive government can use them in the future. But if the government changes, it can order the destruction of the database by citing privacy concerns. This is the surest guarantee that the protestors will ever have a normal life. So, if you are going to be hounded for your entire life, you might as well fight back.

The way to fight back in a democratic system, where you feel your vote will matter and you will not be cheated, is to join an existing political party or start a new one. Both are equally lucrative for different reasons. Before we discuss these options, we must first analyse the role of political parties in the protest. There were efforts made to keep political parties away from the protest for fear that it would tarnish the movement by portraying it as politically motivated. However, keeping political parties away is exactly what media houses friendly to the government, known as the Godi Media, want. If the protest succeeds, they will claim that it succeeded without any support from the

opposition political parties and that they are, therefore, useless. But if it fails, they can blame the opposition parties for not supporting the protestors and failing them. A movement against the government is precisely a political movement where the role of political parties becomes indispensable. We should, in fact, be more worried if the political parties do not respond to such movements. Then we are living in a dictatorship, and democratic forms of protest are already dead. Luckily, that time has not yet come to pass. There is still some hope left in democratic political mobilization.

So, one route for the protestors to fight back is to join existing political parties that have already laid the groundwork, and this resource can be tapped into. But joining an already established organization would require patience to move through the ranks without bypassing senior workers. That would create dissent within those parties. Also, the party will have its own programme, and the new workers will have to adhere to it. So, joining a political party has its benefits but can put one in a very structured environment after having experienced a very spontaneous movement that was successful. But structure is important, and in the long run, organization will always win over short-term movements.

The other option is to start a new political party in the manner Arvind Kejriwal did with AAP after the Anna Hazare-led movement against corruption. This has the benefit of creating your own system which suits the movement. They could always invite senior leaders from other parties as advisers and many intellectual activists will support such an initiative. The two things that will be crucial here, apart from creating a grassroots organization, are the messaging and the leadership.

First, the message has to be part of a broader ideology that the party is going to present to the people, which includes the economic prescriptions for the country (e.g., socialist, neo-liberal, libertarian, etc.), and the kind of social relations it wants in the country (e.g., on the issue of reservation, minority rights, etc.). It has often been said that the BJP is everything that Congress is,

plus the cow (i.e., Hindutva), which, put crudely, means that both parties are similar in their economic program but differ in their social program. I would make one distinction. Both parties believe in the neo-liberal agenda, but the BJP is more intent on creating a crony capitalist state, which Former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian identified through the "two A's"—referring to the mega-conglomerates Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani—as the main beneficiaries. So, what is going to be the economic and social program of this new political party? That has to be clearly spelt out.

The other danger is leadership becoming entrenched among a few individuals who then behave as supreme leaders, without whom no decisions can be made. When this happens, the movement becomes connected to the fortunes of its leaders who, as recently seen in the case of Raghav Chadha, can betray the movement at any given time. Also, a dispersed leadership makes it much more difficult to crush the movement because new leaders can immediately take over if the existing ones are compromised or taken out. The best example of this right now is the inability of the US to defeat Iran's decentralized military command, which gives regional commanders operational flexibility. This also means that even if the US wins the war militarily (which is not happening), it will have to endure decades of Iranian resistance. A movement, therefore, must never be tied to individuals. CJP seems to have had a good start in this regard. The movement did not end with Sonam Wangchuk breaking his fast; it intensified and finally secured its deserved victory.

CJP's victory showed that winning elections does not mean that a political party can do whatever it wants. A mass movement can always bring about corrections, and this victory can be the starting point for a new chapter in Indian political history. Or it can be a paragraph that will be forgotten as one flips to the other pages. It will depend on what follows now that the street protests are over. "What now?" is the question everyone is waiting to have answered.

(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

Silencing a Fifteen Year Old.

A fifteen year old girl uses abusive language while speaking about the Prime Minister. Immediately, the machinery of power allegedly swings into action. Threats are reportedly made against her and her family, and soon the child appears before the public saying that she was forced to use those words.

Perhaps she was forced. Perhaps she was not. Perhaps she spoke in a moment of anger, as teenagers often do. But the larger question is: whether we are listening to the anger behind her words, or whether we are so obsessed with silencing the language that we refuse to hear the message.

A democracy should not be frightened by the vocabulary of a child.

It should correct her language, listen to her grievance, and teach her that she possesses the precious right to criticise those in power. It should tell her, "Your anger may be justified, but your choice of words is not. Speak strongly, speak fearlessly, but speak with dignity."

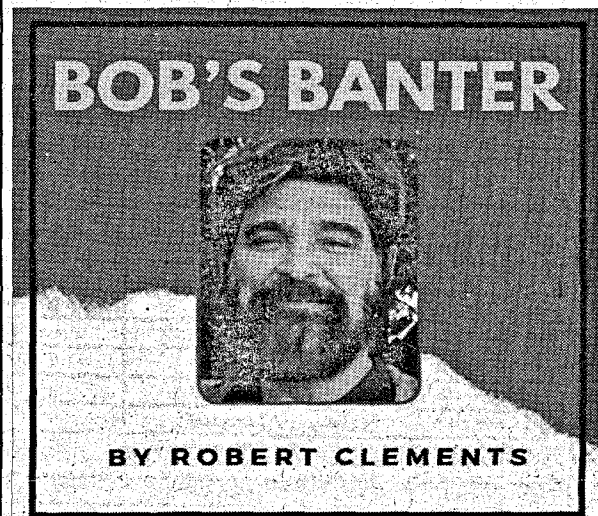
That would have been a lesson in democracy. Instead, if she and her family were indeed threatened, the lesson she received was very different. She learnt that

bring the police into the college?" the principal asked me later. "Because my daughter had to learn her rights!" I replied. That lesson was more valuable than the cell phone. She learnt that authority can be questioned, negligence can be challenged, and an ordinary citizen need not tremble before a system. She learnt that laws are not decorations placed inside dusty books. They are protections available to those willing to use them.

Most importantly, she learnt that her voice mattered. Now I wonder what the fifteen year old girl who criticised the Prime Minister learnt from her experience.

Did she learn to choose better words while bravely expressing her opinion? Did someone sit with her and explain that democracy gives her the right to criticise a Prime Minister, Chief Minister, minister, member of Parliament, or any other public servant?

Did anyone tell her that leaders are elected by citizens and must therefore be accountable to citizens? Or did she learn that criticism invites threats, that power must never be questioned, and that silence is safer than truth? Our children will occasionally speak foolishly. At times they will use words



powerful people are not to be questioned. She learnt that criticism can bring danger to her doorstep. She learnt that the safest citizen is the silent citizen.

And that is a sad lesson to teach a fifteen year old.

When my elder daughter was around that age, her cell phone was stolen from her college library. Students had to deposit their bags before entering, and the phone disappeared from inside hers.

She complained to the librarian. "I am not responsible," said the librarian. But she was responsible because the bag had been left in her custody. If an institution insists that students surrender their belongings, it also accepts responsibility for keeping those belongings safe.

My daughter called me. I went to the college, met the librarian, and heard exactly the same answer. "I am not responsible!" My daughter looked at me. Her eyes asked a question that her lips did not. "Dad, is this how the system works? Do people in authority simply deny responsibility while ordinary people walk away helplessly?"

I could have told her to forget the phone. I could have bought her another one. That would have been easier. But it would also have taught her a terrible lesson. It would have told her that authority is always right, even when it is wrong.

So I marched with her to the nearest police station and registered a theft complaint. The police officer listened, wrote down the details, and returned with us to the college. Suddenly, everyone took my daughter seriously.

The librarian who had declared herself free of responsibility became remarkably interested in the missing cell phone. Doors opened. Questions were asked. People who had looked away began looking around. The system that had been asleep discovered an urgent need to wake up.

"Why did you have to

that make us angry, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. That is part of growing up. Their minds are developing, their emotions are intense, and their understanding of public responsibility is still forming. That is why they need parents, teachers and leaders. A good parent does not break a child for using the wrong word. A good teacher does not silence a student for asking an uncomfortable question. A good leader does not use the weight of the State to frighten a teenager. We must correct their words without crushing their voices.

Imagine if someone in authority had met that girl and said, "Young lady, you have every right to disagree with the Prime Minister. Tell us why you are angry. But do not abuse him. If you want people to respect your argument, express it with intelligence and dignity."

What an extraordinary lesson that would have been. She might have walked away understanding both freedom and responsibility. Millions of young people watching her might have learnt that democracy welcomes criticism but expects civility. Instead, the alleged threats have distracted attention from her language and placed it on the insecurity of those in power.

A strong democracy does not silence a child. It teaches her how to speak. A wise government does not fear the anger of its youngest citizens. It asks what produced that anger. If a fifteen year old is furious with her country's leadership, the answer is not to frighten her. The answer is to listen to her. Because when we frighten a fifteen year old into silence, we are not protecting the Prime Minister.

We are frightening the future of the nation.!

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

Letters to the Editor

Concern over the Claim and Control of Wei-Sawdong and Daiñhlen Tourist Sites

Editor,
Through the esteemed columns of The Shillong Times, I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities and the public to an issue regarding the tourist destinations of Wei-Sawdong and Daiñhlen, which are situated within the property of Laitduh village.

It is a matter of serious concern that the villages of Umblai and Mawphu are reportedly attempting to exercise control over these tourist spots, despite the claim that Laitduh is the rightful and sole owner of the land on which these places are situated. Such a situation has the potential to create unnecessary misunderstanding and conflict among neighbouring communities.

Tourism is an important source of livelihood and development for the people of Meghalaya. Therefore, the management and administration of tourist destinations should be carried out with fairness, transparency and respect for legitimate land rights. No village or community should be allowed

to take control of a place merely on the basis of competing claims without proper verification of the relevant land records and customary rights.

I therefore appeal to the concerned authorities to look into this matter impartially and verify the ownership and customary rights concerning Wei-Sawdong and Daiñhlen. If Laitduh is the rightful owner of these properties, its rights should be duly recognised and protected. At the same time, any legitimate concerns of neighbouring villages should be addressed through proper dialogue and lawful procedures.

The issue should be resolved peacefully and transparently before it develops into a larger dispute. The protection of community rights and the responsible development of tourism can go hand in hand if all parties respect established rights and work towards a fair solution.

I hope The Shillong Times will give this matter due attention and help bring awareness to the issue among the public and the concerned authorities.

Yours etc.,
O.Kharlukhi,
Via email

A Proud Moment for Meghalaya

Editor,
It was a matter of immense

pride to see Ms. Nandini Ishvi O. Sangma, a Political Science student of Don Bosco College, Tura, represent India at the 13th Commonwealth Youth Parliament held in Sydney, Australia, from 26 to 31 July 2026. She was one of only six young delegates selected from different parts of the country to participate in this prestigious international event, where youth representatives from Commonwealth nations discussed issues relating to democracy, gender equality, the responsible use of artificial intelligence, and democratic integrity.

Nandini earned this honour after being adjudged the Best Speaker at the first-ever Youth Parliament organised by the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in collaboration with Tura Christian College. Her outstanding performance reflected not only her knowledge of democratic institutions but also her confidence, clarity of thought, and ability to articulate her views.

One part of her speech deserves special appreciation. Before speaking on artificial intelligence or any other global issue, she simply asked, "How many of you have heard of Meghalaya?" It was a simple question, yet a powerful one. The reality is that even within our own country, many people still ask, "Where is Meghalaya?" when we tell them where we

come from. Nandini wisely chose to introduce the international audience to her home State first. She spoke about Meghalaya's unique matrilineal society, its rich culture, and its identity before addressing the main theme. In doing so, she became not only a representative of India but also a proud ambassador of Meghalaya.

Her achievement is a matter of pride for Don Bosco College, the people of Garo Hills, and the entire State. It also sends a clear message to our young people that one need not come from a metropolitan city to earn a place on an international platform. Dedication, ability, and self-confidence can open doors to the world.

So far as my knowledge goes, and if I am not mistaken, no student from Meghalaya has previously represented India at the Commonwealth Youth Parliament. If that is indeed the case, Ms. Nandini Ishvi O. Sangma has created a significant milestone in the history of our State. I hope her achievement will inspire many more young men and women from Meghalaya to dream bigger, prepare harder, and seize similar opportunities in the years ahead.

I congratulate Ms. Nandini Ishvi O. Sangma, her parents, her teachers, Don Bosco College, and the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly for

nurturing such a promising young leader. I wish her every success in her future endeavours and hope she continues to bring laurels to Meghalaya and the nation.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

We Inherit More Than Land, We Inherit Identity

Editor,
"Being Indigenous is not just about where we come from. It is about who we choose to remain."

Every year on August 9, the world observes the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, celebrating the cultures, languages, traditions, and wisdom of Indigenous communities worldwide. Born and raised in Meghalaya, I consider it a blessing to belong to a land rich in culture, values, and tradition. Our Indigenous identity is reflected in our languages, our respect for nature, our strong sense of community, and the heritage we proudly pass from one generation to the next.

One of the most distinctive features of Khasi society is our matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance pass through the youngest daughter. While many view this as a symbol of

women's empowerment, my experience has shown that the reality is more nuanced.

In my book, *Unfiltered Love, Sex & Marriage*, I share my personal journey of growing up in a matrilineal society, not to criticize our culture, but to encourage honest conversations about both its strengths and its challenges. Our traditions give us belonging, resilience, and strong family bonds, yet they can also bring unspoken expectations and responsibilities.

True empowerment is not measured by inheritance alone. It is reflected in the freedom to make informed choices, pursue one's dreams, build healthy relationships, and live with dignity and self-worth.

As we approach the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, let us celebrate our identity with gratitude, preserve our heritage with pride, and embrace thoughtful dialogue that strengthens both our culture and our people.

Yours etc.,
Jubilin Lyngdoh (Author of *Unfiltered Love, Sex & Marriage*)
Shillong-16

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"High expectations are the key to everything."

— Sam Walton

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, AUGUST 7, 2026

Bills, discussions

IT'S a sad commentary on the state of Indian democracy that Parliament, where people's power is concentrated, hardly conducts business these days. The session that started on July 20 has been drowned in Opposition protests, starting with the issue of student protests over NEET leakage, and moving on to other issues till date, with only a week more left for its conclusion. Bills were rushed through in a lightning hurry. So much so, five of the seven legislations were passed without a debate. Debates matter. Bills drafted and introduced by a government require scrutiny by members from both the ruling and opposition benches. Fine-tuning is what makes a big difference to new laws. Else, they would be half baked. Officials are involved in the drafting of the bill, as ministers neither have the inclination to do the paperwork or study a subject in detail, nor the time as they are busy with other matters in the power circuit. What officials write and give needs to be vetted. Bureaucrats are a class by themselves. They think they are the 'government', lording it over the 'subjects' or the Prajas. They have a tendency to insert whimsical clauses or go overboard. People's representatives are believed to have a finger on the pulse of the common man. They sense danger involved in legislation that can hurt the people's interests. Not the bureaucrats, who live in their own cocooned world. So many legislations in recent times have been passed by parliament and state legislatures without sufficient discussions. Now, by way of strategy, governments even wait for pandemonium in the house to push through bills with hidden clauses.

It's rather upto the government to facilitate discussions on bills, if only to ensure that these benefit the nation and its people the best. But, individual ego apparently does not allow those in government to bend under pressure from the opposition or pick a suggestion or two from them so as to incorporate them in new legislation. This is a pity of the times and undercuts the cause of democracy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi could steamroll his decisions in the last parliament, as the opposition had fewer number of MPs. The Congress recovered substantially from its previous position and won around a hundred seats in the last Lok Sabha polls in 2024. This gave the opposition a new lease of life in Parliament. However, the government remains adamant and refuses to yield even when there exists a scope to make amends. The PM would do well to keep in mind the fact that he had not been granted a mandate to continue the BJP rule in the last polls. He cobbled up a majority by taking help from two parties outside of the NDA framework. This is all the more reason why he owes it to the nation to relent a bit and listen to the opposition too. Once he as the leader of the house does this, the scenario would change in positive ways. Consensus-building is an integral part of the democratic process. The government must help strengthen the system rather than giving a feeling that it undercuts them.

What Next for the Cockroaches? Abhijeet Dipke's Real Challenge Begins Now

By Rajdeep Sardesai

India is a country where improbable stories have an uncanny habit of occasionally becoming reality. Every day, millions dream of changing the system. Very few succeed. Which is why the astonishing rise of 30-year-old Abhijeet Dipke deserves to be taken seriously.

Who could have imagined that a tweet posted on May 16 urging "cockroaches to come together" would snowball into a nationwide youth protest movement that would eventually force the resignation of a powerful Union minister? Barely a month ago, Dipke and his Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) scarcely registered on the national radar. Today, television crews, YouTubers, senior political figures are making a beeline for his modest home in Sambhajnagar. What many dismissed as an online fad has suddenly become one of the biggest political stories of the year.

The immediate battle may have been won. The real challenge begins now. Should the Cockroach Janata Party remain a pressure group or take the plunge into electoral politics? It was a question I put to Dipke in a recent interview that has since attracted millions of views across social media.

His answer was immediate. "We haven't even thought about becoming a political party. We want to remain a protest movement that demands accountability in a democracy." India has heard those words before. At the height of the India Against Corruption movement in 2011, Arvind Kejriwal repeatedly insisted he had no plans to enter politics. Just two years later, he was Chief Minister of Delhi. Every successful protest movement eventually confronts the same dilemma: how do you convert moral authority into political power without losing the credibility that gave you that authority in the first place?

Dipke understands that dilemma better than most. Having worked with the Aam Aadmi Party, he has seen both sides of the story. AAP demonstrated that it is possible to convert public anger into electoral success. It also showed how difficult it is to retain the moral purity of a movement once you enter the unforgiving world of competitive politics, where alliances, compromises and organisational compulsions become unavoidable.

History suggests that every successful political



disruptor needs more than public anger. It needs the right timing and, even more importantly, a clearly identifiable social base. Kejriwal did not simply ride an anti-corruption wave. He became the political voice of India's expanding urban middle class—educated, aspirational citizens frustrated with cor-

ruption, poor public services

and a political establishment that appeared insulated from everyday concerns. That constituency became the foundation on which AAP built itself. The story of the star debutante at the heart of this year's political superhit, C. Joseph Vijay, is different but equally instructive. His appeal rests on a unique blend of cinema and politics that is distinctly Tamil. In a state where film stars have long commanded extraordinary, emotional loyalty, Vijay tapped into a younger generation looking for an alternative to the familiar DMK-AIADMK duopoly. His immense popularity among young voters gave him an instant constituency that transcended traditional caste and class divides.

Every successful political start-up requires such a natural constituency. Moral outrage may ignite a movement; it rarely sustains an electoral challenge.

Which brings us to a central question confronting Abhijeet Dipke. Who exactly is the CJP's core supporter? Is it the Gen Z student angry over repeated paper leaks? The unemployed graduate struggling to find a job? The aspirational lower middle class that feels excluded from India's growth story? Young Ambedkarites seeking a new political vocabulary? Or is it a broader generation of Indians under thirty who increasingly believe that governments, irrespective of party,

have become less accountable? Until these questions are answered, transforming a protest movement into an electoral force will remain extraordinarily difficult.

There is another reason for caution. Unlike Delhi in 2013 or Tamil Nadu in 2026, the national political landscape does not present



an obvious electoral vacuum. The BJP remains India's dominant electoral force. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's aura of invincibility may have dimmed somewhat, but he continues to remain a towering presence. Bringing about the resignation of one minister is a significant political achievement. Defeating the BJP's formidable electoral machine is an altogether different proposition.

Indeed, one could argue that the CJP's greatest strength lies precisely in the fact that it is not another political party. The movement struck a chord because it appeared to rise above conventional partisan politics. It offered young Indians a platform to express frustration without forcing them to choose between the BJP and the Congress or between Left and Right. The NEET paper leak may have been the immediate trigger and Dharmendra Pradhan the most visible symbol, but the movement resonated because it captured a much deeper anxiety about shrinking opportunities, growing inequality and an increasing perception that governments have become less responsive to ordinary citizens.

That moral authority is precious. Once surrendered, it is rarely regained. The moment a movement enters electoral politics, every decision becomes a compromise of sorts. The 'outsider' slowly becomes part of the establishment he once challenged.

For the Cockroaches, the first chapter has ended. The far more difficult one begins now.

Postscript: When I interviewed Dipke last week, he turned up in a loose white T-shirt with a faded "Fly Emirates" logo. There was something almost deliberate in its ordinariness. Here was someone who seemed unconcerned with television optics or political choreography. Whether by instinct or design, Dipke projected the image of a young, fearless anti-establishment figure for whom authenticity mattered more than appearance. In an age of carefully curated political branding, perhaps that, too, is part of his appeal.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Feedback at rajdeep.sardesai52@gmail.com)

Declining Reading Habit: A Global Challenge

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

Books have always been the foundation of knowledge, imagination and intellectual growth. Yet, the habit of reading books is steadily declining, particularly among students. The answer to the question, "Is the habit of reading books declining?" is undeniably yes. While digital technology has transformed access to information, it has also changed the way people read, learn and concentrate. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this shift as schools, colleges and universities adopted online classes and examinations. Even today, many teachers distribute lecture notes and study materials through mobile phones and digital platforms.

Although mobile technology has made education more accessible, studying on a smartphone presents serious challenges. Notifications from messaging apps, social media, short-form videos and online games constantly compete for students' attention. Research in educational psychology suggests that frequent digital interruptions reduce sustained attention and make deep reading more difficult. Instead of engaging with long texts, many students skim information, switch rapidly between applications and struggle to maintain concentration for extended periods. The result is a decline in critical reading, reflection and comprehension.

The way kids learn at home has changed a lot in the last ten years. One big change is that there are fewer books in homes now than there used to be. At the same time, more and more kids have access to things like tablets and educational apps. While technology can be a great tool for learning, it's not being used as well as it could be. Also, spending too much time on digital devices can actually hurt kids' ability to learn and can be bad for their overall well-being.

Reading is the key to academic success and lifelong learning. It enriches vocabulary, strengthens language skills and improves memory. Reading also broadens our understanding of different societies, histories and perspectives. Beyond academic achievement, it stimulates imagination, fosters empathy and develops critical thinking. Books open the door to almost every profession and field of knowledge. A society that neglects reading risks intellectual stagnation, poor decision-making and a diminished capacity for informed and responsible citizenship.

By reading, we can stay curious, open-minded, and informed, which are essential for a healthy and thriving society. Unfortunately, reading is increasingly viewed as a demanding academic obligation rather than an enjoyable lifelong habit. Smartphones, streaming platforms and social media have become the preferred forms of entertainment for many people. The popularity of short-form digital content has shortened attention spans and reduced people's willingness to engage with lengthy texts. According to the OECD's PISA 2018 study, more students now report that they read only when required, while reading for pleasure has declined over the years. More than 75% of 15-year-old boys across OECD countries reported reading for enjoyment for less than 30 minutes a day or not at all, highlighting a worrying international trend.

Hence the question to be asked is - why the hurry to conduct the SSLC examination in the month of December? Conducting the SSLC examination in the month of February (like the previous academic session 2025-2026) is not late and is still within the appropriate academic calendar. Hopefully, the Government through the Education Department will take immediate steps to address this issue and to reconsider its decision.

Yours etc.,
P. Marbaniang
Shillong

commercial establishments; they are institutions where readers discover new ideas, interact with authors and cultivate a lifelong love of literature. Australia Reads reports that nearly half of Australians say they read less than they would like, largely because of competing demands on their time and digital distractions.

This should serve as a warning to countries across the world. Governments, educational institutions, libraries and communities must work together to revive the culture of reading. Schools should organise reading clubs, literary festivals, book fairs and dedicated reading hours. Libraries need continued investment, and independent bookshops deserve support because they play a vital role in sustaining literary and cultural life.

We've seen some great examples of how to get kids excited about reading again. For instance, in Dallas, there's a program called Earning by Learning that pays school kids two dollars for every book they finish. But here's the thing: they have to take a computer quiz first to show they really did read the book. It's been a huge hit, especially with second-graders in schools that were struggling. This just goes to show that if you design the right incentives, you can really inspire kids to develop a love of reading that will last. The program has been particularly effective in sparking a passion for books in young minds, and it's a great example of how a simple idea can make a big difference. By making reading fun and rewarding, we can help kids develop a habit that will benefit them for the rest of their lives.

The pandemic really showed us how important it is to make sure people can get reading materials. When lockdowns happened, millions of students couldn't go to libraries or get printed books like they used to. But what's interesting is that a study by the Global Web Index in April 2020 found that about a third of people worldwide said they were reading more books while stuck at home. This tells us that when people have the time, can get to books, and are encouraged to read, they actually will - and their reading habits can really take off.

Technology is not the problem; it's actually a helpful tool. For example, UNESCO says that mobile devices can make books more available in areas where they're hard to find. But we should use technology to support reading, not replace it. Digital platforms are really useful when they help us focus on our reading, rather than switching between lots of things at once. When we're reading on a device, it's better if it helps us stay engaged with the story, rather than distracting us with lots of other things to look at. This way, we can really get into the book and enjoy it, which is what deep reading is all about. It's really important for kids to start reading when they're young, because if they don't, it can be hard for them to get into it later on. So, it's up to all of us - parents, teachers, and everyone in the community - to help kids see how much fun reading can be, and to make books a part of their everyday lives. We want kids to think of books as friends that they'll have forever, not as something boring or annoying. By working together, we can help kids develop a love of reading that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

The decline of reading and the decline of bookshops are two sides of the same coin. If society fails to nurture a love for books, it risks losing not only bookstores but also one of the greatest sources of knowledge, creativity and critical thinking. In an era dominated by smartphones and shrinking attention spans, cultivating a strong reading culture is more important than ever. Let us rediscover the joy of reading, support our libraries and bookshops, and ensure that books remain at the heart of education, culture and lifelong learning.

Letters to the Editor

Sustainable Revival of Ward's Lake Requires Restoring Its Natural Inflow

Editor,

As an avid reader of the esteemed newspaper The Shillong Times, I read with great interest your recent report ("Ward's Lake set for Rs 25-crore makeover," d.t. 27th July 2026) regarding the state government's plans to revive the Ward's Lake/Nan Polok. While the initiative to clean the lake and improve its ecological health while preserving its heritage character is a welcome step, however the ongoing approach overlooks the root cause of the lake's ecological decay.

It may be mentioned that having gone through many reports and articles written by well known personalities and experts of Shillong in the past whereby they have provided their insights and opinions on the state of the lake, it is worth mentioning if not mistaken, that historically Ward's Lake relied on a vital water feeder system originating from the water source of the Wah Dieng Lieng stream in the periphery of Risa Colony and Cleve Colony. This natural stream flowed via a canal built by the British in conjunction with the creation of the Lake in those

days starting near St. Peter's School, moving through the Dhankheti-Malki stretch, passing the area in front of the Eldorado premises, towards Bawri Mansion, moving along Malki point to Barik, diverting towards the All Saints Church, and flowing between the Main and Additional Secretariats, and reaches a divergent point - one flowing towards the Governor's House premises which was extensively used for general water needs i.e drinking, washing, cleaning etc., in those days when piped water was not available yet, while the other flows into the south point of the lake. This continuous flow was once essential to maintaining the lake's water quality and ecosystem.

However, since the mid-1980s, coinciding with the construction of the Bawri Mansion and Shopping kiosks in front of the Eldorado premises and the other commercial complexes such as the Bareh complex, NL complex etc., this critical water supply route became obstructed and for decades, the water in Ward's Lake has remained largely static and stagnant due to the unavailable supply of fresh water from this source.

It begs the question: Why did the concerned authorities fail to flag or address the blockage of this natural inlet at that time? Deprived of any natural flow, it is obvious that the Lake's oxygen levels plummeted and its ecosystem deteriorated.

Deploying advanced technology like Lamella Clarifiers and nano-bubble aeration may offer temporary relief, but using a Rs 25-crore budget without restoring the Lake's natural water flow is treating the symptoms rather than the cause. Therefore, it is suggested that true and sustainable revitalization requires restoring the natural inflow of water that originally sustained Ward's Lake/Nan Polok.

Yours etc.,
Albert S Lanong,
Shillong

A Commendable Interstate Effort in the Search for Kwis Sumer

Editor,

I wish to express my deep appreciation for the swift, compassionate, and highly co-ordinated interstate efforts currently underway in resolving the disappearance case of Mr Kwis Sumer of Muktapur Village, West Jaintia Hills. Watching these developments unfold as a concerned citizen, it is heartening to see such a dedicated humanitarian response.

The prompt intervention by Hon'ble Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma, deserves significant praise. Immediately upon receiving a formal memorandum on July 27, 2026, he proactively

engaged with the Government of Karnataka to initiate vital interstate coordination. This critical momentum was made possible through the timely assistance of Dr D. Rocky L Nonglait, who acted out of pure goodwill to facilitate the urgent connection with the Chief Minister's office.

Furthermore, the operational execution has been exemplary. A specialised Meghalaya Police team, led by Lovish Garg, IPS, accompanied a delegation to Bengaluru on July 29, 2026. On the ground, they received invaluable on-ground assistance from the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), Bengaluru Unit, led by Younuidame Suchiang and Meban Phielad Shadap. This cohesive team successfully engaged in high-level strategy meetings with DGP & IGP, DIGP, and SPs of the Karnataka State Police on July 30 and 31, ensuring the case remains under rigorous investigation.

In moments of crisis, seeing state leadership, law enforcement, and student organisations unite across borders brings immense hope to a distressed family and the wider society. I extend my profound gratitude to everyone working tirelessly behind the scenes, and I join the community in praying for the safe and swift return of Mr Kwis Sumer.

Yours etc.,
Morning Star Sumer,
Via email

Why the hurry to conduct the SSLC examination in December?

Editor,

The Education Department of Meghalaya, on January 28, 2026 has given a direction that the SSLC Examination for the academic session 2026-27 will be conducted in the month of December 2026. In this regard, one has to ponder on why the hurry to conduct the SSLC examination. Just few weeks after completing the syllabus, students will have to rush in to appear for the final Board examination. And after completing the examination, students will have to wait for months before getting admission to class XI.

Normally, in the first few weeks of December, teachers are engaged in the revision classes for the class X students. Students are making use of the time in revision and discussion of the completed syllabus with the help and guidance of the teachers. There was no need to rush for appearing the final Board examination.

Observing the pattern of time, there is a connection of the academic, social and religious aspects in our State. So, conducting the SSLC Board examination should fit the appropriate timing

without hindering any social aspects of the society at large. Moreover, December is at the peak of the festive season in our State and all sorts of activities and programmes are scheduled within the time frame of the month. Therefore, there is a need for the concerned authorities to strike a balance between the importance of family matters, social life, education, studies, examinations etc. One aspect should not jeopardize too much on the others. For instance, one having to sacrifice not playing Christmas songs at home because someone in the family is studying and is in the middle of the Board exams, is not acceptable at all. So, why has such an undesirable situation arisen? This matter needs to be reconsidered in the best interests of all.

Hence the question to be asked is - why the hurry to conduct the SSLC examination in the month of December? Conducting the SSLC examination in the month of February (like the previous academic session 2025-2026) is not late and is still within the appropriate academic calendar. Hopefully, the Government through the Education Department will take immediate steps to address this issue and to reconsider its decision.

Yours etc.,
P. Marbaniang
Shillong

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"It's a good place when all you have is hope and not expectations."

— Danny Boyle

The Shillong Times

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Protests – Lifeblood of Democracy

THOSE in government, whether at the state or central level, tend to assume superpower status because they believe they have addressed all issues of public concern. But that is supercilious. Those in the higher echelons of government are a privileged lot and are immune from the many afflictions of the common citizen. In these times many of those holding top positions in the political hierarchy might not even settle in Meghalaya. They have made provisions for themselves in other more comfortable locales within the country and abroad. They have enough financial clout to settle anywhere on this planet. Hence, they remain indifferent toward the environmental concerns that afflict ordinary, voiceless citizens. The recent public hearing for starting another cement plant at Nongkhlieh, East Jaintia Hills was a clear violation of all norms, as those against the project were prevented from reaching the hearing. Such a brutal display of state authority does not bode well for democracy and people will eventually find their voices when a leader rises to show the way.

For now the Voice of People Party (VPP) has led the way for a people's protest since it's the only Opposition Party in the 60-member Assembly. However, looking at how GenZ is finding its voice in this country and Gen Alpha joining forces, any ruthless show of state power is unlikely to succeed. There's no stopping this young generation from pursuing their goals of ushering in more accountability into the system and asking the much-touted critical questions from the elected representatives. For too long those who elected MLAs did so on very narrow considerations. They voted after receiving a few sops, promises and sometimes money. They didn't have the capacity to think beyond the vote and what would happen to the state if a particular person is voted to hold office of power and responsibility. Hence for decades, people of Meghalaya elected MLAs who later became ministers without a long-term vision for the state. All they did was address the here and now; they made a few hundred kilometres of roads that were washed away after the first monsoons; repaired a few roads within the city; and provided drinking water wherever feasible. From each of these so-called development schemes the PWD and PHED ministers made their cuts from each of these so-called development schemes, and so too did the engineers in charge. This continues to this day because MLAs sitting in the opposition never followed up with RTI on how the schemes were executed. Concerned citizens and the media were left to interrogate how public money is utilized and if every rupee was accounted for. Most often than not accountability is lacking, which is observed from the CAG reports where utilisation certificates are pending for hundreds of schemes claimed to have been completed.

The MLA of the area where Shree Cements would be setting up the proposed cement plant – Santa Mary Shylla – should have been the one to stand with the people and be concerned that the limestone mining would destroy Meghalaya's heritage caves and ecology as forests would have to be cleared. But she remained a silent spectator. Being part of the government, she probably even has a hand in promoting the Shree Cements company. It is this aspect of the politicians' character – the propensity for reaping short term gains so they can manage 'politics' and continue to remain in power which has virtually destroyed the moral architecture of Meghalaya. Unless people take back power from politicians and refuse to treat them like demigods, this state will continue to travel down the slippery slope.

Letters to the Editor

Why Delay the Appointment of Teachers?

Editor,
Why is the Government of Meghalaya delaying the appointment of teachers in various Government-aided schools. Even in Government schools, vacant posts are lying unfilled for years. From this year, 2026, the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) has issued an order that the best of 5 subjects model for passing examinations will be discontinued. Henceforth students have to pass all 6 subjects in the SSLC Examination. But my concern is that if the post of Maths and Science teachers are lying vacant and the Government is not allowing the school authorities to appoint those teachers then who will teach the students Maths and Science which are two important subjects, during these days? We all know that from this year SSLC Examinations will be conducted in the month of December. If students fail in Maths and Science who will be responsible? The Government or School Authority?

The Government is parroting about quality education but how can there be quality education without a teacher? The Science Section of Government Boys' Higher Secondary School, Tura are complaining that there is no Mathematics and Physics Teacher. Can students who

are offered these subjects pass the HSSLC final Examination? If they fail, who will take responsibility- the Government or students? There may be some students whose aspiration is to crack the NEET or JEE. Let us give them an opportunity to fulfil their dreams.

It is therefore my earnest appeal to the Government to speed up the process of appointing qualified Maths and Science teachers and allow the school authorities of aided schools to also fill up the vacant posts. Time is running out. It waits for no one. Final examinations are knocking at our doors. Let our children thrive under a good educational environment. Those in power and authority in Meghalaya can send their children to an expensive institution, but think of the farmers and children from underprivileged families. They are forced to study in Government or government-aided schools. So let there be justice for the thousands of students who are waiting for the new teachers.

Yours etc.,
C Momin,
Via email

Reading Beyond Notes: A Culture We Must Revive

Editor,
I would like to express my heartfelt apprecia-

Sometimes, a free app is not really free. It may cost nothing to download, but it charges us in time, attention and pieces of our lives. The other day, while doom-scrolling through political posts, I noticed a pattern: It's not that everyone wants to go viral but everyone is forced to. Even worthwhile public good work, narrated in the slow and formal documentary voice, is easily ignored. Package the same work into a fast-paced, attention-grabbing reel of less than ten seconds, and it suddenly attracts likes, forwards, shares and saves. Yet, if that work were presented through an hour-long presentation supported by facts and data, how many of us would stay? We type "wow" and press the like button without realising that social media is conditioning us like participants in an endless behavioural experiment, to react, swipe and move on rather than stay, listen and think. The app may be free, but the price is our attention, and we are paying for it with our lives, ten seconds at a time.

There was a time when eating lunch was simply eating lunch. You ordered your food, complained about the portion size, stole a few fries from someone else's plate and went home. Today, lunch is a production. Before anyone is permitted to touch the food, the table must be rearranged, the glasses shifted towards better light and the person with the best phone appointed director of photography. By the time the photographs are taken, the food is cold, but at least the internet knows we ate good today at a trending place. An influencer recommended, so it must be good right? Somewhere between the arrival of social media and the rise of the algorithm, we all became content creators, whether we planned to or not.

This transformation does not apply only to influencers dancing before ring lights or filming elaborate morning routines. The small-business owner must make reels to sell candles. The fitness trainer must record workouts while conducting them. The artist must film the painting instead of simply painting it. The chef must prepare the food, plate it, photograph it, edit the footage and explain the recipe in under twenty seconds. Even doctors, lawyers, teachers and financial advisers are encouraged to "build a personal brand." Writers are not exempt. "Make yourself more digestible. More palatable. Give yourself some mass appeal!" an advice that makes a human being sound suspiciously like a Hajmola tablet. Oh, you're a writer?

Okay, But Can You Dance?

By Shivani Pde

But do people like you? Forget the writing. Forget the meaning and value your words might offer. Can you dance? When did that become an additional requirement for choosing a profession? Imagine Ruskin Bond releasing another beautiful book, only for the internet to swipe past it in two seconds because he was not performing a trending dance while explaining the plot.

We are no longer expected merely to be good at what we do; we must also prove it publicly, repeatedly and preferably in vertical format. Professional networking platforms, once used to display qualifications and search for jobs, are now filled with inspirational essays about what missing a flight taught someone about leadership. A cup of coffee becomes a lesson in resilience. A delayed meeting reveals five secrets of entrepreneurship. Getting out of bed on a Monday is presented as a case study in discipline. Experience alone is apparently no longer enough. It must be converted into content before it can be considered valuable.

Our private lives have also become raw material. We photograph birthdays while they are happening, record concerts we may never watch again and spend holidays searching for places that will look attractive online. We no longer simply admire sunsets. We film them, colour-correct them, add music and write something about healing. The sun has been setting perfectly well for billions of years, but we continue to behave as though it requires our publicity. Even rest must be repackaged as a "slow morning," a "self-care Sunday" or a beautifully arranged cup of tea beside a book we may or may not actually be reading.

I write this with the uncomfortable self-awareness of someone who willingly creates content. I have waited for strangers to move out of a frame. I have filmed the same scene twice because the first version did not feel cinematic enough. I have looked at a beautiful landscape and thought, with complete sincerity, "This would make a great reel." I blame the algorithm for many things, but I must admit that I have also made my coffee wait while I photographed it from three different angles. Once the mind begins searching for material, an ordinary day can quickly start resembling a production schedule.

The problem is not that we document our lives. People have always kept diaries,

collected photographs and tried to preserve important moments. The difference is that documentation was once mainly about remembering; today, it is increasingly about being seen. A memory can remain imperfect, but content must perform. It needs a strong opening, suitable music, an attractive cover, searchable words and a caption that appears authentic without being so authentic that it makes anyone uncomfortable. Then comes the analysis: views, likes, shares, saves and the mildly devastating discovery that a video into which you poured your soul has reached forty-seven people, while someone dropping a sandwich has become famous overnight.

The algorithm does not merely show us content; it quietly trains us to produce more of it. It teaches us which parts of our lives receive attention and which disappear into silence. Gradually, we begin editing not only our photographs but also our personalities. We become funnier, angrier, wiser, happier or more wounded, depending on what attracts the most engagement. What begins as documentation can slowly become performance, until the question is no longer whether we enjoyed an experience, but whether it generated enough usable footage.

For many people, however, creating content is no longer optional vanity. It has become unpaid promotional labour. Small-business owners, artists, freelancers and professionals must do the actual work and then become photographers, scriptwriters, presenters, editors and marketing departments to ensure that somebody sees it. A person who chooses not to post may be equally talented, but someone more visible is often more likely to receive the customer, commission or opportunity. Visibility has become a form of currency, and silence can feel professionally expensive. We participate willingly in this system, but many of us also understand that opting out may come at a cost.

There are wonderful possibilities within this new reality. People can build businesses from remote towns, teach skills across continents and tell stories that traditional gatekeepers might once have ignored. A phone can become a studio, a classroom, a shop or the doorway to an entirely new career. Yet opportunity has arrived carrying a tripod and demanding regular updates. The exhaustion comes from

living two versions of life simultaneously: the experience itself and its online adaptation. We attend the event and then post the event. We complete the work and then explain the work. We travel and return with enough footage to spend another week editing the journey. Social media is undoubtedly a powerful medium for marketing ourselves, promoting our work and selling a service. However, when it begins to interfere with real life or weaken our ability to think critically, it is time to switch off the phone and take a digital detox.

Many times, I catch myself being pulled into what feels like an episode of Black Mirror, a dystopian future I would never wish upon our children. I see people forming firm opinions based on ten-second reels, often without examining the facts, data or history behind what they have watched. This is becoming increasingly dangerous because complex political and social realities cannot be honestly understood in a few dramatic seconds. We must make reading a habit again: hold a novel, read history, engage with long-form journalism and train the mind to remain with an idea long enough to question it. Our opinions should be shaped by evidence and context, not by a reel created by someone who may be trying to steer the narrative in a particular direction. A ten-second video may begin a conversation, but it should never be allowed to finish one.

Perhaps the quiet rebellion of our time is allowing some moments to remain unproductive: a meal eaten while it is still hot, a walk that produces no footage, a conversation that never becomes a caption, or a sunset permitted to disappear without evidence. The real cost of the content economy may lie not merely in the loss of privacy and time, but in our diminishing ability to experience something without immediately wondering how it can be used. The next time something beautiful happens, perhaps we should resist reaching for the phone. Let the moment disappear from the internet and remain alive only within us. In an age when everyone is creating content, perhaps the boldest thing left to create is nothing at all. Yet none of us stands entirely outside this contradiction. The machine has become so efficient that it can turn even resistance into engagement. I would start a petition to bring back landlines but wait, let me first film the announcement while dancing to a trending audio.

And, hence, the Indian political parties used monthly cash transfer scheme to woo the women voters for

Young Women, Protest, and Digital Platforms A trio scripting new saga in Indian Democracy

By Antriksh Kar Singh

India is passing through a decisive moment in its political history as young girls have become face of ongoing students uprising in the national capital and subsequent solidarity marches across country. These young girls aren't only participating to support their male counterparts instead became face and voice of resistance against those in power.

These young girls bravely faced police brutality on 20 July when police resorted to teargas shelling, lathi charge, and other measures to prevent marching student protestors from reaching parliament. The visuals must have shaken the systems and conscience of many individuals, who make it a point to reach the protest site after 20 July incident.

A question however comes to the mind that suddenly what has changed in Indian society that young girls became so brave to publicly come forward in a movement becoming its face and voice? A few things come to mind as possible reason behind this change.

The first and foremost is

"The improvement of these two measures is a significant factor towards women empowerment. This shift became evident through issues, and policies related to women began taking centre stage in Indian elections prominently from 2022 Himachal Pradesh Assembly Election."

the improvement of literacy among the females in India society, which reached to a level of around 75% in 2023-24 alongside significant rise in female participation in Indian labour force rose to 41.7%. The improvement of these two measures is a significant factor towards women empowerment. This shift became evident through issues, and policies related to women began taking centre stage in Indian elections prominently from 2022 Himachal Pradesh Assembly Election.

And, hence, the Indian political parties used monthly cash transfer scheme to woo the women voters for

"These platforms provide access to loads of transnational information, perspective, and opinions transforming their aspiration and believe systems. This transformation seemingly inculcated fearlessness, self-motivation and a carefree attitude among the Indian youngsters especially young girls, which is visible in the participants of the student protest across country."

winning elections. However, such measures are only a tokenism instead of any real progress but passage of bill for giving 33% reservation to women in Indian parliament and the state assembly was a real sign of tectonic shift happening in Indian socio-political sphere. And, the current protest at Jantar Mantar provided evidence how the young girls are now taking charge of protest by becoming face and voice through use of digital platforms especially social media, which has fundamentally altered the information ecosystem of India. These platforms provide access to loads of transnational information, perspective, and opinions transforming their aspiration and believe systems. This transformation seemingly inculcated fearlessness, self-motivation and a carefree attitude among the Indian youngsters especially young girls, which is visible in the participants of the student protest across country.

This technology done one more thing, it helps in aligning views of young generation in a particular way and now they rely more on collective connectivity instead

of collective appeal and hence protest is continuing in spite of the fact of absence of proper leadership unlike previous ones. The protest is not only sustaining but using its own language employing set of vocabulary, which is new to society in general.

The female protestors have more prominently utilised their creativity using 'sarcasm', 'humour', 'laughter', 'roast' for seeking accountability over NEET examination paper leak. And, these protestors have flooded the social media platforms especially Instagram with such content, which nobody must have ever thought of using it during a protest. It has however become a new reality making people feel more connected through the use of multi-platform media ecosystem.

This phenomenon is fundamentally altering the mechanism of protest in India, which is witnessing its first digital movement with a resonance on the ground. The government, its security agency are facing a problem in giving response to this new form of protest

with such a high women participation. Any use of force – mild or brutal, may would result in strengthening the protest as evident from two instances; first removing Sonam Wangchuk from protest site and using brutal force on protesting students. As a result, the prime minister Narendra Modi tried to directly connect with these young protestors using a Instagram video in a tweaked language attempting to resonate with them.

Whether these messages, government attempts, reported tightening of police checking could result in ending the protest or not, is a matter to be seen in near

find it difficult to analyse, interpret and think independently because they have had little opportunity to engage in deep reading. The true objective of education is not merely to reproduce information but to develop reasoning, creativity and intellectual independence.

The reading culture at home has also weakened. Earlier, many households subscribed to newspapers and magazines, and children naturally developed an interest in reading by watching their parents and elders. Schools encouraged students to read newspapers, discuss current affairs and cultivate the habit of independent reading. Unfortunately, this culture is steadily disappearing.

Dr Kyndiah rightly points out that reading is far more than an academic exercise. It enriches language, broadens knowledge, stimulates imagination, nurtures empathy and develops informed and responsible citizens. I also strongly support his practical suggestions for reviving the reading culture through reading clubs, literary festivals, book fairs, dedicated reading hours and stronger library programmes. The "Earning by Learning" initiative in Dallas, cited in the article, demonstrates that innovative incentives can successfully inspire children to develop a lifelong love of books.

Reviving the reading cul-

ture requires the collective efforts of parents, teachers, educational institutions, governments and community organisations. Schools should once again emphasise textbook reading, strengthen library programmes, encourage newspaper reading, and motivate students to prepare their own notes instead of relying entirely on printed materials. Only then can we nurture thoughtful, confident and independent learners.

Dr Kyndiah's article is a timely wake-up call. I sincerely hope that educators, policymakers and the public will act upon his recommendations and work collectively to restore books to their rightful place at the heart of education, culture and lifelong learning.

As I conclude, I am reminded of the timeless words of the great English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon: "Reading maketh a full man." Those four simple words capture the essence of Dr Kyndiah's message. If we truly aspire to build an enlightened, informed and progressive society, we must rekindle the habit of reading and ensure that books remain our lifelong companions.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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

(The author is a third-year PhD scholar associated with Department of JMC, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya)

Ceuta invasion exposes Europe's migration challenges

In late July 2026, tens of thousands of people crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in a matter of hours, creating one of the most dramatic migration incidents Europe has seen in years.

Estimates put the number of arrivals between 50,000 and 72,000, with many swimming around coastal barriers or pushing through land crossings.

Dozens died in the process—reports range from the mid-60s to around 88 people—most of them drowning or caught in the chabs near the water's edge.

Within days the overwhelming majority had returned to Morocco, escorted by Spanish and Moroccan authorities. Yet the episode left a clear political and humanitarian mark, once again placing irregular migration at the centre of European debate.

Ceuta, a small Spanish territory on the North African coast with a population of roughly 84,000, has long been a pressure point. Along with Melilla, it is one of only two European Union land borders on the African continent.

The territory has been under Spanish control for centuries, first coming under Portuguese rule in 1415 before passing to Spain. Morocco does not recognise Spanish sovereignty over Ceuta or Melilla and has periodically used migration flows as a form of diplomatic pressure.

Crossings occur regularly, usually numbering in the low thousands each year. What made the July surge exceptional was its scale and speed. Social media rumours, partly linked to a Spanish Supreme Court ruling limiting summary returns of people arriving by sea, appear to have played a significant role in drawing large numbers toward the border in a short window.

Trafficking networks amplified the message that entry might be possible and that onward travel to mainland Europe could follow.

Moroccan authorities, for their part, have faced questions about how such a large movement could occur with relatively limited immediate resistance at the border.

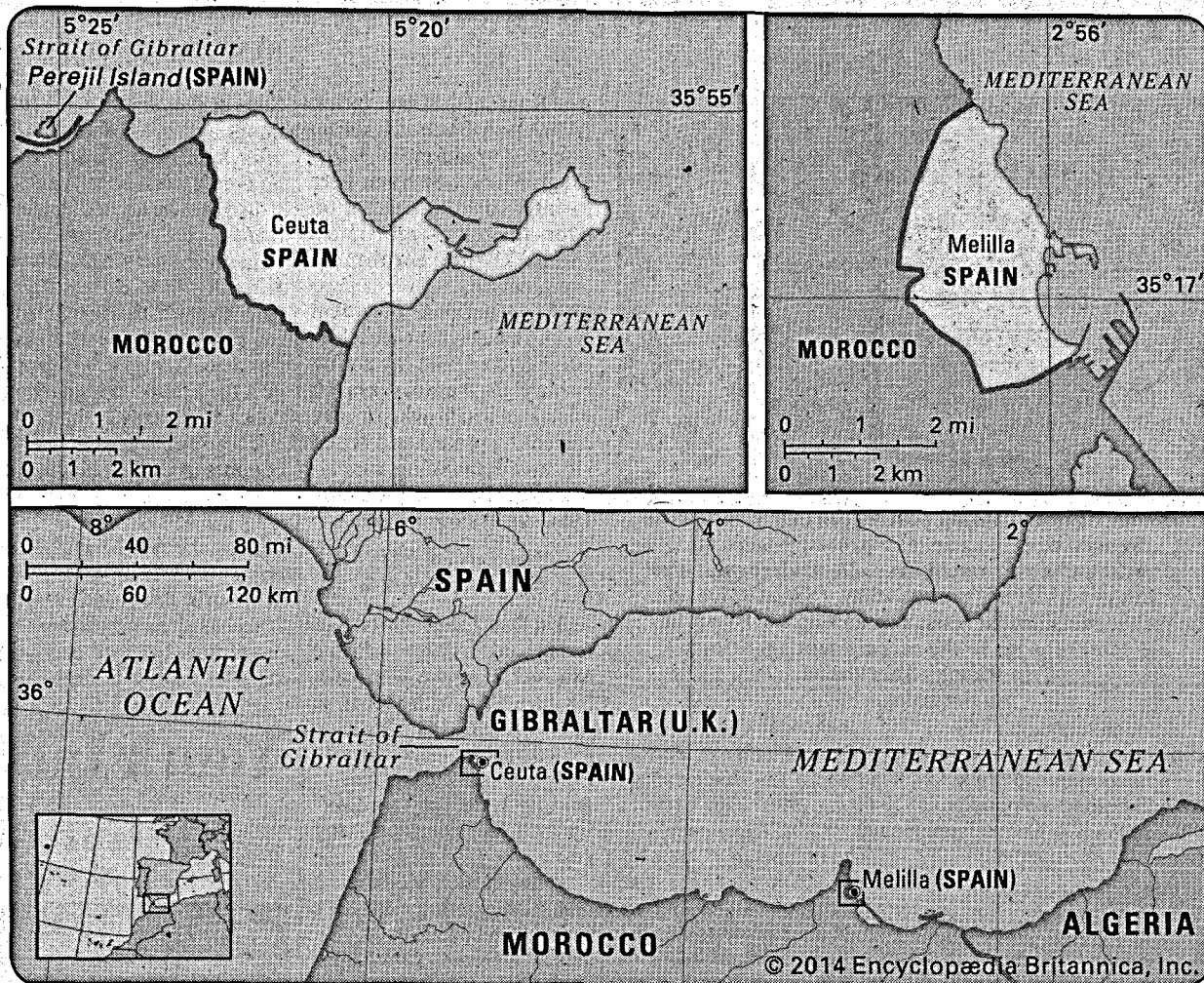
The images of people swimming, scrambling ashore and filling the streets of Ceuta quickly travelled across Europe.

They revived memories of the 2015 migration crisis, when more than a million people arrived in Greece and Italy, testing the Schengen system and exposing deep divisions among member states.

In the years since, the European Union has shifted toward tighter controls. A new Pact on Migration and Asylum, agreed in 2024 and coming into fuller effect around mid-2026, places greater emphasis on faster asylum processing, increased deportations and external partnerships with countries of origin and transit.

Billions of euros in aid and cooperation agreements have been directed toward North African governments, including Morocco, with the aim of reducing departures and addressing some root causes. These arrangements have helped lower overall irregular arrivals in some periods, but they have also created dependencies that can become points of leverage during diplomatic disputes.

The Ceuta episode illustrated the limits of that approach. Economic disparities remain stark. Morocco's GDP per capita sits far below that of Spanish territory just across



the fence, and opportunities for young people in northern Morocco are constrained by unemployment, limited educational pathways and uneven development. Many of those who crossed were young Moroccan men seeking better prospects rather than people fleeing active conflict.

Geopolitical friction also shapes the border. Relations between Spain and Morocco have periodically been strained by disputes over Western Sahara and other issues, and past incidents—most notably in 2021—have shown how migration flows can intensify when diplomatic relations cool.

Critics of current policy argue that large-scale aid packages have sometimes strengthened the leverage of partner governments without sufficiently tackling the deeper drivers of movement—poverty, governance problems and the absence of realistic legal pathways for labour migration.

Inside the European Union the political reaction was swift and fragmented. Italy suspended its Schengen free-movement arrangements with Spain, a largely symbolic step given the absence of a shared land border, while other governments called for stronger external controls and faster returns. France increased police presence at its

border with Spain.

Spain, under Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, defended its handling of the crisis and criticised what it saw as politicised responses from partners.

European interior ministers convened an emergency discussion, and the European Commission signalled further support for border security and cooperation with African partners.

Spain also moved to install a floating sea barrier extending the physical frontier into the water, aiming to restore the possibility of immediate returns at sea.

Most of those who entered Ceuta did not remain. Officials reported that the vast majority returned to Morocco within days. A few thousand stayed behind, including a significant number of unaccompanied minors who enjoy special legal protections and cannot be returned as easily as adults. Reception facilities in the small territory were stretched, and local authorities described the situation as a humanitarian emergency even after the bulk of the arrivals had left.

No significant onward movement to mainland Spain or other EU countries has been reported, underscoring that

Ceuta operates under special rules that limit free travel into the rest of the Schengen area.

The presence of minors has created particular challenges for local authorities, who must provide care and education while legal processes unfold.

The Ceuta events form part of a longer pattern. Irregular arrivals across the Mediterranean have fluctuated over the past decade, falling in some periods and rising in others.

Overall numbers in the first half of 2026 were lower than the previous year, yet concentrated surges continue to generate outsized political impact.

Frontline states argue they bear a disproportionate burden; northern and central European governments often demand tighter external borders and more effective returns.

The result is a recurring cycle of crisis response, temporary solidarity measures and renewed calls for structural reform. Public opinion across much of Europe has grown more sceptical of large-scale irregular arrivals, strengthening the position of parties that prioritise border control.

Underlying the immediate border drama are unresolved questions about how Europe manages mobility in a region marked by large demographic and economic differences. Legal migration channels remain limited relative to demand.

Asylum systems struggle with backlogs and uneven recognition rates. Externalisation policies—paying or partnering with third countries to prevent departures—have reduced some flows but have also created dependencies and occasional diplomatic leverage that can cut both ways.

When cooperation falters, or when information spreads rapidly through social media, sudden movements can overwhelm local capacity and reignite continent-wide tensions. The human cost is also clear: each major surge produces deaths at sea or at fences, along with difficult conditions for those who remain in reception systems.

Ceuta is only one point on a much longer frontier. Similar pressures appear at other Mediterranean entry points and along the eastern land routes.

Each major incident prompts the same set of responses: emergency meetings, additional funding for fences and patrols, renewed agreements with transit countries, and political recriminations.

The deeper challenges—creating conditions that reduce the incentives for irregular movement, building credible legal pathways, and maintaining consistent rules across 27 member states—remain more difficult to resolve.

Without progress on those fronts, the pattern of sudden, high-visibility surges followed by temporary containment is likely to continue.

The July 2026 surge into Ceuta will not be the last such episode. As long as large disparities in opportunity persist just beyond Europe's borders, and as long as physical barriers and bilateral deals remain the primary tools of management, sudden and chaotic movements will continue to test the system.

The question for European governments is whether the next crisis will produce only another round of temporary measures or a more coherent long-term approach to one of the continent's most persistent policy challenges. (Agencies)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, AUGUST 9, 2026

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Mars on your solar return chart and it will give fantastic results for you. Your relationship with your boss and colleagues will be good. The advice of an experienced person will make your luck shine. You will have a positive attitude towards life. You will develop new interests and will keep alive your creative instincts. You will have plans about changing your job. There are strong chances of getting money in business. You will be busy preparing for festivals. You will also get success in court cases and legal matters. You will feel new energy inside you. You will share good bonding with your spouse/partner. Students will excel in their studies and get good results. Business-related activities will keep you occupied. You will make every impossible task possible with your courage and bravery.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) The beginning of the week is going to be fantastic. You will negotiate and clinch a favorable business deal. It will be very important, and you will have gains. It is appropriate to go for partnership than independent business/work at this stage. Working together will get good results. You will be energetic and will not shy away from doing any challenging work. You will have peace of mind and will be relaxed. Wealth will be good. Your income too will rise. And you will enjoy this favorable period. Your well-wishers will help you a lot. You will have better understanding with your mate. Spend time with friends and family. You will be engaged in social work. You will be engaged in legal matters, and your life will be filled with joy and love.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Your destiny will be favorable. It is a week which will bring you gains. You will also buy and sell property. You will have monetary benefits. The partnership you were involved in will bloom. You will also get promoted in your job. Your bosses and colleagues will appreciate your performance. All your obstacles and constraints will get removed. You will help those who need support. You will not let your ego come in between and will offer a hand of friendship to all. In the case of love and affection you will be on the top. Your spouse/partner will give company and support. Your mate will make your life beautiful and cheerful. All the work will gather momentum.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You will have peace of mind. You will march ahead in your profession and outshine one and all. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will also explore additional sources of income. Friendly and attentive behavior will take you ahead. You will take part in the work of social welfare. You will also enjoy a wonderful love life and get success in love matters. You will also spend quality time with your family and plan to go on a short trip for relaxation and fun. You will be promoted in your job. You would also like to get transferred to a place of your choice. You will be able to bring changes in your personality. You will also be admired all around. Your intelligent investment can be beneficial for the future.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) This is going to be an amazing week for you. All the hurdles and obstacles will get removed. You will make progress in your job. Income will be good. You will have a lot to do, and your hands will be full. You will be involved in your work, and you will also be relieved by resolving a matter with some special help from others. Talking to friends will keep you happy. You will also fall in love with a person known to you or working in your office. The husband and wife will have good level of understanding. You will witness a rise in your fortunes, and you could be promoted too suddenly. You will do eventedious work with full enthusiasm. You will also work tirelessly, which will increase the confidence of people in you.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) Your efforts will start giving results. You will have rich dividends in your business/work. You will get promoted in your job. You may also get work orders from abroad. You will be admired in your office and home. These are mentally satisfying days. You will be a winner. A secret of yours may come out but it will not trouble you much. You will get support and love from children and parents. You may visit any relative's house for an important function. You can also plan a family/business trip. You will be able to solve your problems. You will also work with pleasure. Economic conditions will be strengthened. You will solve some vital issues.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Time is changing fast and you will have good days to enjoy. You will do something which will bring you lot of name and fame. Some people will challenge your authority but will be unable to do anything. You will be targeted purposely but you will not be humiliated or pushed to corner.

Nor your work will get stuck. You will be the winner. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will have wonderful bonding with your mate. You will enjoy confidence of your family members. Students will be successful in exams/interviews. Your choice of work will be completed. Your family members will give full support. You can start a new job/business. If you are working in public relations, it will turn up faster.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) The mantra for your success this week is hard work, self-belief in your own abilities and working to your potential to the fullest. You will think about your work and complete all your tasks. You will enjoy good working relations with your colleagues. You will also make new investments. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your spouse. Your children will listen to you. Unmarried boy/girl can be married. The new couple will make use of their time completely. You will enjoy watching movies, gardening and walking around. You will also help people a lot. You will also get interested in religion, spirituality and meditation. You will be attending a family function too.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) Time will be perfectly good for you. Your exams results will be favorable. You will also make a final decision regarding change of job or starting a new business. A person may hurt you and you will get upset. Your income will increase. You will dominate at your workplace. And it is important to tell your subordinates clearly what you expect from them. You will also do some shopping. Working women will get full support. You will have peace of mind. Lovebirds will have a good time. A marriage proposal will come to you suddenly. You may accept it. You will have peace of mind. Your health will be perfect. You will give a new look to your house/office and redesign it. You will expand your social circle.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) It is going to be a gainful and productive week. You will feel peaceful and relaxed. You will earn more profit from little work. Income will be good. You can also move to a new locality of your choice. This is the right time to take advantage of the hard work of the past. You will feel relaxed. You can get promotion, allowance, and incentives too. Work on land or property will begin. You will buy new things. Behavior will be pleasant in the neighborhood. The plans for the auspicious program will be made. You will be very happy. Make home a house for peace, joy and bliss. You will give lot of importance to your family. You will not trust everyone in financial matters. You need to explore the significance of life within.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You will get opportunities to rise in your job and business. You will also receive some auspicious news. There is no need to take additional risks. Everything will work out perfectly for you. You will have monetary gains, and your economic condition will be strong. You will also undertake business-related trips, and they will prove to be beneficial. You will be happy with your married life. You will be able to keep your cool and not exchange any hot words with your neighbors. Do not do anything in a hurry. Your attempts to recover will be successful. The road to progress will become brighter. Your tour will be beneficial. You will be busy in praying to God. People will praise your qualities.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) It is time to relax and enjoy. You will enjoy a very favorable phase in your life. Your financial fortunes will rise. You will also get a good job opening or promotion. You will also plan a major expansion in your business. Additional sources of income will be tapped. You will get an opportunity to meet a very influential person. You will share nice equations with your partner. Relations with neighbors and relatives will be cordial and sweet. Read all documents well before signing them. Bosses and seniors will be satisfied with your work. You will improve relations with bosses. They will be satisfied with your work and praise you a lot.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) There are possibilities of big financial gains this week for you. You will make new investments too. Income will be good. You will also plan to buy a new property or vehicle. Those looking for job will get success after all. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your spouse. You will also get the support of your better half. You will be busy with the preparation of any festival. You will also have to hold on to your society. In family, there will be good relations between mother and daughter, also your wife and sister. You will also help those who are old, ill and weak. You will be able to connect with them at an emotional level. There will be change in circumstances. You will prosper and be happy. You will get name, fame and prestige.

Jobs held by women more exposed to AI than assumed, analysis finds

A widespread assumption holds that artificial intelligence will largely spare jobs built around human care, empathy and physical presence. Roles such as child care, nursing and aged care are predominantly filled by women and depend on face-to-face interaction, emotional judgement and the ability to respond to unpredictable human needs. Many therefore expect women's employment to be relatively insulated from the wave of AI automation moving through other parts of the economy.

Closer examination of occupational data challenges that view: Analyses of automation exposure scores—measures of how readily AI technologies could perform the tasks that make up a job—show that female-concentrated segments of the workforce are in fact among the most exposed.

Occupations heavy in repetitive, routine cognitive work score highest on these measures. Roles that demand physical dexterity, real-time adaptation to changing environments or complex human judgement score much lower. Clerical and administrative jobs sit near the top of the exposure ranking. AI systems excel at processing information; generating documents, managing schedules, handling correspondence and performing standard calculations—precisely the kinds of tasks that fill many of these roles.

In many advanced economies these occupations are heavily female. Secretaries, receptionists, bookkeepers, accounting clerks, human resources clerks and payroll clerks frequently appear among the occupations with the highest automation exposure scores. A substantial share of women's employment is concentrated in these categories.

When the highest-risk occupations are examined as a group, the gender pattern is clear. A majority of the top 20 roles most exposed to automation tend to be female-dominated, and several are highly female-dominated.

By contrast, among the occupations least exposed to automation, the large majority are male-dom-

inated. Many of these lower-risk jobs involve physical labour, trades work or hands-on technical skills that remain difficult for current AI systems to replicate.

Electricians, construction workers and similar trades continue to rely on spatial awareness, manual precision and the ability to solve problems on site in ways that algorithms still struggle to match.

Labour-market signals already appear to reflect these differences in some countries. Vacancies for highly exposed administrative and

This does not mean that every administrative role will disappear. Many will evolve, with AI handling routine elements while humans focus on exceptions, relationships and judgement. Yet the transition may still involve significant displacement, reduced hiring and pressure on wages in the most exposed categories.

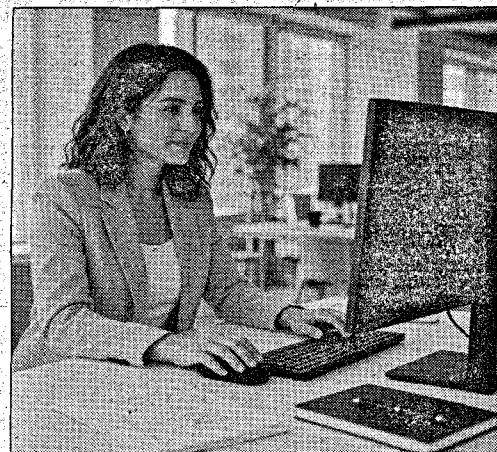
Male-dominated trades, by contrast, appear better protected for the time being. Their relative insulation does not guarantee permanent safety—future advances in robotics could eventually change that picture—but it does create a temporary buffer that many female clerical workers largely lack.

These patterns make a strong case for applying a deliberate gender lens to AI and labour-market policy.

Recognising that disruption will not fall evenly across men and women allows governments and employers to identify which groups of workers face the greatest pressure and to design responses accordingly. Practical measures could include better recognition of existing skills, support for retraining into emerging roles that combine human strengths with AI tools, and pathways into occupations that remain difficult to automate.

Without such attention, the uneven distribution of AI exposure risks reinforcing existing gender divides in the labour market rather than narrowing them. Administrative work has long provided relatively stable, accessible employment for large numbers of women. If that segment of the workforce contracts or changes rapidly while male-dominated trades remain more resilient, the overall gender balance of employment and earnings could shift in ways that policymakers have not fully anticipated.

The data do not support fatalism. They do support realism. AI is already reshaping the demand for certain kinds of work, and the effects are not falling evenly across men and women. Recognising that reality is the first step toward managing the transition in a way that is both economically efficient and socially equitable. (The Conversation)



“Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected.”
—William Plomer

The Shillong Times

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Digital cash, fees

THE digital cash payment system that has gained currency in recent years is of great help to one and all. With a few clicks on the mobile phone, money can be transferred from person to person, city to city and nation to nation. Just as it caught the fancy of the people, hints have emerged that a fee is to be imposed for each such transaction – or that a cut will be made. The plan might have been to implement it subtly and yet help banks or the exchequer make a windfall by the hour. India records over 77 crore such transactions a day, and the number is growing hourly. More and more people are using the UPI platform to send and receive money. Yet, a large mass of people, mainly in rural areas, are yet to be encouraged to use this system. One problem is that this facility can be accessed only by those who have a proper phone system and internet connectivity, in addition to a bank account. Despite such issues, this system has revolutionised the way money transactions are made.

Instead of encouraging the use of this system, banks and governments may be tempted to extract a pie or two from each such transaction. The government has made it clear that while such a move is on, consumers making payments for their purchases will not have to pay any transaction charge for using UPI and a vast majority of merchant transactions will also remain free. It's logical to suspect that once the cut is effected selectively and for larger transactions, this would eventually extend to all UPI transactions. This is bound to act as a dampener for those who adopted this system for their daily transactions, avoiding the need to draw cash from banks or ATMs, or reach such facilities to transfer money to other accounts.

A point to note is that the digital money transfer system has helped control the bane of counterfeit currency. With reports that Pakistan organised to print huge quantities of high-value Indian currency and transferred them here through shady channels via Nepal and Bangladesh, the Indian government acted about 10 years ago through a demonetization exercise to weed out existing currency notes and introduce new notes with fresh security features. This helped to an extent in dealing with a critical situation. The UPI was an add-on. The less people used paper (or even plastic) currency, the fewer the chances of fake notes being circulated. Yet, as of the last financial year, security agencies detected and ejected some 2,30,000 counterfeit notes from the banking system. Even some senior police officers had been accused in the past of being part of such rackets, allegedly substituting the originals in ATMs with fake notes. Agencies inside and outside the country would continue to play mischief even though regulatory steps have been strengthened. In this context, it is imperative that people are encouraged to increasingly use the UPI system, rather than the banking system putting spokes into it via unnecessary charges.

The Shared Language of Life

By H.H. Mohrmen

Almost all religious traditions have stories of a time when humans and animals were still able to communicate, but these are stories that we believe happened in the past. Has nature stopped talking? Or is it humans who have lost the ability to communicate with nature? To those who have the patience and ability to listen and understand, Mother Nature continues to communicate. This does not mean that humans, animals, or nature literally talk to one another. Rather, communication between them continues in other ways. Here are a few examples from my field visits where I found that nature still speaks to humans, albeit in different ways.

Nature's Living Clock

One such story occurred in Jarañ village as we walked down to the Umngot River over difficult terrain to explore a mystery of nature. I call this incident “when the insect tells the time.” A local woman from the Pamthied clan guided us through the steep gorge and thick broomstick plantations to see the spot where certain birds migrate every year. The birds arrive as soon as the earth becomes warmer and remain there from spring until autumn. This unusual migration, dictated by the changing seasons, made us curious about this strange phenomenon.

The Mystery of the Returning Birds

Bird migration is a fascinating natural phenomenon. We have mostly learned about birds that migrate across oceans and continents, yet there are different kinds of migration as well. Some migrations cover only short distances and last for a relatively short period.

We were trying to understand what attracted the birds to this place. What was so special about it that they were willing to make their annual journey every spring, only to head back when winter sets in? Was there some kind of fruit or nut that attracted them?

On reaching the low lying area where the birds roosted, we selected a site opposite the tree that we thought would be an ideal place to hide. We rested for quite some time, observing their behaviour and trying to understand what drew them there.

We hid in a spot covered with thick undergrowth and removed some leaves and

branches that obstructed our view of the trees where the birds were roosting. Upon careful observation, we noticed that every now and then the birds would fly to a section of the stream and dip their beaks into the water. All the birds took turns flying down from the trees to take a sip. We suspected that there must be something in the water that attracted them.

After watching the birds for a few hours, we decided to move closer to the stream. As we emerged from our hiding place, all the birds, both those roosting in the trees and those drinking from the stream, flew away at once, creating a flurry of beating wings.

When we reached the stream and looked more closely, we found a stone beside it with a small hole from which a small stream of water continuously oozed before flowing into the creek below. This was where the birds repeatedly came to drink. It appeared that the water from this small opening possessed some special quality that attracted them.

The Alarm Bell

While we were enjoying the sight of hundreds of birds roosting in the trees and flying down to drink, kong Tiewly Pamthied, the woman who had accompanied us from the village, suddenly said that we needed to begin our journey back as soon as possible. I was the only member of the team who could communicate in the War Amwi/Tlangwai dialect.

When I asked her why, since I was still enjoying the sight, she replied that it would take time to climb the steep gorge and that, if we wanted to reach the village before dark, we had to leave immediately. It was an unplanned trip. We were unprepared and had not brought any food or even a torch to light our way in case darkness fell upon us. She was very confident in what she said, so we complied and started walking back to the village.

As we began climbing the hill, I could not help asking her how she had concluded that it was time to return. She asked us to remain silent for a while and then said, “Do you hear the sound of the insect?” We stopped talking, and indeed we heard a very peculiar sound.

“When this insect makes its call, every farmer in the

village knows it is time to go home,” she said. “We would collect our tools, pack them, put our dop kwai (tiffin) and wai (machete) inside our khoh chot, a small cone, and head back to the village.” She added, “There is another insect that tells us the time as well. Its sound signals that it is time to have our lunch.”

We reached the village just as it was getting dark, and I could not help asking her how she had acquired such knowledge. She simply replied, “It is common knowledge. Everybody in the village knows it.”

When the Wind Foretells the Rain

Along with my friend, Dr. Raj Kamal Goswami, a wildlife scientist, and a few others, we visited the sacred grove at Tuber a long time ago. I remember that we had to remove our shoes and anything made of leather before entering the sanctum sanctorum of the forest.

It was a sunny day with a clear blue sky as we toured the sacred grove and walked all the way to the Myntdu River. As we walked through the valley along the riverbank, our elderly guide sniffed the air and suddenly said that it was going to rain. I was surprised because the sun was still shining brightly. Yet later, we experienced the familiar phenomenon of rain falling on a sunny day.

The Herbs and Shrubs of Sohmynting

Sohmynting is another interesting village when it comes to the conservation of sacred forests. Although the entire village has converted to Christianity, the community still maintains the sacred forest and the Khloo Tangbru belonging to the different clans. In 2012, before the Pyrtuh clan decided to register the sacred forest with the Wildlife Department under the Community Reserve Project, Mynjur Pyrtuh and William Pyrtuh took us around the sacred grove.

As we walked, William, an elder of the Pyrtuh clan, enthusiastically identified various herbs, shrubs, trees, and flowers, explaining their uses to us. With great excitement, he pointed out different species of grass, named them, and explained how certain plants were consumed. He also described the medicinal properties of

numerous plants found in the forest. As I listened, I thought to myself that almost every plant seemed to have some use.

Learning from the Cows

During two field visits with my youngest daughter while she was conducting research for her Master's dissertation on wild edible mushrooms, we encountered a classic example of how humans and nature still communicate. We realised that there are still places and cultures where humans and nature not only coexist but also complement one another.

On one trip, we met a family in Pynthor Langteñ that had just returned from the forest after collecting mushrooms. We asked them to show us what they had gathered, and they had collected many different varieties.

Our first question was: despite the many varieties they had collected, how did they know which mushrooms were edible? How were they able to distinguish the edible from the poisonous? And how did they know when it was the right time to go into the forest to forage for mushrooms?

They explained that their knowledge of mushrooms had been passed down from their mothers. The ability to distinguish edible mushrooms from poisonous ones was common knowledge in the village. They also said that they learned about the changing seasons from the book of nature. Nature is alive, and every change in it is a sign that tells us the time and teaches us lessons about life.

During another trip with Ma Realsing Mukor of Moosakhia village, we noticed an unusual mushroom growing in a pine tree plantation. He went over for a closer look and declared that it was edible. My daughter asked how he knew it was not poisonous. He replied, “From the cows.” He explained, “As cow herders, we used to watch what the cows ate, and whatever the cows ate was also safe for human consumption.”

Though nature and animals do not speak to us in the way humans speak to one another, these stories reveal a different kind of communication that still exists in the wild. It is a language that humans, animals, and nature share without uttering a single word. It is the language they speak in silence.

The Hills Are Not Just Pnar: Why We Must Rethink the Term “Jaintia People”

By Sunrise Pohtam

As someone deeply invested in our region's heritage, it is genuinely distressing to constantly encounter phrasing that casually undermines the rich, pluralistic cultural identities of the East and West Jaintia Hills. For years, a prevailing narrative has dominated the literary and academic discourse. With utmost respect, many writers, predominantly from our kin Pnar community, frequently deploy terms like “Jaintia culture” and “the Jaintia people” as catch-all phrases. But let me be clear

communities actively turn out to vote for the local MLA candidates of their respective constituencies (with the exception of MDC elections, although the Karbis can still vote for local MDC candidates due to their ST status). So you know now, their civic participation proves that their loyalty is deeply rooted in the West Jaintia Hills itself.

However, I do admit that my personal knowledge regarding the deeper demographic intricacies of the East Jaintia Hills is some-

The intent of this piece is not to elevate other nearby tribes or Khasi sub-tribes over the Pnars. Nor is it an attempt to dilute or eliminate the proud term “Jaintia” itself. Rather, it is a plea for grammatical and demographic honesty. When we use geography (Jaintia Hills) synonymously with one specific ethnic identity, we unintentionally write other minorities out of the narrative. The Jaintia Hills is not a monolith; it is a diverse ecosystem of ethnicities, dialects, and traditions.

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As I have said above, to equate the Jaintia Hills purely with the upland Pnar culture is also to turn a blind eye to the steep southern slopes and riverine borders: the War Jaintia area. The War Jaintia people represent a distinctly different way of life and linguistic paradigm dictated by a vastly different topography, parallel to that of the Pnars. There are even certain locali-

ties in War Jaintia that were not settled solely by War Jaintias, but by people who trace their roots to the Khyntiam side. I think readers must know about the villages of Amlanai, Darrang, Shnongpdeng, and a few other places.

While literary and colloquial narratives have sometimes lagged in recognizing this diversity, institutional frameworks have made vital strides. A massive high-five must be given to the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) for officially recognizing certain

The War Jaintia people represent a distinctly different way of life and linguistic paradigm dictated by a vastly different topography, parallel to that of the Pnars. There are even certain localities in War Jaintia that were not settled solely by War Jaintias, but by people who trace their roots to the Khyntiam side. I think readers must know about the villages of Amlanai, Darrang, Shnongpdeng, and a few other places.

ties in War Jaintia that were not settled solely by War Jaintias, but by people who trace their roots to the Khyntiam side. I think readers must know about the villages of Amlanai, Darrang, Shnongpdeng, and a few other places. A defining feature of these villages is that they possess their own distinct dialects, almost to the point where a dominant War Jaintia dialect speaker would have a hard time interpreting their “k'tien shnong” (localised dialect). Therefore, to sweep them under a generalised “Jaintia” or “Pnar” would erase their unique linguistic heritage, which is socially and anthropologically unacceptable in today's logical world.

Perhaps one of the most glaring omissions in the “Jaintia culture” narrative is the vibrant presence of the Karbis and other groups of people like the Patro, Ghar-katias, etc. These groups mostly settled in the border areas near Muktapur. And these communities represent a remarkable example of cultural integration. While they proudly speak their own mother tongues among themselves, most of them can fluently speak the War Jaintia dialect, and many even make an active effort to converse in Pnar and Khasi. And you know what? This integration goes far beyond language. During elections, these com-

minority tribes within its jurisdiction. Though that does not come without criticism, by taking the step to acknowledge these distinct groups, the JHADC has validated their existence and secured their rights. More importantly, this recognition highlights a fundamental truth: these diverse communities have certainly contributed something in their own ways to the region, particularly the West Jaintia Hills district. Their presence, their culture, and their dialects are intricately woven into the very success of the district.

We cannot deny that identity is tied to language, and the words we use to describe our homeland matter. The term “Jaintia Hills” is a geographic and administrative reality, but applying “Jaintia culture” as a blanket term for a single group is an oversimplification. And the fact is, acknowledging the presence of other Khasi sub-tribes (War Jaintias) and other tribes does not diminish the Pnar identity; it only elevates the Jaintia Hills for what it truly is - a beautiful, complex, and pluralistic region where multiple cultures drive our collective progress. We must accurately document our present; so we do not write a confused history for the future of our children.

Letters to the Editor

Request to Reconsider Conducting SSLC Examination in December 2026

Editor,
Through the columns of this newspaper I extend my full support to the concerns raised by P. Marbanang regarding the Education Department's decision to conduct the SSLC Examination for academic session, 2026-27 in December 2026. This decision will have serious implications for students, teachers, and the overall quality of education in our state.

December is meant for syllabus revision, pre-board examinations, and clearing doubts. If SSLC is held in December, students will have to appear for the Board exams immediately after completing the syllabus, with no time for proper revision and preparation.

The CBSE model clearly shows why February-March is the ideal time. In CBSE, classes run from April to March. The syllabus is completed by November. December and January are used for revision and pre-boards. Board exams are held in February-March, and results are declared in May. This allows students to join Class XI in June without any

gap. If Meghalaya conducts SSLC in December, results will come by February. Students will then have to wait 4 to 5 months till June-July for Class XI admission. This long gap will cause academic loss and put our students at a disadvantage compared to their CBSE peers in NEET, JEE and other entrance preparations.

The academic loss this year is already severe. Many teachers are engaged by the ECI as BLOs and for Census duties. In addition, teachers are also being deployed for the upcoming by-elections. In many schools there is an acute shortage of teachers and no substitute arrangement is available. As a result, classes remain without a teacher for days. Effective teaching, particularly for specialised subjects, is not possible. Since BLO and election duties will continue for months, there will be insufficient time to complete the syllabus and conduct proper revision before a December examination.

December is also the peak of the festive season in Meghalaya. It is not appropriate to burden students with the most important exam of their school life during Christmas and New Year.

Most importantly, this decision directly affects teacher welfare and the evaluation process. Except in government schools, most teachers in private and mission schools do not get Earned

Leave. December and January are the only months they get to visit their villages and spend time with family. If exams are held in December, teachers will be on exam duty during the festive season. Worse, who will correct thousands of answer scripts in the freezing cold of January? Evaluation centers in Shillong and other hill areas have little or no heating. With January temperatures of 4°C to 8°C, it is extremely difficult for teachers to sit for 30-40 days and evaluate fairly. Tired and cold teachers cannot do justice to students' papers, and this will directly affect the quality and fairness of results.

In view of these academic, social and administrative reasons, I strongly urge the Education Department of Meghalaya to reconsider the decision and retain February for conducting SSLC examinations. This will align us with the national academic calendar, give students adequate preparation time, respect our cultural values, and protect teachers' welfare.

I hope the authorities will give due consideration to this matter.

Yours etc.,
R. Wanshngong
Shillong

India Needs Young Lawmakers

Editor,
India's youth made their

voices heard on the streets recently, firstly in Delhi which compelled the Modi Government to force the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Similar protests are going on in Jharkhand for the last 14 days

Here the question arises: why are these voices not heard in the temples of democracy - the Parliament and state assemblies? One straight answer is that the elected representatives holding power are ignorant of the youth's strength. Moreover, the answer may lie in a set of revealing data.

The demographic cohort that falls in the age bracket of 14-29-Gen Z in the popular parlance - may, according to some estimates, comprise over 25% of the country's population. Yet their cumulative representation in Parliament and legislatures reads 6 MPs and 20 MLAs, respectively, at present. One reason for these abysmal figures is the minimum age for contesting polls - 25 years. Does this need to change to make Parliament inclusive of the youth? For Rajya Sabha this age is 30 years

Tellingly, the disparity remains even when the age bracket is raised to 40. There are only 397 legislators who are under 40 years out of a total of over 4,000 MLAs in the country. The anomaly-irony gets sharper because India's youth quotient in the total population is set to rise even as their political representation remains seriously

skewed.

The consequences of a Parliament or an assembly of ageing public representatives are many. The demands and the anxieties of the youth - an important demographic capital - remain unheard in the corridors of power and policy.

The present government's initial apathy to the youth protest signifies this institutional myopia. Fewer young members also encourage political parties to remain cartels of seniority. Leaders' experience is often touted as a fig leaf, but this robs parties of the dynamism, energy and imagination that the youth can bring to the table. The most serious repercussion, arguably, is the lack of an even playing field, in tandem with the indifference, even occasional condescension, of senior leaders, this turns the youth cynical about politics and its institutions.

The Cockroach Janata Party's popularity among the youth can be attributed to their disdain for a traditional, entrenched, unresponsive political coterie. Strikingly, the BJP has decided to shun the lure of transforming itself into a political force, choosing instead to flex its growing weight as a collective pressure group. India's revered politicians must reflect on this growing trust deficit between young adults and their public representatives

In Bihar traditional parties lost their traditional base and a new entrant won the election; this indicates that India

needs young lawmakers.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

The Tricolour is Hoisted on Independence Day

Editor,

The news item “Tricolour to adorn M'laya homes as Har Ghar Tiranga begins today” (ST, 9 August 2026), which mentions that the Chief Minister will “unfurl the tricolour,” appears inconsistent with the provisions of the Flag Code of India, 2002.

Under the said Code, the National Flag is to be hoisted on Independence Day. This means that the flag, tied at the base, is to be raised upwards during the ceremony. In contrast, the National flag is to be unfurled - meaning the flag already positioned at the top is to be simply opened - during the Republic Day celebration. This distinction is not merely ceremonial but explicitly codified in the Flag Code of India, 2002, making “hoisting” the legally correct procedure for 15 August and not “unfurling”.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

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"Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians."

— Charles de Gaulle

The Shillong Times

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Entrepreneurship Versus Self Employment

IT is common parlance in Meghalaya to label every self-starter of small businesses as 'entrepreneurs.' Most people who start a shop or café are actually engaged in self-employment. Self-employment, as the term suggests, means creating a job for oneself. The person who creates the job runs it himself/herself and has no capacity to employ others unless the business grows. So it would be fair to say that self-employment can gradually transform into entrepreneurship once there is a need for more hands and the person creating the business has the capacity to expand and employ others as well. But those kinds of businesses are rare. The vegetable vendor or even the alu-muri person around Don Bosco or near Fire Brigade ground who always has a long queue of people waiting for their delicacies will hardly be in a position to expand his business and employ one more alu-muri vendor to work under him. The alu-muri person and others like him who manage a store on their own and cannot afford to employ additional hands are engaged in self-employment and face the risks that attend all businesses but do not have access to the assistance that entrepreneurs have.

The next question is: what then is entrepreneurship and who is an entrepreneur? Entrepreneurship is about creating and growing a business that can create value—and often jobs for others. This means the person must have some idea of what business model he/she wants to develop and how to drive that. The person would also know where the funds will come from because he/she would be able to develop a business model complete with initial investments, returns on investments and the time period involved. The entrepreneur will also know the number of persons he/she would need to employ and include that as part of the business proposal. The entrepreneur has done market surveys to see if the product he/she is going to sell has demand. The self-employed person on the other hand sees someone running a café and doing well and immediately copies that model, setting up one not far from the existing one. Naturally the one set up by a self-starter is likely to run into trouble sooner than later.

Meghalaya does need entrepreneurs and there are markets for different products or products that are marketed differently. In Meghalaya the word 'PRIME' has become synonymous with the creation of small, medium and big enterprises. PRIME stands for Promotion and Incubation of Market-driven Enterprises. It was launched a year after the NPP-led Government took office and has supported local entrepreneurs, mentored budding ones and also assisted with funding and networking through dedicated regional hubs. The goal is clear: Meghalaya needs to create jobs outside the Government and entrepreneurship is a preferred career option for youth through a collaborative ecosystem. PRIME supports entrepreneurs by enhancing their business acumen, empowering them to adopt technology and helping them find credit linkages and even zero-interest loans. The question therefore is should Government only assist entrepreneurs and should it overlook self-employed individuals who too need the same kind of tools to empower themselves—especially zero interest loans. Just think how many self-created enterprises would grow with a little help and skill training! But in the absence of such assistance many just wither away and leave behind a family that's poorer than when it started the business.

When Suffering Becomes a Business Model

By Erica Sangma

There is something deeply disturbing about the way human suffering can become a professional opportunity. We often imagine exploitation as something obvious—a trafficker selling another person's body, a corrupt official exploiting the powerless, or a criminal profiting from desperation. But exploitation does not always look like exploitation. Sometimes it arrives with a charitable logo, donor-funded projects, conference invitations and a vocabulary of "empowerment", "rights", "inclusion" and "community development". Sometimes it comes dressed as compassion. That is precisely why organisations working with vulnerable communities deserve serious scrutiny.

Sex workers deserve dignity, safety, rights and genuine opportunities. Many face violence, discrimination, poverty, stigma and exclusion from essential services. Organisations that support them can provide an invaluable public service. But a noble cause does not make every organisation ethical. When an organisation works with people who have little social or economic power, accountability should be greater, not weaker. The uncomfortable question is: when does helping become exploiting?

Vulnerability attracts attention, and attention can attract money. The more compelling the suffering, the more compelling the fundraising narrative. A photograph becomes a campaign, a traumatic experience becomes a case study, and a personal story strengthens a grant proposal. None of this is necessarily wrong. But a line is crossed when a person's hardship becomes more valuable to an organisation than the person herself.

This is where the language of social development can become dangerously convenient. We count how many people were "reached", workshops conducted and services delivered. Reports fill up with percentages and photographs of smiling participants. But what happened after the cameras left? Did people gain greater control over their lives? Did they become safer and more economically secure? Did they gain a meaningful voice in decisions affecting them? Or did they simply become another statistic in someone else's annual report? Power is the real test of empowerment. If an organisation claims to empower sex workers, sex workers themselves should have meaningful influence over what it does. Can they question its priorities and leadership? Ask where the money goes? Participate in decision-making? Are their opinions treated as expertise or merely collected as testimonials? Are they fairly compensated when their time,

knowledge, photographs or stories create institutional value? Can they refuse to participate without losing access to essential services?

These are basic questions of dignity. There is also something uncomfortable about organisations becoming professionally successful while the communities they serve remain permanently vulnerable. When offices, staff positions, donor relationships, conferences and careers are built around poverty and marginalisation, does the organisation have an incentive to make itself unnecessary—or does the system quietly reward it for proving that the problem remains large enough to justify another grant?

This is not an accusation against every NGO. Many people in the social sector are sincere and committed, and many organisations provide services governments have failed to provide. But good intentions do not eliminate institutional conflicts of interest. An organisation does not have to be deliberately corrupt for an unhealthy power structure to develop.

Often, one side controls the money, donor relationships, professional language and public narrative, while the other supplies the lived experience that gives the enterprise its moral urgency. A sex worker's story may strengthen a fundraising campaign; her photograph may make a report more compelling; her testimony may attract attention. But who owns that story? Who decides how it is used? What does she receive in return? Does she understand where it will appear? Does she have a genuine freedom to say no?

Consent cannot simply mean obtaining a signature from someone who has fewer choices and less power than the institution asking for permission. Ethical consent requires genuine understanding and genuine freedom to refuse. Otherwise, participation can become a sophisticated form of extraction.

We must also stop reducing sex workers to a single story of helplessness. Some may want to leave sex work; others may want safer conditions and stronger legal protections while continuing in the profession. Their circumstances and aspirations are not identical. Yet simplified narratives are often easier to fund than complicated realities. "Victim rescued by NGO" is a cleaner story than "a diverse community with different priorities demanding control over its own future." One of the strongest tests of an organisation is therefore what happens when the people it serves disagree with it. Can

they say, "This programme is not what we need"? Can they criticise leadership, demand financial transparency or insist on becoming decision-makers rather than participants? Can they eventually say, "We can represent ourselves"?

A genuinely ethical organisation should welcome that. Its success should be measured by the power it helped create, not by how permanently indispensable it made itself. This is the difference between solidarity and saviourism. Working with a community shares power; working on a community can quietly accumulate it.

Researchers, activists and NGO professionals may have valuable expertise, but lived experience is expertise too. Too often, a sex worker is invited onto a panel to speak for a few minutes while professionals spend the rest of the hour explaining her life. If the person who actually lives the problem is never allowed to become an equal authority on it, what exactly are we calling empowerment?

Perhaps we should ask different questions when evaluating social organisations. Not simply how many people they "reached", but how much power they transferred. Not how many reports they produced, but whether people gained greater independence. Not how many photographs appeared in campaigns, but whether those photographed controlled their own stories. Not how many awards the organisation received, but whether the community gained greater dignity, security and decision-making power.

We should also ask where the money goes. How much reaches the community? How much is spent on administration, consultants, publicity, travel and overheads? Who decides how funding is used? Are community members represented in those decisions? What happens when someone complains? Can people challenge the organisation without losing access to essential services?

Transparency should not frighten an ethical organisation. Accountability should not be mistaken for hostility. Criticism of an NGO should never be confused with criticism of the people it claims to serve. Questioning an organisation's practices can be one of the strongest ways of defending their dignity.

We should be especially wary of institutions that treat marginalised people as symbols. Sex workers are not campaign props; fundraising photographs or case studies brought out whenever a donor needs an emotional reason to

sign a cheque. Their trauma is not institutional property. Their poverty is not an NGO's marketing asset. Their lives are not raw material for someone else's professional success.

The ultimate question is brutally simple: who benefits? Who benefits when a person's story is published, a new programme is launched, or an NGO receives funding or an award for "community impact"? After the conferences, reports, campaigns and funding cycles are over, who actually has more power over their own life? If the answer is consistently the institution rather than the community, something has gone badly wrong.

The social sector does not need more heroic stories about outsiders rescuing helpless people. It needs humility, transparency and a willingness to surrender power. It needs fewer people speaking for marginalised communities and more marginalised people speaking, deciding, negotiating and leading for themselves. It needs organisations prepared to become less necessary as the people they support become stronger.

Sex workers do not exist to make anyone's career meaningful. Their suffering does not exist to strengthen anyone's grant proposal. Their photographs do not exist to decorate anyone's annual report. Their stories do not belong to the institutions that collect them. If an organisation truly believes in empowerment, it must be willing to share money, information, decision-making power, visibility and credit. It must listen when the community says no, open its books, accept criticism and eventually step aside when people are capable of representing themselves. There is a fundamental difference between helping someone and using someone's hardship to help yourself.

Compassion without accountability can become paternalism. Advocacy without consent can become appropriation. Representation without participation can become control. And charity without transparency can become a business model built on somebody else's pain. The measure of genuine compassion is not how convincingly we can display another person's suffering. It is whether, when we leave, that person has more power over their own life than they had before we arrived.

(The author is an independent researcher interested in social justice, gender, human rights, development, and the experiences of marginalised communities. Her work examines questions of power, representation, accountability and the ways institutions engage with vulnerable communities.)

Beyond the Clouds

Why Meghalaya Must Seize the Semiconductor Opportunity

By Shahin Yusuf

In December 2022, at a summit in Assam, I asked the Hon'ble Chief Minister a simple question: Why cannot Assam have a semiconductor industry? I spoke of the global chip race, Assam's water, its strategic location, and the Northeast's natural advantages. Three years later, Tata Electronics' Rs 27,000-crore OSAT facility at Jagiroad stands as the answer. What was once a question has become industry. Today, I place the same question before the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Meghalaya: Why cannot Meghalaya have a semiconductor industry?

The question before Meghalaya is not whether it can conjure a Rs 27,000-crore semiconductor facility overnight, but whether it can locate its niche within the global silicon symphony. Assam's Jagiroad has already translated aspiration into assembly lines; Meghalaya policymakers must now transcend its agrarian imagination and embrace a parallel architecture of innovation. Ginger missions and mushroom centres have their place, but the future belongs to computation, not commodities. What is required is not mere industrial incentive but a paradigm shift in vision; lest the state's youth be consigned to irrelevance in an economy defined by semiconductors, robotics, and artificial intelligence.

The next geopolitical contest will not merely be over coal, oil or minerals. It will be over chips, computing power, data and artificial intelligence. Meghalaya cannot afford to prepare its youth only for the economy of yesterday. But as Verrier Elwin reminded us, we should not push tribal societies faster than they can go—the ethos reflected into Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel, therefore development must respect local genius even as Meghalaya imagines a future beyond commodities into computation.

From agriculture to advanced technology
Agriculture will always matter, but Meghalaya cannot continue to imagine that farming, tourism, and mineral extraction alone will absorb the ambitions of its educated youth. The state's GDP of Rs 66,645 crore is respectable for a hill state economy, yet its composition betrays a paucity of imagination: FDI inflows of barely Rs 10 crore, exports dominated by iron and steel, and a manufacturing base of fewer than 1,800 enterprises. Services may dominate, but productivity and wages remain modest.

What Meghalaya requires is not just growth but a metamorphosis of vision with a new pillar of high-value industry. Semiconductors epitomise this possibility. One need not begin with a fabrication plant; the value chain is vast—chip design, testing, packaging, research.

Water: an asset, not an invitation to exploit
Meghalaya's hydrological bounty—63.2 billion cubic metres of surface water—should inspire not extraction but imagination. A semiconductor industry cannot be built on the naïve advertisement of pristine rivers like the Umngot; it must be founded on closed-loop recycling, rainwater harvesting, and Zero Liquid Discharge. In other words, the chip must compel the state to become a global exemplar of industrial water efficiency.

The guiding maxim is simple: maximum technology, minimum extraction.

But can Meghalaya actually do business?
This is where rhetoric must yield to realism. Natural resources alone do not attract semiconductor investors; they seek the sinews of modern infrastructure—land, power, water, roads,

digital connectivity, skilled hands, predictable taxation, and above all, the ease of doing business. Meghalaya has commendably enacted the Investment Promotion Act of 2024 and proposed a Unified Portal, yet statutes are but parchment without performance. The investor's query is simple: how many days to secure land, electricity, water, and approvals—and who is accountable? The answer cannot be another subsidy; it must be a comprehensive semiconductor package, marrying speed with certainty.

A Meghalaya Semiconductor Package
The State Government should immediately consider a Meghalaya Semiconductor & Advanced Electronics Policy 2026–31, aligned with India's semiconductor mission.

The package should contain at least nine pillars through LIFTS CORE reminds us that Meghalaya's semiconductor policy must lift the state's core strengths into a coherent industrial architecture.

Each letter stands for a pillar:

L – Land: Contiguous, serviced tracts through transparent leasing and community participation.

I – Infrastructure: Technology zones with dual power, industrial water, telecom, roads, and shared facilities.

F – Fiscal incentives: Subsidies, duty relief, interest support, leveraging central schemes.

T – Talent: Courses, labs, apprenticeships, scholarships, retention mechanisms. Diversion of CM skill programme into semiconductor training.

S – Skilling & Facilitation: Promotion Cell with statutory authority and decision-making power.

C – Community participation: Autonomous District Councils and traditional institutions as partners.

O – Regional integration: Defined role within the Northeast corridor anchored at Jagiroad.

R – Resources: Sustainable extraction of quartz, feldspar, limestone, rare earths.

E – Ecological water security: Strict recycling, Zero Liquid Discharge, auditable compliance.

The logistics problem cannot become an excuse.

Meghalaya's limited railways, rugged terrain and heavy rainfall constrain industry, but semiconductors are not coal. A truckload of chips carries far greater value than bulk commodities, and high-value, low-volume goods can move efficiently by road and air. The proposed Rs 23,000-crore Shillong–Silchar and Rs 8,500-crore Jorabat–Barapani corridors, part of a Rs 39,800-crore highway programme, together with the Umroi Airport expansion and Baljek revival at Tura, promise multimodal logistics for high-value cargo. Land remains harder: under the Sixth Schedule, community ownership demands leasing and transparent benefit-sharing with Autonomous District Councils and traditional institutions.

The real test of Meghalaya's GSDP

The real question is not another scheme, but whether Meghalaya can raise productivity per worker. Subsidies for mushrooms or ginger may help clusters; tourism may create seasonal jobs. But semiconductors create intellectual property, high-skill employment, ancillary industries, and exportable technologies. India has entered the age of chips and AI. Assam has already answered through Jagiroad. It is now Meghalaya's turn: to harvest the clouds not as rain alone, but as policy architecture for technology.

(The writer is an Advocate, Columnist and Consultant)

Letters to the Editor

Stop Mocking Democracy

Editor,

The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly sat for a total of 15 days across 2025 divided into a 10-day Budget Session and a 5-day Autumn Session. These numbers compare very poorly with other states like Kerala and Odisha which had 34 and 43 days of Assembly sittings.

The above figures reflect a defining trend occurring for a few decades during the tenures of governments led by almost all political parties presently occupying both the treasury benches. Hence, it is clear that sittings of our Assembly have become mere formalities just to meet constitutional obligations prescribed under Article 174 which mandates that Legislative Assemblies should meet a minimum of twice a year but this Article does not specify the minimum number of working days and this loophole is being exploited by everyone.

It may be recalled that Budget Sessions in the 1980s and 1990s used to extend to 30 working days and other Sessions used to have about 12 to 15 working days. Sadly, what we witness nowadays is nothing short of a theatre and sabotage of one arm of the government (Legislature) by another arm (Executive), and we the people and democracy are mocked in the process.

The Leader of the Opposition is nowadays waxing eloquent about getting very little time to discuss people's problems and draw up laws to address them in the Assembly but this rings hollow when we consider that during his terms as Chief Minister the Assem-

bly sat for only 19 days a year which is just a little better than the 15 days averaged by the present dispensation. This is according to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms.

Under these circumstances, we the little people are left helpless and more so because most of us are still sleeping.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Via email

Environmental Protection an Imperative

Editor,

Referring to the news item published in The Shillong Times of August 10, 2026, regarding the selection of Carmel Fedrick Malngiang of Wakhaliar near Sohra as one of the 30 Climate Champions under the Climate Champions Fellowship 2026, I must appreciate this remarkable achievement. However, I feel that the news deserves to be looked at in a wider context, particularly in view of the environmental challenges confronting Meghalaya today. It also brings to the fore the importance of giving continued media attention to young environmental leaders and to others who, in their own small ways, are working to protect the environment.

What impressed me most about Malngiang is his selfless commitment and genuine concern for environmental issues at the grassroots level. His plans to focus on river conservation, improved waste management and responsible tourism in the Sohra region are highly relevant to Meghalaya. At this juncture when our State is facing increasing pres-

sure from waste, pollution, hill cutting, quarrying, mining, unplanned development and growing tourism, such initiatives are timely.

Fact is, there are many individuals and communities who may not receive such recognition but are quietly contributing to environmental protection in their own areas. Their efforts, too, deserve appreciation. We are fortunate to have green hills, forests, caves, waterfalls, rivers and streams of extraordinary beauty. These are not merely tourist attractions; they are part of our natural heritage and support the lives and livelihoods of our people. Protecting them must become a collective responsibility.

Malngiang's selection is particularly encouraging because his work has grown out of lived experience and direct engagement with issues affecting his own community. Through the six-month fellowship, he will certainly have an opportunity to work with local communities, government agencies and civil society organisations and take these grassroots concerns to a wider national platform, with possible opportunities to participate in international climate forums. I hope this exposure will further strengthen his efforts and bring greater attention to the environmental concerns of the Sohra region.

His work also reminds us that environmental protection is ultimately about prevention. In the present context, the recent Supreme Court decision concerning the Centre's 2021 Office Memorandum relating to post-facto environmental clearance has brought into focus the question of prior environmental scrutiny. As I see it, the larger message

is clear: environmental safeguards should not become an exercise undertaken only after damage has occurred. Proper assessment and scrutiny must precede activities that may cause lasting environmental harm.

This principle is particularly relevant to our state, Meghalaya. Development is necessary, and Meghalaya needs investment, infrastructure and employment opportunities. But development should not come at the expense of the environment. Whether mining, quarrying or major projects raise genuine environmental concerns, affected communities should be heard and the possible consequences examined through transparent, independent and scientific assessment. Development and environmental protection should move in tandem and not be treated as opposing objectives.

While larger environmental concerns demand attention, another problem is looming large – the littering of tourist destinations. Meghalaya attracts visitors because of its environment. Unfortunately, plastic bottles, food packets, disposable cups and other waste are increasingly visible around tourist destinations.

The irony is difficult to ignore: people come to enjoy Meghalaya's natural beauty, yet careless behaviour gradually damages the very beauty that attracts them. Tourism is an important opportunity for the State, but the need of the hour is responsible and sustainable tourism. Adequate waste bins, regular collection, sanitation and clear information about environmental rules should be put up at major tourist destinations. Where anti-littering rules already exist, they must be

strictly enforced. Local communities, tourist-spot management bodies, guides, taxi drivers, hotels, homestays, vendors and tour operators can all play an important role in guiding visitors and maintaining cleanliness.

Some measures can be simple and practical. Tourist vehicles could carry waste bags so that passengers can retain their waste until they reach a proper disposal point. Drivers and guides could briefly remind visitors about local environmental practices. Hotels and homestays should encourage guests to reduce plastic use and dispose of waste responsibly. At the destinations themselves, however, adequate collection facilities must be available.

Clean-up drives are useful, but prevention should always receive greater importance than repeated clean-up. Whenever volunteers collect large quantities of garbage from a tourist spot, we should also ask why so much waste was allowed to accumulate there in the first place.

Against this backdrop, the role of the media becomes particularly important. The August 10 report on Malngiang's selection should not be the end of the story. His work, experiences, challenges and achievements during the fellowship deserve to be regularly followed. Similarly, the efforts of other individuals and communities working quietly for environmental protection should also receive attention.

A person protecting a local stream, a group planting trees, villagers safeguarding a forest, students conducting an awareness programme or citizens speaking against pollution may never receive a national fellowship. Yet their

efforts are valuable. Giving such initiatives visibility can encourage others to follow their example and help transform environmental concerns into everyday environmental responsibility.

The selection of Carmel Fedrick Malngiang should therefore be seen as more than the achievement of one young environmentalist. It is an opportunity to draw attention to the urgent need to protect Meghalaya's natural heritage and encourage everyone to contribute, however modestly, towards that goal.

I sincerely hope that The Shillong Times will continue to highlight Malngiang's work throughout his fellowship and also give space to others who are contributing to environmental protection in their own ways. Such continued coverage can create awareness, encourage responsible behaviour and inspire more young people to become environmental champions in their own communities.

For Meghalaya, environmental protection is no longer an occasional campaign. It has to become a continuous responsibility and a way of life. Our message to everyone who visits this beautiful State should be simple:

"Come and enjoy Meghalaya. Take home your memories, but leave behind only your footprints—not your waste."

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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"Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly."
— Langston Hughes

The Shillong Times

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FCRA Bill Deferred for Now

PARTIES in both Houses of Parliament, unitedly and strongly, put the Union Government on the backfoot. With just two days left for the Monsoon Session to conclude, many MPs believe the Government will not push the Bill for now. The Opposition has taken a united stand to argue that the FCRA Bill is draconian and intends to hinder mainly Christian institutions known for educating the neediest in distant rural hamlets. Without the intervention of Christian missionaries in health and education large swathes of rural India would be more backward today, and the number of young people without access to education would be a phenomenal figure for the state to manage. However, the BJP-led NDA Government is determined to push this Bill in Parliament ostensibly to plug legal gaps, prevent the misuse of foreign funds, and enhance national security. According to the Government, the legislative overhaul is required to strictly monitor foreign financial inflows into non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society groups, and religious charities.

This is nothing short of an allegation that Christian educational institutions primarily, and other NGOs receiving foreign funding are aiding and abetting the youth against the state. This is a ridiculous allegation. This country has failed miserably to provide education to all nooks and corners and should be grateful that private institutions are plugging this huge vacuum. Instead, the BJP feels that schools teaching in English are not instilling enough patriotism in their young students. Given half a chance the BJP wants to launch its agenda of one country, one religion, one language and one election by brainwashing its followers into believing that India's lack of a national language handicaps nationalism and patriotism.

The BJP maintains that the FCRA Bill is vital to prevent foreign entities from using financial leverage to alter domestic policy, social movements, or political discourse and to block subversive activities like Left Wing extremism aimed at destabilising the country. Another repeatedly made point is that recipients of FCRA funding must be open to stricter auditing to ensure the money is used for its intended purpose and not misused. Christian institutions and NGOs are open to such scrutiny. The Bill seeks to ensure the new framework targets broader compliance mechanisms to track every dollar entering the country. But the core and most debated objective of the 2026 Bill is to empower a government-appointed authority to manage, take over, or sell assets built with foreign money if an NGO's FCRA license lapses, is surrendered, or is cancelled. On the face of it, the Government states that it intends to prevent assets generated from foreign funding from sitting idle or being transferred inappropriately when an institution loses its active registration status. However, those receiving the funds know the real intent is devious. It is therefore important for all NGOs and church leadership to take a strong stand in opposing this Bill which the BJP might push through during the Winter Session, just before Christmas. Opposition MPs feel its important to build public opinion against the Bill outside Parliament too.

Acceptance or Non-acceptance of the so-called Jaintia as Part of Khasi Community

By Synran S Kharmih

There have been many write-ups where one section says that the Pnars are Khasi and the others who claim they are not Khasi. At the outset, I admit I am not expert on these issues or have any knowledge on the history of our ancestry. But with the Census coming in next year I feel I should give my opinions based on what I see and hear in my day to day life. The first that I encountered is the inconsistency in using the word Khasi and Jaintia. In the Reservation Policy of 1972, it seems that Khasi and Jaintia is considered to be a single homogeneous community as can be seen in the Policy where it says, "There shall be a reservation of 40 per cent of the vacancies in favour of Khasis and Jaintias." Sometimes, the word Khasi and Jaintia is also referred to as Khasi-Jaintia in this Policy. It can be further understood from PART XV—Meghalaya of THE FOURTH SCHEDULE OF THE NORTH-EASTERN AREAS (REORGANISATION) ACT, 1971 AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION (SCHEDULED TRIBES) ORDER, 1950 which deals with the list of Scheduled Tribes recognized in the State of Meghalaya, we see that in entry 6 it says - 6. Khasi and Jaintia (including Khasi, Synteng or Pnar, War, Bhoi or Lyngngam). From this, we can conclude that there is no proper definition or clarity on the word Jaintia. Ironically there is, another entry i.e. entry 14. Synteng which treats Synteng as being totally different from the one defined or included in entry 6. Khasi and Jaintia. I wonder if ever there were people defined as Synteng in their Scheduled tribe Certificate and under which category that would fall - on the 40% Khasi and Jaintia or 5% of other Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.

But while describing the communities of Meghalaya, Khasi and Jaintia are treated as two distinct communities like in the sentence "Meghalaya is home to three major indigenous tribal communities: the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia (Pnar)." Even here the word Jaintia (Pnar) has no clarity. Either Pnar is another word for Jaintia or Pnar is a sub-tribe of Jaintia in which Pnar are the majority.

Now coming to the acceptance or should we say non-

acceptance of the so called Jaintia as part of Khasi community, the Khasis in general consider Pnars (Synteng) as their own much like the Bhoi, the Lyngngam etc., and therefore to the Khasi there is no Jaintia, whereas some Pnars consider themselves to be the Jaintias and very much different from the Khasis (the word 'some' is used here because there is no clarity as to whether all Pnars consider it the same way). Surprisingly, the Pnars who reside in Jaintia Hills hate to be called Syntengs which is the common word used by the Khasi for them, and even the Pnars who reside in Khasi hills do sometime call the Pnars residing in Jaintia hills Syntengs and then there are retorts saying that they are the ones that should be called the Syntengs since they no longer reside in Jaintia hills. Recently there has been some claim that a Jaintia has never risen to the post of Chief Minister and that they deserve to get one. Frankly speaking I do not understand what they mean. Is it that no MLA from Jaintia Hills ever become the CM? Or no Pnar ever became a CM? If the latter part is what they mean then these very people do not accept the Pnars staying in Khasi Hills as their own because I remember clearly Late J D Rymbai had been our Chief Minister and he is a Jaintia/Pnar/Synteng or by whichever tribe name he is called.

To understand better we need to look at how we identify or associate ourselves in day to day conversation. Almost every person residing in Khasi Hills identifies himself/herself as Khasi when identifying himself/herself vis a vis others. Specifically, I have never come across any Khasi to ever identify himself/herself as Khyntiam except in relation to the Synteng/Pnar. But they do not mind if the Pnars call them Khyntiam. Even in the entry 6. Khasi and Jaintia there is no mention of Khyntiam. However, almost every person residing in Jaintia Hills identifies himself/herself as Pnar/ Biate and so on. The identification or attachment of Jaintia is only with the people who live along the borders of Bangladesh who identify themselves as War

Jaintia - though specifically they are identified as War-Dawki War-Amlarem, War-Umkhang etc. This identification is similar to the identification of War Khasi - War Sohra, War Pynursla, War Mawkyrwat, War Smit etc.

The word Jaintia is normally associated only with the title given to pressure groups, such as JSU (Jaintia Students Union) or JSM (Jaintia Student Movement). This Pnar, Synteng and Jaintia itself is confusing. Why do some War-Jaintia not identify themselves as War-Pnar? Firstly, Who are the Pnars? Are War Jaintia and Biate included in Pnars? My understanding is that Pnars include most of the War Jaintias but not the Biate and definitely not the Mirkirs.

Next question here is - who are the Jaintias? Is Jaintia another exclusive name of Pnar? Or does it include the Pnars and other communities? Are the Biate also Jaintias? My understanding is that Biate are Jaintias and therefore Jaintia is not an exclusive term for Pnars. Is the word Jaintia an offshoot of the Hima Jaintiapur? Or did the word Jaintia precede the making of Hima Jaintiapur? Before the coming of the Hima Jaintiapur, what were the so called Jaintias known as? From what I can understand, the word Jaintia is generalized name derived from the making of Hima Jaintiapur very much like Shillong or Sohra in the Hima Sohra. I hope the word Jaintia preceded the making of Hima Jaintiapur otherwise the Jaintia community may include not only the Pnar community but also other communities in the Hima Jaintiapur. Further, if that is the case then I feel that the word Jaintia should have been discontinued from 15 August 1947, since Jaintiapur is no longer part of India. And instead of Jaintia Hills it should be known as Pnar Hills.

From the various write-ups, it seems predominantly that the people who practise the indigenous religion consider themselves different from the Khasi. Interestingly, I have not seen nor heard any opinion from the people who no longer practise the

Niam-tre, whether residing in Jaintia Hills or Khasi hills. But I do hear the Pnar residing in Jaintia Hills who have converted to other religions that they do want to have separate reservation for Jaintia (however I am not sure what they mean by Jaintia). Therefore, it is imperative for the Pnars to firstly be clear as to whether they belong to the Jaintia tribe or Khasi tribe. Because I believe that the Khasi accepts Pnars as part of their community and do not accept Jaintia tribe as their community.

Whatever be the case, I feel that the word Jaintia should not be hyphenated with Khasi. We should not refer to the two tribes as the Khasi and Jaintia community, Khasi-Jaintia community or Khasi and Jaintia as in the Reservation policy. In my opinion, the Reservation policy should only be identified as Khasi and Garo since the Pnars are part of the Khasis, or identified separately as Khasi, Jaintia and Garo where the Pnars are not part of the Khasi. If the latter is followed, then I feel the Jaintias have the right to demand for separate reservation in jobs etc., and also for changing the State song, State anthem etc.

However, people should be cautious in that they weigh thoroughly the pros and cons because there may be likely future implications especially in relation to the autonomous District Councils and/or for the Pnars who have been permanently born and brought up in Khasi Hills. Similarly for the Khasis born and brought up in Jaintia Hills. Therefore, the next census is very important to clearly distinguish the communities and be able to arrive at the desired reservation policy for all the stake holders.

If possible, irrespective of whether the Pnars are Khasi or not, I feel the census should capture the different sub-tribes of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo separately. It should capture the backwardness of each sub-tribe so that the State Government can provide specific help. I hope the present leaders especially from Jaintia Hills who are part of the Government will do their best to see that the census is conducted in the manner that can satisfy their own people.

How a Tribal Should Think About Reservation

By Balakmen Suting

A recent social media post criticised the Centre for opposing the extension of the "creamy layer" principle to SC/ST reservation, even though it already applies to Other Backward Classes. The argument has force: if a person's parent is already an IAS officer or a minister, why should the child still claim a benefit meant for the deprived? It is a legitimate question. But a considered answer needs more than a viral post's worth of history, and the realities of the tribal Northeast complicate the debate in ways rarely acknowledged nationally.

What the law actually says

The creamy layer principle is not new. It entered Indian jurisprudence through the Supreme Court's 1992 verdict in Indra Sawhney v. Union of India, which upheld OBC reservation on condition that families already economically advanced be excluded from it, the same judgment explicitly held that creamy layer had no relevance to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, since their backwardness was rooted in caste-based discrimination and historical exclusion, not income. That position did not hold cleanly for long: in M. Nagaraj v. Union of India (2006), the Court introduced creamy layer language into SC/ST promotions as well, a shift that created years of legal uncertainty over which precedent actually applied. In August 2024, a seven-judge Bench in State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh ruled 6:1 that states may sub-classify SCs and STs to direct benefits toward the most backward groups among them, and several judges went further, observing that a creamy layer could be identified within the SC/ST categories so that those who have already benefited substantially do not continue to receive the same benefits. The Centre opposes implementing this part of the judgement, arguing SC/ST reservation redresses social stigma rather than poverty alone, and that an economically advanced member of these communities may still face such stigma.

Both positions rest on defensible reasoning. What is often missing is a sense of scale. India reserves 27% of central seats for OBCs, 15% for SCs, 7.5% for STs, and a further 10% for the Economically Weaker Section since 2019, taking total reservation past the 50% ceiling courts once treated as a constitutional limit. The OBC creamy-layer cutoff is a family income of Rs 8 lakh a year, fixed in 2017 and unrevised despite recommendations to raise it to Rs 12 lakh. No comparable test exists for SC or ST families, exactly what the petitioners now before the Supreme Court seek to change.

Why the tribal Northeast is a different case

Here a tribal reader has reason to slow the argument down rather than adopt either extreme.

It is true that literacy among Meghalaya's tribal population is now close to the national average, a fact that often surprises people unfamiliar with the region. This is largely the legacy of nineteenth-century mission education, from the Khasi alphabet devised by Welsh missionary Thomas Jones in 1842 to the Garo script developed by American missionaries decades later. Christian missionary education played a foundational role in the early spread of literacy in tribal Meghalaya, well before modern state institutions reached many parts of the region. But literacy is not competitive parity: it brought us to the classroom door, not into the IAS, the judiciary, or the boardrooms of Delhi and Mumbai. For most of the twentieth century, the tribal Northeast remained administratively peripheral connected late to rail and road, sustained by a land-based rather than monetised economy, and largely absent from the professional networks through which government service became a family inheritance elsewhere.

This is the distinction the creamy-layer debate tends to

flatten. Some mainland SC and ST families are now two or three generations into government service and higher education, with the informal social capital that comes with both. Their children begin from a genuinely different position than a tribal student from a first-generation higher-education family in Ri-Bhoi or the Garo Hills, whose parents may have completed school but never sat a competitive examination, never had a relative who could explain how UPSC or SSC recruitment works, and never had a surname that opened an institutional door.

I write this from within that second experience. I belong to the first generation in my family to pursue higher education and compete for professional opportunity, and the difficulty has rarely been effort or ability, it has been the absence of what many take for granted: a relative already inside the system, a family name recruiter already recognises, a network that shortens the distance between qualification and employment. That gap is not captured by any income certificate, and it is why a first-generation tribal candidate and the child of a two-generation government family—though both classified, on paper, as "Scheduled Tribe"—are not competing on the same terrain.

Reform, not blind defence

None of this means reservation should be treated as beyond scrutiny. If a narrow section within our own community continues to capture its benefits while genuinely remote and disadvantaged families remain excluded, that deserves the same scrutiny as any national debate. Reservation was designed as an instrument of empowerment, not a permanent substitute for effort. It is a door opened, through which a person must still walk with competence and responsibility.

The more constructive reform is precision rather than abolition. OBC creamy-layer verification relies on manual paperwork and opaque local certificates, vulnerable to forgery and intermediaries who know how to work the system. Transparent, digitised verification would fix this. Periodic, data-driven review of which sub-groups within SC/ST actually access government jobs and higher education, instead of treating the category as permanently uniform, would direct benefits toward remote and still-excluded communities rather than repeat beneficiaries. And because competition is intensified by scarcity as much as by category, government schools need real investment and the pool of quality seats and formal-sector jobs needs to grow. Reservation decides who gets a share of a limited pie; it does not enlarge the pie. None of this is easy: parties find it simpler to add new groups to reservation lists than to review existing ones, since the issue carries an emotional weight data alone rarely overcomes at the ballot box.

Where this leaves a tribal reader

The considered tribal position is neither blind defence of reservation nor apology for holding it. It is to support genuine sub-classification and transparent, updated criteria that stop reservation being monopolised by whichever families reached it first, tribal families included. This means resisting the argument that equates a few decades of missionary-built literacy with generations of institutional access others have quietly inherited. Reform asks that backwardness be measured honestly, including within our own community, so the benefit reaches where the need still lies. Removal assumes that because some tribals have arrived, all must now compete as equals with communities that had a centuries-long head start. The first position is defensible. The second is not. We are not asking to be exempted from scrutiny. We are asking that it be accurate about who among us has genuinely caught up, and who, like many of my own generation, is still the first in the family trying to get through the door.

Letters to the Editor

Credibility of Educational Trainers Suspect

Editor,

As a member of the teaching fraternity, I wish to express concern over the recent practice of appointing inadequately qualified resource persons for training programs under NEP 2020. While agencies such as DERT and MBOSE deserve appreciation for their initiatives, the credibility of these programs depends on the merit of those entrusted to train principals, teachers and administrators.

Selecting resource persons merely on availability, including those with questionable rigour, undermines the very objective of educational excellence. Training must be led by educators who have earned their qualifications through rigorous academic processes. Otherwise, the morale of participants suffers, and the prime objective of NEP 2020 risks failure.

I urge the authorities to ensure accountability and appoint only well-qualified resource persons. Our state has no dearth of capable educators, and their expertise should be harnessed to strengthen the foundation of our education system.

The downward trend of our state's educational rating could also stem from the Education Department's reliance on incompetent resource persons. Therefore, the educational agencies responsible for running education must take due notice of this to ensure a positive change in the overall improvement of the state's education system.

Yours etc.,
Dicey Anthony,
Shillong-4

The Lum Shyllong Ropeway Project

Editor,

Lum Shyllong or Shulong (Shillong Peak) 1964 meters above Mean Sea Level is considered sacred for the Khasis who call the peak Lei Shyllong a Khasi deity. From this peak emerges nine sacred eternal springs known in Khasi as, "Khyndai Umdih Khyndai Umtong" (Nine drinking and collectable water). These rivulets provide water for habitation, irrigation, cultivation and plantation. These nine rivulets traverse Khasi Hills and ultimately flow to the Brahmaputra Basin in Assam in the north and the Surma Basin in Bangladesh in the south. In Meghalaya the water run-off is 50.02 trillion litres out of which 32.64 percent flows to the Brahmaputra basin and 67.36 percent flows to the Surma Basin, according to the North East Space Application, Government of India. If these 50.02 trillion litres of water that runs-off could be tapped for 4 million people in Meghalaya the Per Capita availability of water works out to 12.5 million litres. At 150 litres a day the average use of water by a household this water would last over 83,000 days or 228 years. However, the cost for tapping this huge water resource is humongous.

The frontpage news "Raid Laban Dorbar backs Shillong Ropeway project" (ST 9th August 2026) made interesting reading. The Government has rightly cleared the air on envi-

ronmental concerns after joint inspection by the concerned parties since there is no water source along the stretch of land planned for the ropeway. In fact, those who are writing and protesting regarding the environment should have studied well before speaking against the government's good initiative and intention to promote tourism. I suggest that critics should trek from Rani Motors, Mawblei to 3rd Mile; Upper Shillong along the pony track built at the initiative of Keith Cantlie, Deputy Commissioner Khasi and Jaintia Hills 1930 to 1934. This pony track takes 3-4 hours to trek along the slopes of Lei Shyllong or Lum Shyllong or Lum Shulong. It is along this pony track that one can access 7 of the "Khyndai Umdih Khyndai Umtong" that emerges from Shillong Peak which are listed below so that one knows exactly where the sources of water along the ridges of Lum Shillong are. For those who are interested here are the seven sacred eternal springs:

1. Umshyllong River: Originates from "Sangmei" forest and flows towards "Umdiangpun" and "Kshaid Umdiangpun" (Elephant Falls) thence to "Wah Umiam" (Umiam Khwan or Barapani)
2. Umjasi River: Originates from "Riat Tynrah" and flows by the side of Lawsoh-tun village leading to "Umshyrypi" at the foothill of Ri Lbong (Rilbong) thence towards "Riat Marshan" (Bishop Falls) meeting "Wah Umkhrah" and thence they flow to Wah Umiam Khwan which runs through the Kolang Stream and directly unto Brahmaputra River.
3. Umshyrypi River: Originates from "Wah Diengliang" by the side of Malki and

Laban and meets "Umjasi" at the foothill of Ri Lbong (Rilbong)

4. Umkhrah River: Originates from "Lawjynriew" and flows to "Umkhrah" and transforms to "Spread Eagle's Fall" then to "Wah Pongding" near Pynthorunkhrah. Thence runs along Laitumkhrah, Jail Road, Wahingdoh, Raitsamthiah and Jaiauw and through Mawlai and Mawprei direct to "Kshaid Sunapani" (Beadon Fall). It connects Umshyrypi and Umjasi at "Wah Ro Ro" unto Wah Umiam Khwan.

5. Umkhren River: Originates from nearby Laitok Village, East of Lum Shulong or Shyllong (Shillong Peak) and runs towards Madanrying and Mawshbuit Villages and then transforms into "Weidtem" (Sweet Falls) and then flows by the side of Mawdiang-diang and Tynring villages thence through Ri Bhoi areas unto Brahmaputra River in Assam.

6. Umtongsyiem or Umtangsyiem: Originates from Lum Shulong or Lum Shyllong (Shillong Peak) and flows through the stream "Pasir" before reaching the villages - Mawsawa, Madan-ying-Syiem and Syilai-U-Lor village where Umtangsyiem and Umjlieng meet and wherefrom they are then known as "Umjlieng" that flows to "Umiew" and then directly to "Umiam Mawphlang".

7. Umjlieng: Originates from Shyllong Peak near Mawkan village and flows through Madan Lyngkien Thawlang and Bannun till it meets Umiew.

Now with the Dorbar's backing and the Government's clear position on environmental safeguards there is no reason why the project should not move forward.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Rain-water Harvesting an Imperative

Editor,

This refers to the news item published in The Shillong Times on August 4, 2026, highlighting the monsoon drought-like situation in different parts of Meghalaya. The report is indeed a matter of concern and reminds us that changing climatic conditions are beginning to affect even a State traditionally known for its abundant rainfall.

The State Government has been making sincere efforts to improve water supply and strengthen rural infrastructure through various schemes. However, the emerging challenge of erratic rainfall calls for renewed attention and a long-term strategy to ensure water security for all.

One important step would be to promote rainwater harvesting on a much larger scale. Government offices, schools, colleges, hospitals and new buildings may be encouraged to install rooftop rainwater harvesting systems. At the household level, awareness programmes and modest incentives could motivate more families to conserve rainwater for future use.

The preservation and rejuvenation of natural springs also deserve special attention, as they continue to be the primary source of water for many villages. Protecting catchment areas, encouraging afforestation with indigenous tree species and strengthening watershed management may help improve groundwater recharge and maintain the ecological balance. Similarly, constructing check dams, farm ponds, recharge pits and small storage reservoirs

in suitable locations can help retain rainwater that would otherwise flow away during the monsoon. Reviving traditional ponds and wetlands and promoting soil and moisture conservation practices would further strengthen the State's water resources.

Another area where valuable savings can be achieved is the efficient management of treated drinking water. In some localities, overhead storage tanks occasionally overflow due to operational reasons. With regular monitoring, timely maintenance and the installation of automatic water-level control systems wherever feasible, such losses can be minimised. If technically possible, excess water may also be stored or channelled to nearby areas facing shortages. Water conservation is not the responsibility of the Government alone. Educational institutions, village councils, community organisations and every citizen can make meaningful contributions by using water judiciously and spreading awareness about its importance.

The present situation offers an opportunity to strengthen our preparedness for the future. With continued government initiatives, scientific planning and active public participation, Meghalaya can successfully address the challenges posed by changing rainfall patterns and ensure sustainable water security for generations to come.

Yours etc,
Jairaj,
Via email

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

"Don't wait. The time will never be just right."
— Charles de Gaulle

The Shillong Times

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Coalgate, clean-chit

IN a world of make-believe, the real often becomes unreal while the unreal takes on a life of its own. Some 14 years after the Coal Block Scam or Coalgate erupted on the basis of a report from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), which put the then prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh in the dock, the Supreme Court officially cleared him of all corruption allegations in relation to the Talabira-II coal block allocation case. This follows the presentation of a closure report by the Central Bureau of Investigation that probed the case for several years. The CAG report had picked holes in the allocation of coal blocks between 2004 and 2009, without competitive bidding. Dr Singh was drawn into the picture as he held charge of the coal ministry while also serving as PM during the 2004-2014 period. Notably, CBI filed such closure reports several times, stating that there was no evidence of wrongdoing on Singh's part, but the cases remained unclosed. This drag is typical of the nation's justice dispensation systems.

A certificate by the CBI or the other central or state investigating agencies is often taken with a pinch of salt. The Supreme Court itself had itself called CBI a caged parrot, a mouthpiece for its political bosses. These agencies had faced a credibility deficit during the Congress periods, but the scenario has only worsened during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's (and home minister Amit Shah's) tenure. They themselves lacked credibility and a commitment to fair-play. Worse, corruption across bureaucracy has skyrocketed under the Modi rule, while less is openly spoken in relation to corruption at the ministerial level. The bureaucracy and the judiciary are steadily losing their image in terms of their ability to deliver justice and fair-play. The graph of corruption is increasingly and feverishly on the ascendant across the spectrum. For a leader to remain oblivious of the ground realities is tantamount to a criminal neglect.

In all fairness, the clean chit given to Manmohan Singh by the investigating agencies must be seen in the backdrop of his impeccable record in public life. As part of the Civil Service and during his stints as RBI governor and economist with IMF, he had earned high respect from those who were associated with him. Unlike the present breed of professional politicians with a hand-in-the-honey pot approach, he cared little for his personal coffers. Those who worked with him vouch for his integrity and high sense of self-respect. Coal block allocations, however, have a political involvement. Money is likely to have, and probably changed hands. As the CAG reported, there was no competitive bidding. At the same time, significantly, the CBI has not been able to dig deep and expose foul play, if any, in relation to these allocations. The central agency, as also ED, has been pussy-footing in respect of several scams of epic proportions. Either the political bosses are forcing them to slow-pedal investigations or the policing in the country has come to such a pass that incompetence is their hallmark. Notably, the heads of ED and CBI had accused each other of taking bribes -- one while positioning himself in a foreign soil -- some years ago. Interestingly the Modi government simply let that pass.

Letters to the Editor

Dipke's comment on Judiciary's role!

Editor,
The Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke on August 4, while interacting with media representatives in Maharashtra has broached several vital and socially thought-provoking issues and inter alia, one of them being on the role of our judiciary, when he boldly asserted, and let me quote him verbatim, "There is a big question mark about the judiciary as well. Their hearings and orders are not quick enough. People face a lot of hassles if they go to the courts, yet as soon as a big businessman goes to the court, an urgent hearing is scheduled".

I trust our Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court has taken cognizance of Dipke's submission.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong -2

FCRA Bill: Regulation or Control of Civil Society?

Editor,
The editorial "FCRA Bill being deferred" (ST

12 August 2026) makes a few strong points worth unpacking. The editorial notes that opposition parties came together to stall the Bill in the Monsoon Session, framing it as a move that disproportionately affects Christian institutions that have historically provided education and healthcare in rural India. The BJP-led government presents the Bill as a national security measure, aimed at preventing misuse of foreign funds by NGOs or group which works out to the tune of Rs 18,000 crore annually, allegedly destabilizing the country. The most debated provision is the one allowing authorities to take over or sell assets built with foreign funds if an NGO's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) license lapses or is cancelled. The editorial interprets this as a devious attempt to control institutions rather than a neutral compliance safeguard. It situates the Bill within a larger narrative of "one country, one religion, one language, one election" warning that the government may revive it in the Winter Session. The editorial urges NGOs and church leadership to mobilize public opinion beyond Parliament, suggesting that civil society must play a role in resisting what it sees as an encroachment on freedom. The editorial frames the Bill less as technical regulation and more as a clash between national security narratives and civil society freedom. It is essentially asking if this

Last week, the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) held a public rally to put forward its eight demands to the government, which included among other things protection of land rights, detection and deportation of illegal immigrants, and environmental controls. However, it appears that the rally was organized to draw attention away from its own disastrous tenure at the KHADC (Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council), during which the party has come into conflict with the non-indigenous population (trading licenses), indigenous faith practitioners (Hima Sohra and Hima Myliem), and traditional institutions like the Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Raid, and Dorbar Hima (deletion of Section 16 from the 2021 Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Act). The rally was, therefore, not about holding the state government accountable for its missteps. Rather, it was about taking some of the pressure off the VPP over its own dismal performance in the KHADC. However, this does not mean that all the issues raised during this rally were irrelevant. The concerns surrounding the public hearing that took place on the 31st of July, 2026, for Shree Cement's proposed, integrated cement plant and limestone mining project at Lum Syrman, Nongkhlieh, East Jaintia Hills, are certainly relevant.

The project in question is worth Rs 1,800 crore and passes through a heritage cave system -- Krem Liat Prah, which is interconnected with the Um Im, Labit, and Rubon passages and measures approximately 30.4 kilometres in length. This limestone cave system has been recognized as the longest natural cave in India and, as the editorial published on the 3rd of August, 2026, rightly points out, "how such a project could receive no objection from the Ministry of Environment and Forest Department (MoEF), let alone the State Forest Department, is beyond comprehension." It is also highly ironic, considering that the state has been pushing for UNESCO World Heritage status not just for the Living Root Bridges but also for the Meghalayan Age Limestone Cave Systems, and the cave systems of Nongkhlieh, which are threatened by the project, are certainly an important part of that. This Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde-like behaviour on the part of the government is highly confusing and deeply disturbing.

is about plugging loopholes or about curbing institutions that do not align with the ruling party's ideological vision.

A sharper breakdown of the editorial is the legal implication if an NGO's FCRA license lapses or is cancelled; the government can seize or sell assets built with foreign funds. Legally, this raises questions of property rights and due process. It could mean schools, hospitals, or community centres funded by missions might be transferred to state control without compensation. NGOs would face stricter reporting and renewal requirements. Smaller organizations, especially in rural areas, may struggle to meet these, risking closure or take over. Such provisions could be contested in court as violating constitutional protections for religious freedom and the right to association. The political strategy is a deferral tactic to stall the Bill in the Monsoon Session. The government avoids immediate backlash while keeping the option to reintroduce it later.

The editorial suggests the Winter Session close to Christmas could be symbolically chosen to heighten pressure on Christian institutions. The government frames the Bill as a national security safeguard while critics see it as part of a broader ideological project of centralization and cultural homogenization. The editorial highlights rare unity among opposition parties,

This is not the first time that an attempt has been made to establish a cement plant in the region.

In his article, 'The CM's Silence on Nongkhlieh Speaks Volumes', H H Mohrmen revealed that in 2010, Lafarge had planned to establish a mega cement plant at Shnongrim, capable of producing one million metric tonnes of cement a year. Mohrmen, along with the local community, protested against it and the company abandoned the project. The company realized that the project would have destroyed some of India's most spectacular caves, including Krem Liat Prah. Therefore, despite having already purchased some of the land, Lafarge decided to abandon the project. Mohrmen therefore asks why the government is so determined to allow a cement plant to be established in the area, particularly when a previous attempt recognized its mistake and withdrew.

Lafarge is not a stranger to controversy. In the early 2000s, there were protests against its limestone mining operations in the Shella-Nongtrai area, and I met some of the people who were fighting against it. In that workshop, there were environmental activists and legal advisers from different parts of the country who came to discuss strategies to fight against projects that are harmful to the environment as well as the local community. During the discussion, senior activists revealed that sometimes, decisions arrived at by the courts to allow certain projects to go ahead can be put down to political considerations. The Lafarge project was a cross-border project that linked the quarries in Nongtrai to the manufacturing plants in Chhatak, Sunamganj, Bangladesh. It had a total investment of 500 million dollars, one of the biggest-ever foreign investments received by Bangladesh. We were therefore not surprised when the project in Shella-Nongtrai finally went ahead. The decision not to proceed with the Nongkhlieh project could be an attempt to avoid getting into fresh controversy. But Shree Cement does not appear to be bothered about any such controversy, certainly not with what happened during the public hearing.

The public hearing on the 31st of July, 2026, was a sham, and there is no other way to describe it. By its very definition, such an exercise

is to ensure transparency about foreign influence in American politics, policy and public opinion, and these entities undergo audits similar to India's single-window FCRA system. In Slovakia NGOs crossing foreign income thresholds must file exhaustive donor reports, aligning with India's ban on sub-granting and strict end-use tracking. In Georgia non-profits and media outlets with more than 20% foreign funding must register as foreign-funded, disclose finances, and face audits -- comparable to India's registration and compliance rules. In Russia extensive oversight of foreign-funded organizations, mandatory labelling, unannounced audits, and state control of assets are structurally similar to India's asset regulation under FCRA. India's FCRA amendments are part of a global trend. Governments worldwide are tightening rules on foreign funding to ensure transparency, prevent covert influence, and safeguard sovereignty. The Indian model sits somewhere between the Western disclosure frameworks (US, Slovakia and Georgia) and the more restrictive Russian-style oversight.

However, India's updated FCRA rules are not unique but part of a global trend. Many countries are tightening oversight of foreign funding to ensure transparency, prevent covert influence, and safeguard sovereignty. In the United States of America, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) a US law enacted in 1938 requires individuals and organizations acting as "agents of foreign principals" to register with the Department of Justice (DOJ) and disclose their activities, finances and relationships. Its purpose

is to be conducted with all the stakeholders and not just those who support the project. According to reports, even senior officials and scientists of the State Pollution Control Board were not present at the hearing. Such a meeting cannot be considered a legitimate public hearing. And if the roads were deliberately dug up to prevent people opposed to the project from attending, such an action raises serious questions about the legality and validity of the hearing. In fact, the Jaintia National Council (JNC) and the Jaintia Students' Union (JSU) have accused the state government, police, and Shree Cement of orchestrating intimidation, road sabotage, and violence in the lead-up to and during the public hearing. JNC central president Sambormi Lyngdoh even released a video in which he accused the government of bringing police personnel from Garo Hills to detain JNC leaders and prevent locals of Elaka Nongkhlieh and Elaka Sutura from participating freely. This high-handedness, as revealed through multiple videos on social media that confirm the news reports, creates a very dangerous precedent for the future.

Recently, the government announced that it would bring a resolution against uranium mining in the state. That resolution may eventually be adopted during the upcoming autumn Assembly session, but what has transpired in East Jaintia Hills creates doubt as to whether such a resolution will actually have any real impact. The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has already alleged that influential individuals, including a former legislator from Ri Bhoi district, are quietly acquiring land in uranium-rich areas like Domiasiat to facilitate mining in the future. So, if the Indian government were to ever consider mining uranium in these areas, they would just need to organize a public hearing where most of the landlords, i.e., the elite outsiders who are buying a lot of the land, would agree to the proposal. The locals will be prevented from attending the meeting by digging up the roads and through the deployment of central forces. In a social media post, Mewaker Lyngdoh Pakma—who heads the BJP's youth wing in Meghalaya—demanded that the students demonstrating at Jantar Mantar be shot (his allegation that

his account was hacked has not been confirmed by the police). Considering that pellet guns were subsequently used against the protestors, it is quite possible that, in a similar scenario, live bullets could be used against those opposing uranium mining. Based on what has transpired in Oting (Nagaland), such actions will not elicit much outrage from the mainstream media. There will be no hunger strike or public rally in Delhi. It will never become a national movement, and no one will ever resign. But the repercussions within the state could be deadly.

On August 3, 2026, two masked individuals entered the premises of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB), Lumpyngad, Shillong, and hurled petrol bombs at the building. The bombs struck the outer wall of the building. Fortunately, no injuries or casualties were reported. While there has been no confirmation from the police as to whether this attack had any connection with the 31st July public hearing, there is every reason to believe that the two are connected. While the anger and frustration are understandable, violence cannot be condoned, since any escalation will create a much wider law-and-order problem. This is not the only attack that has taken place in the last few years. There have also been incidents of rifles being snatched from security personnel and police vehicles being set on fire. If people feel that their voices are being suppressed through unlawful means, such incidents will only grow.

What happened in East Jaintia Hills was a farce, and the JSU has submitted its complaints to both the Meghalaya Human Rights Commission (MHRC) and the police. Will any action be taken to ensure that people's voices are not suppressed and their rights are not snatched away? VPP, for all its flaws, has taken up the issue and demanded a fresh hearing, terming the earlier exercise 'null and void'. The KSU has also called for the cancellation of the 31st July hearing. I hope the government will heed these demands and conduct a free and fair hearing. If the people decide in favour of the project, so be it. But let it be the people's choice. Do not suppress their voice.

(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)

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Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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An Aspiration Fulfilled in the Garo Hills

By Dr. Rhinkle M. Marak

Only the tribals of Meghalaya will now vote in elections to the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, on an electoral roll prepared by the Council itself. Some demands are voiced for so long that they begin to feel permanent, a fixture of public conversation rather than something that can actually be settled. For the people of the Garo Hills, the demand that their District Council rest on electoral foundations of its own was one such demand. With the amendment of Rules 128 and 129 of the Assam and Meghalaya Autonomous Districts (Constitution of District Councils) Rules,

third is standing. An institution whose electorate matches its constitutional purpose speaks with greater authority when it legislates on land, custom and identity.

The amendment also completes work that began earlier this year. The amendment to Rule 8 received the assent of the Governor on 24 March 2026, establishing Scheduled Tribe status for those seeking election to the Council. The amendment of Rules 128 and 129 carries the same principle from candidature into the electoral roll itself, so that the framework now reads as one coherent whole rather than a set of partial fixes.

"This was never a novel aspiration. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution created the Autonomous District Councils so that tribal communities would have institutions of their own to protect land, customary law and cultural identity, and the Garo Hills Council carries that responsibility across the five districts of the region. Paragraph 2(6) of the Sixth Schedule itself recognises that qualifications for voting, the preparation of electoral rolls and eligibility for election are integral to the constitution of these Councils."

1951, it has been settled.

The position is now clear and simple. Elections to the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council will be decided by the tribals of Meghalaya, and by them alone. The Council will have a dedicated electoral roll of its own, prepared for the Council and anchored in Scheduled Tribe status, which is the very basis on which the Council was created. Until now, the Council went to the polls on the State Assembly roll, a roll drawn up for a different institution serving a different purpose. That borrowing has ended. The Council will vote on its own list, made for its own mandate.

Reforms of this kind do not happen by drift. For decades the electoral framework of the Councils remained tied to borrowed arrangements, and it took a political climate willing to take the Sixth Schedule seriously, sustained administrative backing and clear leadership to change that. Under Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, a long-standing community aspiration has been converted into law. There is a longer thread here as well. The late P. A. Sangma, former Chief Minister of Meghalaya, spent a lifetime arguing for indigenous rights and institutions, and strengthening the

"Three things follow from this reform. The first is clarity. Elections to the Council will now be conducted on rules that are settled and unambiguous, which spares the institution the uncertainty that has repeatedly surrounded its polls. The second is ownership. The Council's roll becomes the Council's own responsibility rather than an inheritance from elsewhere, and with that responsibility comes a stronger claim to the machinery and the resources needed to discharge it."

This was never a novel aspiration. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution created the Autonomous District Councils so that tribal communities would have institutions of their own to protect land, customary law and cultural identity, and the Garo Hills Council carries that responsibility across the five districts of the region. Paragraph 2(6) of the Sixth Schedule itself recognises that qualifications for voting, the preparation of electoral rolls and eligibility for election are integral to the constitution of these Councils. The principle was written into the Schedule at the very beginning. What has changed is that it has finally been given effect.

Three things follow from this reform. The first is clarity. Elections to the Council will now be conducted on rules that are settled and unambiguous, which spares the institution the uncertainty that has repeatedly surrounded its polls. The second is ownership. The Council's roll becomes the Council's own responsibility rather than an inheritance from elsewhere, and with that responsibility comes a stronger claim to the machinery and the resources needed to discharge it. The

foundations of the Garo Hills Council is a continuation of that argument in a concrete form.

It is worth being plain about what comes next. The rule is now in place; the roll still has to be built. Preparing a fresh electoral roll across five districts calls for enumeration, trained staff, a working machinery and time, and the Council will need steady support from the State Government to do it properly. The announcement is not the end of the exercise. It is the point at which the administrative work can begin on firm legal ground, which is precisely what has been missing until now.

For generations, the people of the Garo Hills were told that the Sixth Schedule guaranteed them institutions of their own. That guarantee has now been made real in the one place where it matters most for a democratic body, which is the roll of those who elect it. A promise made long ago has been kept, and the Council that emerges from it will be better placed to protect the land, the rights and the heritage of the Garo people for generations to come.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Tura Government College)

"It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds."

— Aesop

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Judge nailed again

WHAT next -- is a big question after a three-member panel appointed at the behest of Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla came to the conclusion that Justice Yashwant Varma of the Delhi High Court was indeed guilty of stockpiling huge sums of unaccounted money inside his casually designated 'outhouse' last year. The cat was out of the bag when a fire erupted in the outhouse. That Varma hid money was precisely what an earlier panel appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court concluded three months after sacks full of Rs 500 notes got burnt from one end to the other end of the outhouse -- when Varma and his wife were holidaying in Madhya Pradesh. Curiously, no case was filed against the judge and no questions were asked to him. Varma was subsequently transferred to his parent court, the Allahabad HC. Despite calls from the Chief Justice of India after the first inquiry report indicted Varma, the tainted judge refused to quit the exalted office. He was sure no one out here had the courage to order his arrest or seek his resignation.

Varma behaved as if he's innocent. He initially said it was not his money but this was likely kept in the outhouse by some or other of his personal assistants. Then he changed the plate a bit and did some chest beating... that this whole episode was a conspiracy against him. Clearly, Varma was in no mood to make a clean breast and explain how so much money surfaced there. Offense, he thought, was the best form of defence. Or so it seemed to many. When two inquiry panels involving senior judges as their members shot down Varma's defences, the cat was out of the bag. Here, many suspected, was a clear case of judicial corruption. But, the Modi government that lords over the destiny of the nation still does not appear to be convinced about this. The top authorities might be tempted to institute another inquiry at this very late hour, which would help Varma buy more time. That Varma resigned on his own sometime ago was fine, but this could be because he realised a bit late that the defences he built for himself were not of much help. Unless a clear explanation comes as to the source of the burned notes, the needle of suspicion will remain focused on him.

Notably, the establishment as a whole is scripting new chapters in corruption on a daily basis while the central investigation agencies keep looking the other way. To the naked eye, the graph of corruption has skyrocketed over the years. The judiciary itself faced embarrassment as in the "crores for bail" scam in Andhra Pradesh, years ago. Since the judiciary is insulated from open criticism, unlike in the case of politicians and bureaucrats, it would require a fire or some such incidents to get black sheep exposed. Perceptions are that all arms of the establishment are now corrupt. All spheres of life have been corrupted. The two inquiry reports in the note-burning case in Delhi point to a shameful scenario.

The Scourge of Drugs: Reasons for Social Dystopia

By Patricia Mukhim

Drug use is moving at a ferocious pace and upending the lives of many families. But families dealing with this blight are left to tackle their problems in a long and lonely journey. It's no longer possible to arrest addicts or even small peddlers because the prisons would be over-crowded. Hence, a walk around Police Bazar or near the Polo Bazar in the evening and into midnight will show every place lined up with people too drugged to know if they're sleeping on their beds at home or on a hard, stony, cemented public sitting space.

Unfortunately, as a society we are not used to reflecting on the social ills that goad our young people to take refuge in substances that provide a temporary escape but have the potential to turn the lives of drug users and their families into a wretched hell. I have had the occasion to speak to families of addicts who have the good fortune of attending a paid rehabilitation centre and have come out as certified as a "recovering drug addict." Addicts and alcoholics don't really "recover" because the possibility of slipping back into the habit is so overwhelming. And we cannot even imagine the scourge that a family with a drug addict goes through. It's a painful torture as has been shared by a brave young lady -- whose brother she says put their mother through so much mental torture because he needed a fix every day, every 6-7 hours.

The young lady whose Instagram reel has gone viral spoke of her mother who got into debt and had to mortgage their only home to meet her brother's drug use habit. This is just one such story. There are a few lakh such families in Meghalaya (at last count there were three lakh drug addicts in this state). The numbers must have swelled by now. It is not that the state is doing nothing. It has created the DREAM (Drug Reduction, Elimination and Action Mission) a comprehensive state government initiative launched to combat substance abuse, prevent addiction, and build a drug-free society through community and institutional efforts. This organization has worked relentlessly involving the Dorbar Shong, Seng Kynthei and Seng Samla of various localities and as far as awareness goes most substance abusers don't get

into the habit out of ignorance any longer. They know what they are getting into; they know the misery they cause to themselves and their family members but they are hooked to the habit.

In Meghalaya one of the key problems driving the young to drugs is unstable, women-headed families. Let's accept the fact that in most families sons have no male to look up to as role models. While the father alone may not be the role model boys look up to, they do need healthy, positive male role models to guide their development and these figures can come from places outside the home too. While speaking to some young men, one learnt a lot about what bothers them the most. In most families the father either drinks, smokes, or has abandoned the family and moved on. The Khasi "kpa-nah" (step-father) syndrome is very problematic for growing up children especially for girls as they grow into adolescents. We have several cases of step-fathers raping their step-daughters. In most cases such instances are hushed up but at great cost to the young girl who sometimes becomes a teenage mother with no one to turn to. When the sons in the same family see this they are traumatised and without any counselling available they turn to drugs for temporary emotional relief only to realise they are hooked to the substance and often cannot meet their needs so they resort to stealing -- first from their own families and later from other homes. Whether we accept this or not, boys do look up to older males to learn how to navigate the world. A positive male figure helps them. But the question is: are there enough such male role models within their social groups? According to the National Family Health Survey -6 (2023-24) about 41% of all households in Meghalaya are headed by women. The Indian average is only 18%. Another study conducted by the Meghalaya State Commission for Women in 2022 documented 3,078 single mothers across seven of the state's 12 districts. The vast majority of these women were recorded as deserted, abandoned, or legally divorced. Academic field studies analyzing female-headed households (FHHs)

in rural Khasi regions indicate that approximately 50% of female household heads are single due to choice or compulsion arising from divorce, mutual separation, or abandonment, alongside widowhood.

Most studies attribute the high rate of abandonment and divorce to Meghalaya's matrilineal traditions which men claim leave them owning neither the children they help procreate nor the family ancestry since men have traditionally never inherited any part of the family property which usually passes through their youngest sister. And men tend to believe that matrilineal vests women with special defence mechanisms; hence, even if they abandon their wives/partners and the children born out of the union, the women will somehow survive because the clan and family will help absorb the shock and perhaps even contribute financially to support the household. But that is easier said than done. No clan is known to support a woman-headed household. If there are any I would like to be corrected. In fact, clan support is eroding and clans are now divided by class. There are the affluent among the clan and the very poor too and to each his own. Every person in the clan has to design and work out their own survival kit. In most Khasi families when a man walks out of a marriage or a co-habitation arrangement he also walks away from financial and care-giving responsibilities without any social or legal costs.

In a matrilineal society where children are always under the custody of mothers, the burden is borne by women. It is no wonder then that poverty has a woman's face. In short, Meghalaya is where the phrase "feminisation of poverty" fits. Of the single mothers documented by the NFHS, 46.2% are completely illiterate and 28.4% possess only a primary education, forcing them into low-paying, informal daily wage labour to sustain their households. Now figure a household where the mother has to go to work and leave her children behind to do their own thing. They may or may not be going to school; there's no monitoring. When they get into their teens they form friendships with the opposite sex; they know

nothing about protected sex but experiment with sex. The girl gets pregnant and what happens thereafter is what "replication of poverty" is all about. Think of the boys in this family. With just the bare minimum of sex education in school -- sex being a taboo subject for a society that places a premium on "respectability" (ka burom ka akor) above all else, even when that respectability has flowed down the drain -- how do we expect boys to understand the importance of using condoms? Schools are silent on the words 'sex', 'condom' and 'protected sex'. Then as far as drug use is concerned, since most teachers are untrained on how to broach the topic it becomes a 'silent' treatment and boys are just told that drug use is wrong; nay it's a sin; it's a curse on the family and it will destroy their lives. Period.

But that's hardly how the subject of substance abuse is discussed. It is here that teachers' training should also involve understanding the implications of drug abuse. The last thing teachers should be doing is judging, condemning, and treating those suspected of abusing substances as pariahs. In this we as a society obsessed with culture and respectability (ka burom ka akor), which are peripheral to our present needs for a strong social mooring in a changing world, are actually fighting a losing battle. We must abandon our obsession with cultural hegemony, face the facts on the ground, and get off our high horses to deal with the problem pragmatically. We need to name our weaknesses and face them one by one. Let's find out the many reasons why our young ones take to drugs.

Let's listen to those sleeping on the benches in Police Bazar and hear them out because there is no other way forward.

I will end with a quote from Daniel Patrick Moynihan an American diplomat and social scientist who presciently stated thus, "A community that allows large numbers of young men to grow up in broken families -- never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future -- that community asks for and gets chaos." Doesn't this reflect what's happening in many of our families today? The result? Growing substance abuse...

An Accidental Vacation in 1984

By Sreelata Jonnalagedda

I discovered, during a brief visit to Yangon or Rangoon, the former capital of Burma, that Burmese Days was Orwell's first novel. I left the country thinking about his other famous novel instead.

I was not on a planned holiday but an accidental vacation to Burma, a country synonymous, for me, with Vipassana meditation. Seeing the land that made meditation its national occupation had not been on my list as much as doing the 10-day Vipassana course (one-day, hopefully).

Coming home from any travel makes me draw up a

for international schools, however, were everywhere. The general picture that emerged was bleak.

With the democratic leader incarcerated and unable to rebel, insurgent groups too fractured to unite, and a young military-appointed leader gaining legitimacy through China, the hope for democracy looks distant and slim.

India is closer to Burma than we envision, culturally first of all. Advaita, the idea of non-duality, and Vipassana, seeing things as they truly are, may mean different things to different people, but their roots are identical.

"Tourists were few and far between.

Guides and photographers were conspicuous

by their absence, even at the Shwedagon

Pagoda. When I asked the staff at my hotel,

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mand until it dissolved into a blank, and some-

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allowed to answer."

mental gratitude list. This time there was a surprise addition, and an existential one: democracy.

I was somewhat prepared for the political climate and the lack of media access, thanks to warnings from Google and ChatGPT itineraries. WhatsApp is banned in Burma, I'd heard, and I was glad of the excuse to abstain. But business is business.

Within minutes of landing I had a new SIM, and the operator had installed a free VPN on my phone. WhatsApp, Instagram, most media restored. Most, except American outlets like the NYTimes, where my paid subscription now bought me nothing.

I began exploring the way I would anywhere in the world: places to see, restaurants to try, guided by social media and reviews. After a full day in Yangon though, I returned to the hotel underwhelmed.

Tourists were few and far between. Guides and photographers were conspicuous by their absence, even at the Shwedagon Pagoda. When I asked the staff at my hotel, an international mid-range chain, to point me toward the city's art and cultural scene, I watched my request pass down a chain of command until it dissolved into a blank, and something like fear: as if no one was sure they were allowed to answer.

American media was unavailable, but BBC was, and it filled in what the streets and small talk would not. Military rule had replaced a ten-year democratic regime in 2021. The government pegged the currency at 2,200 Kyat to the dollar; the market traded closer to 4,000. There is forced conscription of the young, which explained the surveillance outside the airport, in place to stop them from leaving.

The restaurants had none of the life the reviews promised, in patronage, menu, or vibe. Everything was functional on the surface. It was only when you looked deeper that the scratches surfaced.

American media was unavailable, but BBC was, and it filled in what the streets and small talk would not. Military rule had replaced a ten-year democratic regime in 2021. The government pegged the currency at 2,200 Kyat to the dollar; the market traded closer to 4,000. There is forced conscription of the young, which explained the surveillance outside the airport, in place to stop them from leaving. University buildings looked deserted and dilapidated, faculty and scholars displaced from their safe spaces, I heard. Hoardings

VPN and cut myself off. So here it was, first-hand: a world where controlled information distorts reality, at least for a lay observer like me. Orwell's 1984 came to mind, precisely the dystopian fiction I've always avoided, because it felt too far from reality to be worth the gloom. Interestingly, on this trip it felt close and real.

As for the book, I plan to go back to it, most certainly for the sake of democracy. To go back to mulling over what would happen in the world absent with a space for voice -- of the people, for the people, and by the people.

(The writer is Professor of Marketing at IIM Bangalore and this write-up is based on her experiences during her visit to Myanmar earlier this year.)

Letters to the Editor

Forced Conversion or Personal Conviction?

Editor,

There is a disturbance in the social equilibrium of the country today. Many factors have caused this disturbance and one of them is religious disharmony. There is a lot of hue and cry about forced conversion especially targeting those who practice or profess the Christian faith. How do we define forced conversion? Is it conversion at gunpoint? Or is it conversion under threat or inducement? When people admire, understand, and accept the Christian faith as their personal belief after seeing the spirit, ideals, and belief behind the good works done by Christian Missionaries, is that a forced conversion?

Nowhere in the Bible it is mentioned that people should be converted by force or inducement or made to change their national identity. Rather it is to preach the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ so that people are convicted of their sins and their need for salvation from sin. This is the basic tenet of a Christian faith. Charitable works stem from the guiding principles for Christian life which Jesus himself exhorted and commanded his disciples and followers to do irrespective of whether they accept him as their personal saviour. If a person becomes a Christian just to get a bag of rice or some personal benefit, it is their own selfish will and personal decision, but

this cannot be blamed on the good works done by Christians.

Firstly, I want to ask those Hindu organisations hell-bent on attacking religious minorities in India: Is a non-Hindu person less patriotic? Are there not Hindus who spied against India for an enemy state? Has Great Britain become more Bharatiya and less British just because a Hindu (Rishi Sunak) was a prime minister? Secondly, what about those who have abandoned or will abandon their belief in gods and goddesses and turn atheist after being convinced by the teachings of scientists in scientific institutions? Will you call this also forced conversion? Are you going to destroy those institutions just because there is conversion from Hinduism to atheism and is this a threat to India's national identity?

Just a reminder that Stalin and Mao Zedong loved their countries as much as the Orthodox Christian Russians and Confucian or Taoist Chinese do. Thirdly, regarding our own Khasi community, we noticed that the RSS started claiming the Khasi Indigenous faith as a part of the Hindu religion and began embracing them as their own while doing charity work for them. What were they doing throughout the centuries? Perhaps they considered the tribals uncivilised, low-caste people who were untouchable; or perhaps they thought we did not belong to Bharat which is historically correct; or perhaps they were in deep meditation or deep slumber.

When my mother who comes from a conservative indigenous Khasi family, married my father who was from a devout Khasi Chris-

tian family, all of my mother's clan members were very happy and celebrated their Christian wedding with a big feast. This was not because they did not want my mother to remain in the indigenous religion but because they accepted that she had found happiness in a new faith and a beloved husband. I have never ever heard them say it was a forced conversion. Rather they believed it was a personal conviction. There is always respect and bonding among our family and clan members irrespective of our different faiths. I remember that whenever there was a Christmas celebration or large church gathering, our aunts, uncles, and cousins would come, support and help us with the preparation even though they did not directly participate in the church activities. And vice versa! When there is Shad Suk Mysiems, we visit them, wish them well, and support them. This happens because we believe that religion is a personal matter that does not destroy the clan identity and societal bond existing among family and clan members.

In conclusion, I should say that the Hindu organisations instead of sowing seeds of difference among Khasis of different faiths, should rather learn from our community and teach those fanatics in the mainland that existence of different religions does not destroy the nation; rather they are like different flowers adorning the nation. Religious conversion is not a threat to the nation; rather rampant political conversions are a danger to the nation. Last but not the least, whether one worships a cow, a goat, a cat, a tree, the sun, or the moon,

etc. it doesn't matter, he will remain an Indian as long as he owes his allegiance to the Constitution of India.

Yours etc.,
Dr. M. Lyndem,
Via email

Meghalaya's escalating HIV crisis

Editor,

Recent statistics released by the Meghalaya AIDS Control Society, regarding public health in our state should serve as a stark wake-up call for every citizen and policymaker in Meghalaya. Recording 574 new HIV cases in just three months is deeply alarming for a state with a population of about 3.5 million. What is even more alarming is the transmission pattern: unprotected casual sexual encounters account for 52 percent of these new cases, while regular partner transmissions make up another 32 percent.

These numbers reveal a dangerous gap between our social habits and public health awareness. As the saying goes, "Ignorance is the root of all misfortune." For generations, our society has relied primarily on moral lecturing and traditional silence to address sensitive personal matters, however none of these are addressed openly to this day. They're always addressed behind closed doors. While family values and moral guidelines are essential in building a responsible society, they are not enough to stop a

biological virus that is an ongoing Global Pandemic. Ignoring the reality will not make it disappear; it only allows the crisis to grow in the shadows.

To fight this effectively, we must first clear up basic misunderstandings that persist across our communities. Chief among them is the confusion between HIV and AIDS. HIV is the virus; whereas AIDS is the advanced stage of the disease that occurs when the infection is left untreated. Presently medical science allows a person living with HIV to access various medicines and therapies, enabling them to live a long, healthy, and fulfilling life without ever progressing to AIDS. Knowledge of this distinction alone can reduce unnecessary panic and encourage early diagnosis.

However, to reverse this surge, both the Government and local communities must adopt a proactive, grounded approach:

1. Grassroots Awareness and Open School Curricula: The Government must launch structured awareness drives at the village and town levels. More importantly, sexual health education must be taught in our middle and high schools without hesitation, shame, or squeamishness. Education is our primary defence. Young people must be taught how the virus spreads and how essential barrier methods, particularly condoms, are in preventing infection.
2. Promoting Personal Responsibility: We must discuss, personal

freedom with honesty. While individuals have sexual autonomy, it must always go hand-in-hand with caution after all, freedom without precaution is peril. At the same time, awareness programs must highlight other critical transmission pathways, such as the sharing of contaminated needles among injecting drug users and mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy or delivery.

Ending Social Stigma and Discrimination: The greatest obstacle in this fight is the harsh social stigma attached to the virus and the people who carry this virus. Too often, individuals living with HIV are treated as social outcasts or modern-day "untouchables." This fear of public shame forces people to hide their status and avoid getting tested or seeking life-saving treatment. Illness is a health condition, not a moral failure. We must replace judgment with empathy and isolation with community support.

We can no longer sweep this issue under the rug out of embarrassment or outdated taboos. It is time for the Government to take the lead with grassroots initiatives; for educational institutions to teach the facts openly, and for society as a whole to treat affected individuals with dignity and compassion.

Yours etc.,
Reakor Shisha Kharkrang,
Upper Shillong

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"You can't just let nature run wild."

— Walt Disney

The Shillong Times

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Problems With SIR in Meghalaya

THE main purpose of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is to ensure that no eligible voter is excluded and no ineligible person remains on the electoral roll. Meghalaya began its 2026 SIR in July, using the 2005 electoral roll as the "legacy" roll for verification. Following the exercise, the draft electoral roll was published on 5 August 2026. However, Meghalaya's particular social, geographical and constitutional circumstances raise several genuine concerns. Firstly, dependence on the 21-year-old 2005 roll poses several gridlocks. Many of the new eligible voters were children or had not been born. Others might have moved between villages, towns and other states. Treating the old roll as an important reference point can disadvantage younger voters and people whose circumstances have changed. The official Meghalaya election website specifically requires voters to search the 2005 roll as part of the SIR process.

Some citizens may be absent from the 2005 rolls for legitimate reasons such as not receiving the enumeration form, having changed their address, or being unable to produce supporting evidence to establish their eligibility. This is particularly true of elderly people, migrants and people living in remote areas. House-to-house verification is challenging in Meghalaya due to scattered settlements and remote villages. A household that cannot be reached or whose members happen to be away should not automatically be treated as doubtful. There are several homes in places like Shella for instance where people have moved to Shillong for work but their homes are locked. They could be missed. Many residents who might have moved to study or work outside the state retain their permanent homes here. Conversely, people from other states have moved into Meghalaya for work and business. SIR therefore has to distinguish between temporary migration and permanent change of residence — something that cannot always be established merely by a house-to-house visit. In this respect, young voters face a special disadvantage. Many who are eligible voters today did not exist as voters in 2005. Their eligibility logically cannot depend on their presence in a 2005 electoral roll. The process must ensure that the 2005 roll is evidence, not a de facto eligibility test. Meghalaya presents a difficult case study because many in rural areas have no documents to produce. They resisted the Aadhar Card and even the EPIC due to religious reasons. They don't have birth certificates, having been born at home. In light of these obstacles many genuine citizens may be excluded from the electoral rolls.

The Dorbar Shnong often has intimate knowledge of who actually lives in a locality. Hence this knowledge is extremely useful in verification. But these are customary institutions, not electoral authorities. Their information can only assist the ECI but cannot replace statutory electoral procedures. Too often there is a danger of confusing electoral eligibility with indigeneity. The SIR should determine who is entitled to be an elector. It cannot indirectly become a mechanism for determining who is an indigenous inhabitant of Meghalaya. Meghalaya has currently flagged 6.51 lakh electors for scrutiny. Voters are given an opportunity to know why their names are questioned or removed and should have a simple, accessible opportunity to appeal. While the electoral rolls need to be cleaned and deceased voters removed, including names of those who have permanently moved to other states. The concern is that a one-size-fits-all SIR may not adequately reflect Meghalaya's distinctive realities. The electoral roll should be cleaned without disenfranchising genuine citizens and without turning electoral verification into a test of indigeneity, customary identity or a document of wealth ranking. Electoral verification reliant on a 21 year old list is complicated.

Meghalaya makes its teachers carry the state on their backs, then wonders why students aren't learning

By Napoleon S. Mawphniang

Let me ask you something simple. Something almost embarrassing in its simplicity.

When did we — as a people, as a state, as citizens who claim to value education — last stop to ask how the teacher is doing? Not the curriculum. Not the examination results. Not the percentage pass rate the government prints proudly in press releases. I mean the actual human being standing in front of fifty, sixty, a hundred children, carrying everything on two shoulders while the state keeps piling more weight on top.

Ambekar once wrote that a people who forget those who educate them will, eventually, forget how to think. He didn't put it quite that way, but the spirit is there in his fury against every system that weaponises ignorance. The teacher, in Ambekar's imagination, was the first revolutionary — the one who hands the oppressed the tools to name their oppression. So here's the first question worth sitting with: what happens when the revolutionary herself has no rights?

The Meghalaya government's school education system runs, broadly speaking, on a bewildering architecture of categories. You have government-scale deficit teachers, SSA teachers, RMSA teachers, adhoc teachers in LP and UP schools, 4th teachers, Science Grant teachers, Hindi Grant teachers, Pre-Primary teachers... It reads less like an education policy and more like a caste system — each category fixed at a different pay rung, a different dignity rung, a different survival rung. The state's own notification of April 2026, introducing the Structured Pay Framework (SPF), effectively acknowledged this inherited hierarchy by promising to fix it — which, to be fair, is something. But let's not mistake a bandage for surgery.

Under the SPF, an LP teacher with zero to five years of service earns Rs. 21,000 per month. A UP teacher in the same bracket earns Rs. 24,250. A Higher Secondary teacher — the one guiding children toward national competitive examinations — earns Rs. 36,500 at the bottom rung. These numbers, presented with great fanfare in the state assembly in February 2026, represent what the Chief Minister called "stabilisation." The Meghalayan Express reported the government projecting total annual expenditure rising from Rs. 600 crore to

Rs. 800 crore, covering approximately 23,000 teachers (The Meghalayan Express, February 17, 2026).

Stabilisation. That word deserves scrutiny. Because a teacher earning Rs. 21,000 in 2026 — the year artificial intelligence is reshaping every profession on earth — hasn't been stabilised. She's been sedated.

Now. Let's talk about what's really going on.

Kafka wrote about a man who woke up one morning transformed into something unrecognisable, something the world refused to accommodate. Gregor Samsa didn't ask to be a beetle. But the world's indifference to his condition — that was the real horror. Our teachers didn't ask to become multi-purpose government instruments. But here we are.

In May 2026, the Chief Minister himself announced the postponement of the Meghalaya Teacher Eligibility Test — the MTET — because teachers were caught between classroom duties, Census enumeration work, and Special Intensive Revision (SIR) assignments. A delegation of teachers had gone to him. They were, in his own words, "worried and in a dilemma" (Meghalaya Times, May 18, 2026). NDTV carried the story nationally. So did multiple state publications. The MTET, which teachers need to qualify to secure a government post, had to be pushed back because those same teachers were busy doing work that has nothing to do with teaching.

Sit with that irony for a moment.

A teacher cannot prepare for the examination that will define her career because she is too busy counting households for the census. And the government's official position, citing Section 27 of the Right to Education Act, 2009, is that this is lawful. That the enumeration can happen "after school hours." That teachers should feel it as a "sense of commitment."

I am an advocate. I've read Section 27. It does permit deployment of teachers for census and elections. But the law's permission and moral justification are two entirely different animals. Legality is the floor. Decency is the ceiling. We seem to have confused the two.

Paulo Freire would recognise this immediately. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he described the systematic

dehumanisation of those the state finds useful but inconvenient to fully dignify. The teacher becomes what Freire called a "depository" — not a thinker, not a professional, but a vessel the state fills with tasks and empties of agency. Census. SIR. Election duty. And now, please also appear for your eligibility test. Oh, and teach. Don't forget to teach.

The vacancy problem makes it worse. Much worse.

In April 2026, KHADC Executive Member Powell Sohkhlet publicly urged the government to fill 677 vacant teacher posts in government LP schools, including 29 in Eastern West Khasi Hills alone (The Shillong Times, April 7, 2026). He asked the obvious question: "How can two teachers manage a classroom of 120 students?" He cited a school in Eastern West Khasi Hills that had shut for over three weeks after the transfer of its sole teacher. Weeks. Children sat at home — or played on roads — because one transfer couldn't be compensated by any system that thought ahead.

The Jointia National Council noted in June 2026 that over 31,000 MTET-qualified candidates are waiting for appointment while 677 posts remain vacant across the state. Over 31,000 people. Qualified. Ready. Waiting. And still and still, children sit with two teachers for 120 students, while the state explains, gently, that advertisements will come "within the next few months."

Months. Always months. This is what Wittgenstein might call a language game gone wrong — the government says it values teachers, but the grammar of its actual actions speaks a completely different dialect. The words are fine. The structure beneath is broken.

Meghalaya's students scored 29% in Mathematics and 47% in Language in the PARAKH national survey — against national averages of 37% and 54% respectively. These are not abstract statistics. These are children. These are futures.

The deeper Socratic question — is this: Can we demand excellence from a workforce we have chosen not to respect? You cannot build a cathedral with workers you keep asking to sweep the road. You cannot raise a generation of thinkers with

teachers you've reduced to data-collectors and voter-list verifiers. Our education system has its own version: All teachers are valued. Some, of course, more than others.

I want to be careful here. I'm not writing to condemn any party, any individual, any minister. That's not the point. The point is structural. The point is that we have built a system that extracts from teachers — their time, their energy, their dignity — while offering them fragmented pay scales, years-long recruitment delays, census duties, SIR assignments; and the constant insecurity of adhoc status. And then we wonder, publicly, why the quality of education in our hills and valleys falls short of where we want it to be.

Teachers, have become a kind of quiet scapegoat. When children fail, we look at the teacher. When the school is empty, we look at the teacher. We rarely, with the same intensity, look at what we've done to the teacher.

The teacher carries ours. She carries our collective investment — or lack of it — into every classroom, every morning. What she feels when she walks in matters enormously. Whether she feels seen, secure, respected — or stretched thin and treated as a utility — that feeling transfers. Children feel it. Communities feel it, eventually.

Here's what I ask. Not of the government alone — of all of us.

Stop treating the teacher as a residual. Stop treating her eligibility test as something schedulable around census fieldwork. Stop letting vacancies sit for two, three years while qualified candidates grow grey with waiting and children crowd into under-staffed classrooms. Stop the ritual of announcing frameworks without the political will to make them real.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire for humanity. The gods punished him. But the fire — once given — couldn't be taken back. The teacher is our Prometheus. She carries the fire of knowledge into the darkest hills and the loneliest valleys of this state.

The least we can do is not chain her to a boulder while asking her to keep the flame alive.

(The writer is an advocate from Syadheh Village and a concerned citizen of Meghalaya. Views are personal.)

Why Meghalaya Should Seek More Premium Educational Institutes

By Ibormire Passah & Karissa Khonglam

What could Meghalaya gain from one more major national institution? More classrooms and degrees, but could it also mean new research, jobs, businesses and opportunities for young people? Development is often discussed through roads, hospitals and industries, but institutions can shape a state just as deeply over time. The question is whether there are still gaps that more premium institutes could help fill and whether its impact could reach beyond the campus itself.

One such example is Institutes of National Importance, or INI, which are higher-education or research institutions given special status through an Act of Parliament. IITs, IIMs, NITs, IIITs, AIIMS, IISERs, NIDs and NIPERs. These institutions receive Union Government support and have a national role in teaching, research and professional training.

Meghalaya already has major institutions such as North-Eastern Hill University, NIT Meghalaya, IIM Shillong and NEIGRIHMS. Recent reports that the Meghalaya Government plans to seek formal statutory INI status for NEIGRIHMS make this discussion timely. Could a stronger institutional position help medical education, research and specialised healthcare in the region? And if there is a case in health, are there other fields where a similar need exists? Science, technology, agriculture, design, pharmaceuticals and food technology are some areas worth examining.

These questions are warranted. The World Bank's 2021 report on tertiary education says strong higher-education systems can help countries build advanced skills and support innovation. An OECD study published in 2025 also notes that universities can contribute to regional development when they work with governments, businesses and communities. How much of its value can reach beyond the campus?

Employment is one place to look. A national institution needs teachers, researchers, administrators, engineers, laboratory workers, IT staff, accountants, nurses, technicians, security personnel and maintenance workers. Once a campus opens, it may also create demand for transport, food, accommodation, printing, repairs and supplies. Could some of this support the state's workers and businesses?

Access to specialised education is another concern. Many students from Meghalaya leave the state because the courses they want are not available locally. Studying in another city brings tuition fees, rent, travel and other costs. For some families, these expenses can reduce the choices available to students. Could a specialised national institution make some strong courses available closer home? It would not remove the need to study elsewhere, but it could widen the options.

There is also the question of exposure. IIM Shillong and NIT Meghalaya have made nationally recognised higher education more visible within the state. Could more institutions make laboratories, research and new career paths easier for school and college students to understand? Campus visits, public lectures and interaction with students and faculty may help young people see opportunities that otherwise feel far away.

The state's economy may also gain through wider spillovers. Universities are economic ecosystems: students, staff, visiting scholars and families spend on rooms, food, transport, shops, hotels and other services. This activity can support businesses beyond the campus itself.

Infrastructure can be part of the same spillover. A large campus needs roads, electricity, water, internet, healthcare and public transport. If improvements stop at the campus gate, the wider benefit may be small. But if these services are planned with nearby communities in mind, the same investment could serve homes and businesses too. That is why location and planning would matter.

Research may be one of the stronger reasons to consider more national institutions. The Economic Survey 2025–26 puts India's research and development spending at about 0.64 per cent of GDP, while the India BioEconomy Report 2026 values the country's bioeconomy at \$195.3 billion but finds that the Eastern region, including the Northeast, contributed only 6.4 per cent, while the South and West together produced more than 78 per cent. Meghalaya and the wider Northeast have strong possibilities for research in biodiversity, agriculture, food processing, water, climate and sustainable technologies. Could stronger

institutions, including specialised centres in areas such as forestry and biodiversity, drawing lessons and examples from institutions such as the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun, help turn some of these strengths into knowledge, skills, practical solutions and new economic activity?

There is also an economic reason why an additional major institution may matter differently in a smaller state. Growth theory has long recognised the importance of building human capital, especially where its existing stock is limited. The same broad idea can be applied carefully to higher education: one more major institution may make a relatively small difference in a region that already has many leading universities, but a much larger difference where such institutions are fewer. Research by Goldstein and Drucke found that university effects on regional earnings were strongest in small and medium-sized regions.

For Meghalaya, that raises an important possibility: A specialised institution could add laboratories, researchers, academic networks and specialised skills that are still relatively scarce in the state. If it works closely with other universities, government departments and businesses, the benefits could spread further through research partnerships, training, procurement and new economic activity.

There may be a wider regional role too. In March 2026, IIT Guwahati and other institutions from the Northeast signed a letter of intent for an academic and research consortium with Japan. India's Act East Policy also gives the Northeast an important place in engagement with neighbouring Asian countries. Could stronger education and research networks lead to more student exchanges, joint studies and academic partnerships? Meghalaya would not become an international education centre simply by opening another campus, but stronger institutions could make such links easier.

At the same time, more INIs cannot be treated as an answer to every development problem. School education, primary healthcare, state colleges, skill training, entrepreneurship and good administration remain essential. Existing institutions also need faculty, funding and infrastructure. If current colleges and universities are struggling with basic needs, would adding new campuses alone solve the problem? Probably not. Expansion should therefore go together with strengthening what Meghalaya already has.

Meghalaya cannot declare an institution to be an INI on its own. Formal status normally requires action by the Union Government and legislation by Parliament. But the state can identify clear academic and research gaps, prepare strong proposals, support suitable upgrades, and make the case for institutions that serve Meghalaya and the wider Northeast.

The real question, then, is not how many prestigious names Meghalaya can add to a list, but what kind of educational ecosystem it wants to build. What if the right institutions could bring specialised courses closer to home, attract researchers and skilled professionals, create new opportunities for businesses, strengthen research, support better infrastructure and give young people more reasons to see their future within the state? What if campuses in Meghalaya became not only places where degrees are awarded, but places where ideas are developed, businesses find new opportunities, various problems are studied, and knowledge from the Northeast reaches the rest of the country and beyond?

That future need not depend on INIs alone. Strong public universities, specialised national institutes and high-quality private institutions can all have a place in it. Nor would simply opening more campuses guarantee these results. Their value would depend on quality, purpose, good planning and how closely they connect with the society and economy around them. But imagine Meghalaya a decade or two from now with a deeper network of excellent institutions, students coming here to learn rather than always having to leave, researchers choosing the state for serious work, and communities and businesses growing alongside these campuses. If even part of that future is possible, is it not worth asking today what institutions Meghalaya should begin building, attracting and strengthening for tomorrow?

(Ibormire Passah is with Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Indian Institute of Management, Kashipur & Karissa Berti Khonglam is with Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi)

Letters to the Editor

Coalgate Clean Chit a Fresh Lease of Life for Congress

Editor,

The editorial "Coalgate, clean chit" (ST August 11, 2026) rightly frames the Supreme Court's clean chit to Manmohan Singh as consistent with his reputation for integrity, while simultaneously condemning India's investigative agencies and justice system for systemic delays, political influence, and rising corruption. The Supreme Court's clean chit to Dr. Manmohan Singh reinforces his image as a leader of integrity. For the Congress, this helps counter the long-standing "scam-tainted" narrative that the BJP has used against the UPA years. It allows the party to reclaim Singh's reputation as an honest statesman rather than a compromised leader.

The BJP has often leveraged Coalgate as a symbol of UPA-era corruption. Now that late Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh is cleared, that narrative weakens. However, the editorial points out that corruption has not disappeared—it argues it has worsened under the Modi government, particularly in the bureaucracy. This shifts the spotlight back onto the ruling party's own record. The editorial's critique of the CBI and ED as "caged parrots" highlights their perceived political misuse. This resonates with opposition claims that the agencies selectively weaponize which could become a rallying point in future debates. Singh's reputation for honesty contrasts sharply with

the current political climate. Dr. Singh's stature as an economist and civil servant stands apart from today's "professional politicians," potentially reminding voters of a different style of leadership. The clean chit strengthens Congress's moral position while exposing cracks in the BJP's corruption narrative. It also reignites debate about the credibility of India's investigative agencies and the persistence of systemic corruption.

The "Coalgate, clean chit" could shape election rhetoric going forward and reframe the Congress's potential messaging. Reclaiming integrity the Congress can highlight the Supreme Court's clean chit to Dr. Manmohan Singh as proof that the UPA's leadership was not personally corrupt, countering years of BJP attacks. Singh's reputation as an economist and civil servant could be contrasted with today's "professional politicians," appealing to voters nostalgic for technocratic, honest governance. Congress may argue that corruption has worsened under the Modi government, and bureaucracy, shifting the focus away from UPA-era scandals.

However, the BJP can downplay the verdict and avoid focusing on Singh personally, instead continuing to frame the UPA years as "scam-ridden," emphasizing systemic corruption rather than individual culpability. To counter Congress's narrative, the BJP may stress infrastructure, welfare schemes, or national security to keep the spotlight on present governance rather than past scandals. The government could argue that investigative agencies acted within their mandate, deflecting criticism of political misuse.

For undecided voters,

Singh's clean chit may soften the perception of Congress as corrupt, but whether this translates into electoral gains depends on how effectively the party communicates it. The editorial suggests corruption is now more entrenched in bureaucracy under the current regime. If Congress amplifies this, it could resonate with voters frustrated by everyday governance issues. Singh's vindication may serve as a symbolic reminder of integrity in politics, potentially influencing urban middle-class voters who value credibility. In short, the verdict gives Congress a chance to reframe its legacy and challenge the BJP's corruption narrative, while the BJP will likely pivot to present-day achievements and systemic critiques.

How the Coalgate clean chit verdict could ripple into election rhetoric:

Immediate Phase (August–September 2026): Congress highlights Dr. Manmohan Singh's vindication, framing it as proof of UPA's integrity. Begin contrasting Singh's clean record with alleged corruption under the current regime. BJP downplay Singh's personal exoneration; continue emphasizing "systemic scams" of the UPA era. Pivot messaging toward present-day achievements in infrastructure, welfare, and national security.

Pre-Winter Session (October–November 2026): Congress's strategy is to use Singh's clean chit in speeches and media campaigns to rebuild credibility, especially among urban middle-class voters positioning Singh as a symbol of honest governance. The BJP's strategy intensifies focus on Congress-era scandals as a whole, while

accusing Congress of selective memory. Stress continuity of corruption in bureaucracy regardless of leadership.

Winter Session (December 2026): Congress's narrative is to tie Singh's vindication to broader claims of investigative agencies being politically misused, echoing the "caged parrot" critique. BJP's narrative would be to defend agencies as functioning within their mandate and accuse Congress of undermining institutions.

Election Campaign Trail (Early 2027): Congress presents Singh's clean chit as symbolic of Congress's moral high ground, contrasting it with alleged bureaucratic corruption under the BJP. Use Singh's legacy to appeal to credibility-focused voters. The BJP shifts focus away from Singh, emphasizes the Modi government's achievements, and frames Congress as historically corrupt despite individual exoneration. The verdict gives Congress a window to reframe its legacy and challenge the BJP's corruption narrative, while the BJP will likely pivot to present-day governance achievements.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

SIR Legacy Papers: A Citizen's Silent Struggle

Editor,

A friend of mine (Mr Singh), a businessman by profession and a dedicated social activist was born and raised in Shillong. He has always been deeply involved in the welfare of the weaker sections of society. He shared

his sad story with me about the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process and his concerns about his citizenship. His case shows how a technical requirement in the SIR form can suddenly become a serious problem for an ordinary citizen. The concern grows when we consider that lakhs of electors may come under scrutiny for various technical reasons, as reported in the Shillong Times, "Meghalaya SIR: 651,644 electors under scrutiny" (ST August 12, 2026).

The crux of the matter is Singh's difficult childhood. His mother left Shillong due to family problems when he was only four years old. His father later married another woman in the 1970s. Unfortunately, Singh's father died in the late 1990s. Since then, for over twenty-seven years, Singh was never given his father's voter ID or related documents, despite repeated requests. He has therefore remained without access to important family documents connected to his father and parental lineage.

Now, while filling the SIR form, he is caught in a bind. He cannot provide his father's voter ID number as part of the required legacy details. He fears his application might be rejected. Worse, he worries that his eligibility to vote could be questioned in the future. Needless to say, in India, a voter ID is often used as important proof of identity and electoral status, though it is not conclusive proof of citizenship. Without his father's voter ID, Singh worries he may face bureaucratic hurdles in establishing the required legacy link. He may have difficulty completing official documentation or establish-

ing the family legacy records required under the process.

Meanwhile Mr. Pratap, the son of Nita's sister and Singh's next-door neighbour, had completed the recent SIR form on behalf of Singh's stepmother. Given the seriousness of the situation, Singh approached him and requested a screenshot of the completed form to keep as additional supporting evidence. Much to Singh's shock, Pratap refused outright and brushed him aside, saying dismissively, "Why do you need your stepmother's SIR form? I may have misplaced it." These words hurt Singh's self-respect. He was only trying to gather supporting documents connected to his father and family that could help establish his lineage and heritage.

This raises an important question: Could Singh's rightful place on the electoral roll be put at risk simply because an old family document containing the required identification details is unavailable?

This case is a reminder that democracy must remain inclusive. No citizen should be left out in the cold when it comes to providing legacy details and supporting documents, particularly genuine citizens. Above all, no third party, even blood relatives, should be allowed to become an "obstacle" when the issue of one's electoral rights and identity is at stake. (For privacy purposes, the original names have been changed.)

Yours etc,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

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"When we lose the right to be different, we lose the privilege to be free."
—Charles Evans Hughes

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TURA, MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2026

State of the Nation

THE Independence Day Address to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the ramparts of the Red Fort, the 13th in a series since he assumed power at the Centre, gave sufficient hints that he's winding down — a strange signal midway through his third innings in the PM's chair. His speech was long-winding, as is his wont; yet, it failed to inspire the masses, the largely herded crowd in front of him or those glued to their television screens from their homes. Modi's speeches now fail to inspire amid feelings that he's past his prime. The PM was not in his elements; he looked tired. He spoke of his achievements in the past 12 years — which by extension were the nation's gains. He had a long list of credit-worthy performances, signifying speedier progress to the nation on multiple fronts. However, these were claims repeated again and again through his terms and lacked verve or novelty. Nor do chants of a Viksit Bharat by year 2047 — when India turns a century of self-rule after a century of British-Raj — inspire many as the benefits of the nation's economic growth are concentrated in the hands of a few. The larger mass is struggling to make ends meet.

Modi's coinage of Dimagi Naxals, as against his previous rants of Urban Naxals — an allusion to the anti-establishment mindset among the educated and disgruntled segments of society — drew media attention. His target might as well have been the young crowds at Jantar Mantar and beyond that confronted him and extracted their pound of flesh in the form of a minister's resignation. Fact is, Modi has not recovered from the lighting hit he took from an unsuspecting set of urban youths right under his nose. But, no word of consolation came from him over the NEET fiasco other than a promise to introduce online coaching for future national-level tests. Nor did Modi refer to ugly scenarios like the loot from the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, where the Hindutva pride melted like ice in the face of an expose of huge misappropriation of donations that came to the temple hundi. The RSS, which used the Ram Temple as the leitmotif of its Hindutva agenda, is yet to recover from the shame it experienced from this wanton indulgence.

Selective silence, for Modi, is an art in itself. Instead, the PM rambled on his achievements, cited the poor performance of past governments, and made some hollow claims as well. His citations of Make in India, which failed to gain steam, and Khelo India, which made a negligible impact, failed to inspire. The manufacturing sector as a whole faces serious odds, also due to bureaucratic corruption and red tape that Modi failed to address. India continues to present a pitiable sight at the Olympics and Asian Games. The Independence Day speech failed to project a new vision for India. It was mostly silent on India's alienation at the global stage. Modi's speech largely ignored the farm sector as well.

The Politician, the Plaque and the Missing Brain Cell

By Khrawpyrkhat Khongier

Independence Day is almost here. Flags will fly, the anthem will play, children will stand in the sun, and politicians will deliver speeches about sacrifice, democracy and freedom. Everyone will go home feeling patriotic until somebody says or does something so confusing that even history quietly asks for a transfer. This is the strange beauty of Meghalaya politics: some can speak for an hour without saying anything, while others can say something in ten seconds that takes three days to understand.

Who can forget the episode of a road being named after Sanbor Shullai while he was still alive and serving as a legislator? Reports said the local dorbar decided the name as a mark of appreciation, so technically the politician did not simply name the road himself. Still, there is something wonderfully efficient about a living man inaugurating a road that already carries his name. Most people wait until they are dead to discover whether history thinks they deserve a memorial. Meghalaya apparently decided there was no reason to waste time. Why wait for posterity when you can have the photograph, ribbon and newspaper report by Tuesday?

The possibilities are endless. We could have Sanbor Shullai Road, Traffic Signal, Parking Area and Roundabout. The roundabout would be particularly appropriate because it represents politics beautifully: everybody keeps moving, but nobody is quite sure where they are going. We could even unveil a statue while the politician is alive and let him unveil it himself. At least the statue would never make a historical mistake.

And now Meghalaya has apparently moved from roads to waterfalls. In July 2026, a waterfall in West Jaintia Hills was named "Sniawbhalang Dhar Waterfalls" after Deputy Chief Minister Sniawbhalang Dhar, reportedly in recognition of his contribution to the area. Dhar was present at the programme and also laid the foundation stone for a tourism project.

This is magnificent progress. We began with roads and have now reached waterfalls. At this rate, Meghalaya's natural geography may soon require political clearance. Mountains should be nervous. Imagine the possibilities: Conrad Sangma Peak, Prestone Tynsong Viewpoint and the Home Minister's Bend. Soon tourists may stop asking, "Where is the waterfall?" and start asking, "Which minister?"

The naming enthusiasm is not confined to Meghalaya. In 2025, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma urged the Centre to name a road in New

Delhi after his late father, former Lok Sabha Speaker P. A. Sangma. There is nothing wrong with honouring people who have genuinely served the public. But when every achievement appears to require a nameplate, political culture begins to resemble a family album carved into stone. At this rate, Meghalaya may need a Department of Roads, Bridges, Waterfalls and Things We Have Named After Politicians.

The real problem is our fascination with political personality. A government project is no longer simply a government project; it needs a photograph, banner, chief guest, speech and plaque containing enough names to make future archaeologists believe they have discovered an ancient royal dynasty. A small development project suddenly acquires the atmosphere of a coronation; while the citizen who uses it becomes little more than an audience member.

Then there is history. If politicians want to discuss Meghalaya's past, surely the first rule should be: know who fought whom — and who lived when. Take for example P. T. Sawkmie's reported confusion between David Scott and Alexander the Great. This was not a tiny historical slip. David Scott was a British colonial administrator associated with British expansion into the Khasi Hills; Alexander the Great was the ancient Macedonian king who lived more than two thousand years earlier and conquered a vast empire. They belong to entirely different historical worlds. If politicians are going to speak about history, perhaps they could at least read the chapter first.

Perhaps we should sympathise with them. Their brains are already overloaded with party colleagues, opponents, constituencies, schemes, inaugurations, promises, television channels and, above all, which camera is pointing in their direction. Under such pressure, David Scott and Alexander the Great may occasionally collide in the memory department. It happens. But ordinary citizens can forget facts; people governing millions should check them before speaking into a microphone.

Then came another memorable Assembly episode when Adelbert Nongrum reportedly knelt to pray and read from the Bible during proceedings in 2020, while the Speaker asked him to stand and state what he wanted to say. There is nothing funny about prayer itself; the comedy lies in its collision with parliamentary procedure. One can imagine the Speaker saying, "Honour-

able Member, please stand," and the reply, "I am praying." The Speaker: "Yes, Honourable Member, but the Assembly Rules are also praying that we finish this sitting." At that point, the agenda could have been Question Hour, Zero Hour or Divine Intervention.

We have perfected the ceremony of governance. A road is inaugurated as though a new continent has been discovered, a government building opens as though Meghalaya has landed on Mars, and a small scheme receives a banner large enough to cover the building it is supposed to serve. Flowers, shawls, microphones and photographers appear, and for one glorious afternoon everyone behaves as though poverty, unemployment and bad roads have been defeated.

But a ribbon does not repair a road, a plaque does not fix a bridge, a speech does not create employment and a photograph does not educate a child. A plaque is wonderfully obedient: it never asks why the road has potholes, how much the project cost or where the money went. It simply displays important names while citizens negotiate the potholes below.

Perhaps no politician should get his name on a public project for twenty years. If the road still exists, the bridge still stands and people still remember the contribution, then we can discuss the plaque. Until then, let the politician remain anonymous. Imagine the horror: a public project without his photograph, a banner without his face and a road that simply says, "Built for the people." Some politicians might require medical attention.

The deeper tragedy is that Meghalaya is not short of intelligent people. We have teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, researchers, entrepreneurs, artists and young people competing successfully across India and the world. The problem is not that Meghalaya lacks intelligence; it is that intelligence does not always appear to be an entrance requirement for political leadership. Nobody expects politicians to be walking encyclopaedias, but surely they can read, admit when they do not know, consult experts and check their facts. Surely knowing the difference between Alexander the Great and David Scott should not require a PhD.

Public office is temporary. The chair belongs to the institution, the money belongs to the public, the road belongs to the citizens and the Assembly belongs to democracy. The politician is merely passing through. Yet

our political culture sometimes behaves as though the temporary occupant is the permanent owner.

This is where the joke becomes serious. We laugh when politicians get history wrong, turn inaugurations into personal victory parades or make plaques larger than projects. But when absurdity becomes routine, people stop expecting better. If we laugh at a politician's mistake today and vote for exactly the same behaviour tomorrow, the joke is no longer entirely on the politician. Part of it is on us.

So this Independence Day, let us declare independence from a few dangerous ideas. Election does not automatically make someone intelligent. Popularity does not equal competence. Loudness does not equal leadership. A ribbon is not development, a plaque is not history, a photograph is not an achievement and a waterfall is still a waterfall, even if someone has put a politician's name on it.

We should demand politicians who read before they speak, think before they promise, listen before they lecture and check their facts before they rewrite history. Imagine such a politician arriving at an inauguration, thanking the workers, checking whether the project works and leaving without demanding a giant photograph or personal plaque. The public would probably become suspicious: "Who is this man? Is he really a politician? Where is his banner?" Somebody might even suggest calling a doctor. That is how unusual humility has become.

But beneath the laughter lies the question that matters: what kind of Meghalaya are we building? One day every politician will leave. Their photographs will fade, banners will be thrown away, plaques will rust and speeches will disappear. The road, school and hospital will remain; so will the forests, rivers, hills and children. That is the real legacy — not the politician's name carved into stone, but what remains useful after the politician has disappeared.

After 79 years of independence, Meghalaya has enough politicians. What we need now is better thinking. Democracy gave them the microphone; it is still up to us to decide whether they deserve to keep it.

(The author is a school teacher residing in Pynursla, Meghalaya, with a keen interest in education, society, public affairs and the everyday political life of the state. His writing often uses humour and satire to examine issues of governance, public accountability and the relationship between political leadership and ordinary citizens.)

From Potholes to Proof: Can AI Make Shillong or Meghalaya's Roads Accountable?

By Shakeel Rafee Swer

A Bengaluru experiment offers Meghalaya a powerful idea: use AI not merely to detect potholes, but to connect every road defect to the relevant contract, contractor and responsible authority.

For motorists in Shillong, Meghalaya State or anywhere, a pothole is much more than an inconvenience. It can damage tyres and suspension, cause accidents, slow traffic and become particularly dangerous during the monsoon.

Recent developments have once again highlighted the problem. Recently, Meghalaya High Court had questioned the condition of NH-6 and summoned senior NHAI officials, with the court reportedly noting that potholes had reappeared despite repairs.

Earlier, the Meghalaya High Court had also questioned claims concerning completion of strengthening works on the Jowai-Ratacherra road after reports highlighted potholes and blocked drains.

The issue therefore goes beyond simply asking who will repair a pothole. The more important question is: who is contractually responsible for preventing or repairing it, and how quickly can that responsibility be established?

The Bengaluru idea — a technology enthusiast in Bengaluru has reportedly developed a system using a dashcam, GPS and an accelerometer to detect potholes while driving. AI-based computer vision classifies the potholes and records their precise locations.

The innovative part is what happens next.

The system reportedly searches thousands of government contracts to identify the relevant road package, tender and contractor, and then prepares a complaint containing the pothole photograph, location and contract information. One reported drive detected 12 potholes and generated 12 complaint records.

The principle is simple: **Detect → Locate → Identify Contract → Assign Responsibility → Report → Track Repair.**

What could this mean for Shillong? Imagine a vehicle travelling from Mawpat to Police Bazar with a dashboard camera and GPS.

The system detects a pothole, records its location and estimates its severity. It then determines:

- * Which road and department are responsible?
- * Which project or work package covers the location?
- * What is the tender or work-order number?
- * Who is the contractor?
- * What maintenance or defect-liability provisions apply?
- * Has the location been reported before?
- * Was it repaired, and has the defect returned?

A pothole would therefore become structured infrastructure data, rather than just another photograph on a complaint portal.

From complaints to accountability

A conventional complaint might say: "There is a large pothole near Upper Shillong. Please repair it."

A technology-assisted complaint could identify the exact location, photograph, road package, tender number, contractor and applicable maintenance responsibility.

It could also create a permanent record.

If the same pothole reappears after 15 days, it becomes a repeat defect. If hundreds of defects occur on one road, engineers can investigate whether the underlying problem is drainage, pavement quality, construction methodology or another cause.

This is particularly relevant to Meghalaya, where heavy rainfall, steep terrain, drainage problems and traffic place considerable stress on roads.

Building a Shillong Road Health Map

Meghalaya already has departments, road inventories, tender information and engineering personnel. The missing link is the digital connection between the physical road and the government contract responsible for it.

A pilot Shillong Road Health Map could classify roads as:

Green: Good condition;

Yellow: Minor defects; Orange: Moderate defects; Red: Major/dangerous defects; Black: Repeated or unresolved defects.

Officials could analyse defects by road, locality, department, contractor, project, severity and repair history.

The objective should not be another app asking citizens to upload photographs. It should be a Road Defect Intelligence System that can combine Drone, dashcam imagery, GPS, road-contract data and engineering verification.

More than potholes For Meghalaya, such a system could eventually detect:

Potholes and cracks; damaged shoulders and road edges; waterlogging; blocked drains; debris and landslide-related obstruction; damaged road furniture; and recurring pavement failures.

Combined with rainfall and maintenance information, this could eventually support predictive road maintenance, rather than waiting for citizens to report failures and put the reputation of the concerned public representative, Political Party or the ruling Government at stake.

A practical pilot The Government need not begin across the entire State.

A pilot covering 50-100 km of Shillong roads and major approaches could establish the model.

Drone surveys and vehicles could be equipped with cameras and GPS, while relevant road and contract information is digitised. Engineers could verify AI-generated defects through an IT enabled dashboard.

The system could then measure:

Defects detected → Verified → Assigned → Repaired → Repeat defects → Average response time.

After three or six months, the Government could publish a simple performance report:

Potholes detected: 4,820
Verified: 4,100
Assigned: 3,900
Repaired: 3,500
Repeat defects: 420
Average response time: XX days

Numbers like these would tell citizens far more than a statement saying that "road repairs are being undertaken."

AI cannot repair roads — but it can improve accountability. AI should not automatically blame a contractor. A pothole may result from poor construction, drainage failure, utility work, excessive loading or natural deterioration. Engineers must verify the cause and determine responsibility.

But technology can ensure that a defect is recorded, located, assigned, followed up and verified after repair.

That changes the model from:

See pothole → Complain → Wait → Patch → Pothole returns to:

Detect → Verify → Map → Link to contract → Assign responsibility → Repair → Verify → Monitor recurrence.

In the current scenario, where the State of Meghalaya and Central Government invests heavily in new highways and urban roads, this approach deserves serious consideration.

Shillong or Meghalaya does not need another photograph or video of a pothole.

It needs to know which road the pothole belongs to, which contract governs that road, who is responsible, when it was detected, when it was repaired — and why it came back.

Perhaps the most useful AI application on Shillong's roads will not be a self-driving car. It may simply be a camera that recognises a pothole and asks:

"Who is responsible for fixing this?"

(The author has extensive IT enabled Infrastructure experience working as a Professional Consultant in Assam PWD Roads World Bank Project, Government of Meghalaya Road and Building Infrastructure NDB funded Project and currently serving as a Team Leader, Digital Project Management Unit HAM II - 6000 Kms Road Project in the State of Maharashtra.)

Letters to the Editor

A Reflection on Independence Day

Editor,
India just celebrated its 80th Independence Day on Saturday, August 15, 2026. As someone who belongs to the Northeast, it is sometimes hard to fathom what India's freedom struggle really means. Growing up, Independence Day only meant empty streets and it was an opportunity for all the neighbourhood kids to play cricket or football freely and that feeling was what freedom meant to all of us. Most of us still feel left out of the national conversation, and the discrimination faced by North-easterners in mainland India makes us feel more distant from the rest of the country. It sometimes feels like there is a deep, irreversible chasm between us and the rest of India.

Yet it is undeniable that we are part and parcel of this great nation, and India's fight for independence stood as a testament to the fact that India's freedom struggle had great and selfless leaders who were willing to lay down their lives for the country without largely resorting to violence. When independence was achieved, our great leaders had the vision to stitch the country firmly together with affirmative action, justice, liberty, fundamental rights and fundamental duties.

India's freedom struggle was a glorious new chapter in the intriguing, timeless book called India. India, a land of unmatched diversity, is well on its way to reach greater heights. Nations belonging to the Global South are staking their claim to the economic and scientific throne, and if the Global South is a class of students, then India has consistently been one of its top-performing students.

It's high time for the people of the Northeast to shed the victimhood mentality, and in a reciprocal gesture the people of mainland India also need to shed any semblance of prejudice. We must all strive to contribute whatever we can to nation-building and take our country to the greater heights that it deserves. The intriguing, timeless book called India has now turned its pages to a new exciting chapter; it's the responsibility of each and every Indian, especially Gen Z and Generation Alpha, to make sure that this exciting chapter has a beautiful ending and is forever etched in our collective memories.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbanian,
Via email

Maternity leave a matter of discussion

Editor,
The Allahabad High

Court's decision denying maternity leave to a government employee for the birth of her fourth child raises a question that extends beyond the facts of an individual case: how should maternity protection be reconciled with service rules that restrict benefits according to family size?

The Supreme Court has reiterated that maternity leave is an integral component of women's reproductive rights and right to life and no institution can deny a woman employee her right to maternity leave benefits.

India was among the first countries to enact laws on maternity benefits that include not only financial security during a woman employee's time away from work but also ensure adequate rest and recovery time so that new mothers feel healthy enough to rejoin work and balance their professional obligations with motherhood.

The Maternity Benefit Act, formulated in 1961, entitled women employed in the formal sector to 12 weeks of paid leave. This was amended in 2017, increasing the duration of leave to 26 weeks for the first two childbirths. A 2025 study funded by the National Science Foundation of the United States of America found that since the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act was implemented in 2017, Indian women were

22% less likely to receive interview calls, underlining how pregnancy impacts their likelihood of being re-hired. Further, the Voice of Women Study 2024 showed that 7% of women experienced a career setback after returning from maternity leave. The situation is much worse in the Indian economy's informal sector, where women's participation is often high but enforcement of the rules is slack.

Hence the Allahabad High Court's decision raises a question that extends beyond the facts of an individual case: how should maternity protection be reconciled with service rules that restrict benefits according to family size? The court dismissed the petition of Shashi Kumari, whose request for six months' maternity leave had been rejected by the Block Education Officer in Sambhal. Her counsel argued that she had not taken maternity leave for her first three children and was seeking the benefit for the first time. The state maintained that the applicable rules did not permit maternity leave for a fourth child, and the court found no reason to interfere with the administrative decision.

The ruling may be defensible within the boundaries of the service regulations before the court, but it exposes a larger policy dilemma. Maternity leave is not merely an employment concession or financial incentive for having children.

Its fundamental purpose is to protect a woman's health during pregnancy and childbirth and enable her to care for a newborn during the crucial first months. The physical consequences of childbirth do not become less significant because a woman already has several children. When maternity protection is linked too rigidly to family size, the distinction between a welfare measure and an instrument of population policy becomes blurred.

Indian maternity law itself recognises differences based on the number of surviving children. The statutory framework provides 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for eligible women for the first two surviving children, while women with two or more surviving children are entitled to a shorter period of 12 weeks.

Government employees can additionally be governed by separate service regulations. This distinction shows that the law already attempts to balance maternity protection with broader policy considerations. But denying leave altogether presents a more difficult proposition, particularly when the employee claims not to have previously used the benefit.

There is also an important distinction between encouraging smaller families and protecting women after childbirth. Governments are entitled to

frame service conditions and pursue population-related objectives, provided these withstand constitutional scrutiny. Yet policies intended to influence reproductive choices should not inadvertently make women bear a disproportionate cost. Once a child is born, denying reasonable maternity protection affects not only the employee but also the newborn. Workplace rules should therefore recognise maternity as a question of health, dignity and childcare rather than treating leave exclusively as a reward available for a prescribed number of births.

The judgment consequently points to the need for governments to revisit maternity provisions in service rules rather than leaving every difficult case to litigation. A sensible framework can discourage repeated long periods of paid leave without eliminating maternity protection altogether. Reduced leave after a specified number of children, combined with medical safeguards and clearly defined exceptional circumstances, would provide a more balanced approach. Courts must interpret the rules placed before them, but governments write those rules.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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"Don't go through life, grow through life."

— Eric Butterworth

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Whither Women's Safety

THAT a young law intern had to call out sexual harassment by a senior advocate is reason enough to believe that women are unsafe in every profession. Earlier, women cricketers complained of a similar sexual aggression by their coaches but the matter remained unaddressed for a long time because those who commit such crimes are powerful people backed by their workplace peers. Violating the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, commonly known as the POSH Act is a crime and it gets worse when those who violate this Act are themselves members of the legal profession who are supposed to defend the victims of sexual harassment. The Act is premised upon the Supreme Court's 1997 Vishaka Guidelines to ensure safe, harassment-free work environments. Criminal law provisions also penalize sexual harassment offenses. Unfortunately, many women who suffer sexual harassment at the workplace especially in informal work spaces choose silence for fear of losing their jobs. Most women are still unaware that a State Commission for Women exists to guide them on the steps they should take to stop the offence and punish the offender.

In the case of the young woman intern lawyer, the situation is even more intimidating because the alleged offender is a senior advocate who could queer the pitch for her in her legal career. Thankfully the case is now in the High Court and will be dealt with in accordance with the law. In such cases the Advocate General has to answer on behalf of the state as to whether adequate safety nets are provided for women advocates and internees so that they feel safe to complain against their male peers, juniors or seniors regarding unwanted sexual advances. The Advocate General admitted in Court that the legal profession has perhaps failed somewhere to adequately protect its female colleagues from unwanted sexual advances. For stating this, he has been at the receiving end of the ire of his colleagues in the legal profession. They have sought his debarment from the post of Advocate General and also expelled his membership from the Shillong Bar Association and High Court Bar Association. Meanwhile the Supreme Court Bar Association has expressed concern at the actions of the two Bar Associations, calling them unwarranted.

The questions that arise here is why are the Bar Associations defensive about the fact stated by the Advocate General that somewhere the profession has failed to provide a safe space for women. The fact that many women advocates, have in the past, suffered silently and were unable to raise the banner of protest because they are a minority should not deter the younger women advocates from speaking out against all forms of misogynistic behaviour. Time has come for young women to break free of patriarchal bondage and raise their voices against all forms of sexual harassment at the workplace and beyond it. For too long it has been taken as an accepted practice for men to touch women inappropriately and for women to take it in their stride. This has to end here and now.

Letters to the Editor

MMDR Amendment Bill, 2026: A Concern for Meghalaya

Editor,
The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026, which was passed by both Houses of Parliament on August 13, 2026 raises serious concerns for Meghalaya because of its mineral wealth, particularly its uranium deposits and the special constitutional position of the State under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

Meghalaya is a mineral rich state. As per data available in the Government of Meghalaya web portal the State has an estimated coal reserve of about 640 million tonnes and inferred limestone resources of about 5,000 million tonnes. Meghalaya also has significant deposits of uranium. Recent reports estimate that the State has between 9,500 and more than 20,000 tonnes of high-grade uranium deposits, accounting for around 11% to 16% of India's reserves. The Atomic Minerals Directorate describes Domiasiat as the country's largest and richest sandstone-type uranium deposit (Source: Times of India - Meghalaya clears draft resolution opposing uranium).

The concern is not simply about mining. It is about who will have the authority to regulate mineral bearing land and who will have the power to collect taxes, cess and other levies connected with minerals. This becomes particularly important in

Meghalaya because land is largely connected with individual, clan and community ownership systems, while large areas of the State fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

The Amendment Bill proposes important changes to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957. One of the major concerns is the proposed treatment of "mineral-bearing lands". The amendment seeks to bring such lands within a stronger framework of Union regulation. This raises questions for Meghalaya because land in the State cannot be viewed only as an economic resource. Land is closely connected with traditional institutions, customary practices, community interests and the constitutional powers of the Autonomous District Councils.

Another important provision is the proposed Section 9D of the MMDR Act. Under this provision a State Government would not be permitted to impose specified taxes, cess or other levies on mineral rights or mineral bearing land on the basis of the quantum of minerals, their value, royalty payable or otherwise, except in accordance with conditions or restrictions prescribed by the Central Government.

This provision creates an important question about the future of Meghalaya's financial and administrative powers over minerals. The Central Government has explained that the purpose of the amendment is to create greater uniformity in mineral taxation and to restrict State governments from imposing any new taxes on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands without conditions/restrictions prescribed by the Central government (Source:

In the middle of a cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a short break to exhort his ministers to take to Instagram. He urged them to make videos and reels for Instagram! The previous night, Modi had himself turned to Instagram with selfie-style videos to win over young voters following Gen-Z protests in Jantar Mantar. He cited his own initiative to spur cabinet colleagues into making reels to win over voters in the 15-25 age bracket.

Did such a discussion ever take place before in the central government's cabinet since India gained independence? Certainly, not. Someone can say for the sake of argument that as Instagram is itself new, it couldn't have become a topic of discussion earlier. But the fact is that Instagram is now in its 16th year. But Modi, who is in power for 12 years, did not cajole cabinet colleagues earlier to harness the power of Instagram. Never before did he urge ministers to be active on platforms popular with the young. So, the burning question is: what suddenly forced the 75-plus Modi to extol the virtues of Instagram in a cabinet meeting on July 24?

It would be wrong to assume that it was the Cockerham Janata Party's unprecedented and relentless mobilisation of youth power last month - forcing Modi to sack one of his favourite cabinet ministers, Dharmendra Pradhan - which made the PM preach Instagram to the cabinet. We need to rewind to the April-May Tamil Nadu assembly elections - long before the BJP's birth in June - when film star-turned politician C. J. Joseph Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam dramatically rode to power in the key southern state solely on the strength of social media, leaving established regional parties like the DMK and AIADMK miles behind.

Chief Minister Vijay-led TVK has written its name in golden letters in the annals of Indian elections by defying and demolishing all notions and theories about polls and polling. It entered the poll fray sans an organisational

Press Information Bureau - MMDR Amendment Bill, 2026).

However, from Meghalaya's perspective, another question needs to be asked: how will these provisions operate in areas protected by the Sixth Schedule?

The Bill does not specifically provide a separate exemption for Sixth Schedule areas. This is an important point because the Sixth Schedule was created to protect the distinct social, customary, administrative and land-related interests of tribal.

The Autonomous District Councils in Meghalaya have important constitutional responsibilities relating to local administration, customary laws, land and traditional institutions. Paragraph 9 of the Sixth schedule to the Constitution contains provisions concerning mineral licences granted by the Government of the State in respect of any area within an autonomous district as may be agreed upon between the Government of the State and the District Council of such district shall be made over to that District Council. Therefore, mineral resources in the state are not simply a matter between the State Government and mining companies. They are also connected with the rights and financial interests of Autonomous District Councils.

The MMDR Amendment Bill, 2026 may have been introduced with the objective of creating uniformity in mineral taxation and strengthening regulation. But uniformity across India does not always mean that every State has the same constitutional circumstances.

Meghalaya is different because of its Sixth Schedule status; its customary

chart and party offices; it didn't even do the caste arithmetic or properly spell out its ideals. It banked very heavily on social media, especially Instagram. And of course Gen-Z which wanted an overall change and transformation. The youth wanted Vijay to rise above the prototype DMK versus AIADMK narrative and pave a brand new political path. Their burning desire for change and an alternative swept the TVK to victory powered by the youth and social media.

After Tamil Nadu, the longing for change once again drove young men and women to assemble in Delhi's Jantar Mantar. The youth who assembled in Jantar Mantar didn't want a change of government. They simply wanted politics to change for the better. Politics which would give hope to the people instead of despair. They wanted to bury that brand of politics which projected a single leader as indispensable for India's security and stability. They wanted a brand of politics wherein leaders would be accountable and held responsible for governance failures.

Post Pradhan's ouster, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party had to pay a very heavy price in Bihar's Bankipore assembly constituency because of the youth's new-found taste for change. For the first time in BJP's history, it lost a by-election in the party president's home turf.

Instagram made its advent in India 16 years ago. And coincidentally, BJP President Nitin Nabin too has represented Bankipore for 16 years! During last year's assembly elections, he won the Bankipore seat handsomely enough by 50,000 votes. His subsequent elevation to the Rajya Sabha necessitated a by-election which was naturally expected to be a cakewalk for the BJP, especially because its last elected representative had become the BJP president - a powerful post embodying winnability and invincibility as it was once held by none other than Amit Shah!

Bankipore and three other

land-holding system the role of Autonomous District Councils and the long standing concerns of its people regarding mineral exploitation. The mineral wealth beneath the ground in other states may belong to the nation in the larger constitutional framework but in Meghalaya the mineral and land above it belongs to people, clans and communities whose relationship with the land existed long before the present system of mineral regulation.

That is why the MMDR Amendment Bill, 2026 is not merely a question of mining policy for Meghalaya. It is also a question of land, revenue, constitutional protection and the future relationship between the Union, the State, the Autonomous District Councils and the people of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Kenneth Nongsiej,
Via email

Counterpoint to Heinous Proclamation by Meghalaya BJP Youth Wing Prez for Delhi Protestor to be Shot

Editor,
This proclamation is a horrendously violent declaration in its guise as a monstrous, illegal, and cowardly call to mass murder that completely destroys any claim to authority, order, or justice in a civilised society. Shameful at the very least, abominable beyond all tenets

of humane principles. Evil takes place when the good do nothing, not when the evil blast forth prescriptions for mass murder.

Labelling peaceful civil rights protesters as targets for execution exposes a bankrupt ideology that relies on terror because it cannot survive debate, and history proves that such murderous tyrants ultimately face total defeat and condemnation.

Peaceful protest is a protected human right, while murdering unarmed citizens is a severe crime under national and international law. Threatening mass murder against people using their voices reveals deep fear of truth, justice, and human equality. A leader who orders the slaughter of citizens acts as a criminal gang boss, not a legitimate authority. Past regimes that used firing squads against civil rights advocates collapsed in total ruin and shame.

Peaceful movements outlive violent oppressors because moral truth is stronger than bullets.

I respectfully advise this misguided "leader" to reconsider the precepts of humanity for his word smack not of humankind in action; but of human-cruel with despotic prescriptions.

Yours etc
Dilip Mukerjee
Via email

There is no denying that the youth had a major role to play also in the BJP's and Modi's rise to power. Modi had won them over, or rather floored them, by promising achey din. Although he didn't keep his word, he somehow succeeded in the intervening years to turn the BJP into a party of middle-

aged orthodox Hindu status quoists. This constituency has been systematically brainwashed into believing that without Modi at the helm jihadis will take over India with Pakistan's help. More-over, inimical external forces would pump in funds to create political and economic instability which will, in turn, send the Sensex crashing -- triggering a financial crisis which would reduce Hindus to beggars in their own country.

But today's youth, unlike their fathers and uncles, doesn't have unquestioning faith in BJP. Neither do the young men and women idolize Modi as the saviour of Hindus which is all too evident from how they ridiculed and insulted him during the Jantar Mantar demonstrations. But they can't be won over simply by taking to Instagram and making reels as Modi seems to be thinking. If it was so simple, they would have been flooded by the BJP leadership's decision to make 45 years old Nabin party president. Gen-Z would be equally unimpressed if Modi-Shah inducted young ministers to run the government. Let's not forget that the youth shouting slogans against Modi in Jantar Mantar were from Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar - the Hindi-speaking "cow belt" prized by the BJP as its pocket borough. Bankipore and Jantar Mantar protests showcase the cracks in the saffron vote bank.

In Bankipore, only a measly 35 percent of the electorate turned up to exercise their franchise. What on earth happened to Shah's famed poll-winning machinery and flawless booth management which ensured that loyalists and faithful religiously cast their votes? What went wrong with Hindutva's Whatsapp-Facebook operations run by Amit Malviya? In such a bleak scenario, I wonder how reels and videos which Modi is so passionately advocating, help stop the ground from slipping under the right wing's feet.

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

Yours etc
Dilip Mukerjee
Via email

Fast Food Puts Health at Stake

Editor,
Over the years, the food habits of Indians, especially children have changed completely. People are now averse to eating home-

cooked or traditional food. They have an inclination to have packaged food or food from roadside fast food eateries. Little do they care about whether or not what they eat is nutritious or whether its harmful to their health. According to the estimate of World Obesity Federation, by 2040, twenty million children in India will live with obesity. In the midst of people's reluctance to follow dietary life style and alarming rise in the case of life style diseases, the Supreme Court has criticised the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) for not introducing front-of-pack warning labels on packaged food products indicating sugar, salt and saturated fat levels.

Regular and high intake of these foods causes diseases in people and it leads to serious health problems. Clear and noticeable warning labels or colour-coded markers on the packets will help people choose the right kind of food. Countries such as Chile, Mexico, Peru, Israel, Argentina and others give stop signs or warning labels on food packets. India must take a leaf out of these countries' book before it is too late. Manufacturers often mislead and confuse people by giving fake information. Progress of a country mainly depends on healthy people. Hence the government must take measures to ensure that what people eat is good for them.

Yours etc,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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A Case of misdirected aggression & misplaced sympathies

By Arjun Sheoran

In what can only be described as a witch-hunt, driven as much by misogyny as by prejudice against an "outsider," the High Court of Meghalaya Bar Association and the Shillong Bar Association have turned on the Advocate General of the State, targeting him personally for taking a stand on the safety of the Bar's young women members. His offence, if it can be called one: attempting to make the High Court a more inclusive and egalitarian space, one that looks beyond gender, caste, and class.

It all began when a young law student, interning with an old hand at the Bar, accused him of harassing her inside his chamber and then attempting to buy her silence with Rs. 500. Intimidated by the accused advocate's profession and stature, and the advice of those around her to remain silent, the intern turned to her brother, who in turn approached an NGO to help her register an FIR.

While the two Bar Associations found no urgency to act upon the intern's complaint of sexual harassment within the precincts of the highest court in the state, they found plenty, however, when it came to defending the accused; branding the very group that took him to the police station and ensured the survivor's complaint was registered as a "mob" whose conduct had violated his rights.

When the High Court of Meghalaya sought the State's response to the incident, the Advocate General was the first to commit to both a fair investigation of both matters and ensuring that the investigation would proceed at a steady pace; and worked actively to ensure that every violator of rights was brought to justice. That, it now appears, was his real folly. The Bar Associations it seems, were concerned chiefly with protecting one of their own, the strong and powerful, rather than the young and naïve. Having apprised the Court of the action taken by the State Police against the "mob," the Advocate General went on to fairly state that, "the Bar, myself included, has failed to protect its female members." However, the Senior Advocate appearing for the Bar Associations, took strong exception to the said remark and what soon unfolded was a smear campaign against the Advocate General and anyone who attempted to support him.

What followed was a sustained campaign of harassment, isolation, and bullying of the young women advocates who had supported the Advocate General's statement, carried out, tellingly, by the Bar Associations' own esteemed office-bearers. Advocates who backed the "outsider" AG and spoke out against the sexism entrenched in the local Bar found themselves singled out, interrogated, and personally targeted. One woman advocate, who had submitted a list of recommendations on behalf of a group of female Bar members, was all but gheraoed outside the courtroom; she and the Advocate General were both pressed to name the other advocates who had been victims of sexual harassment, in complete disregard of those victims' privacy and safety. One wonders whether the Bar Associations would be quite so willing to condemn mob action if the mob in question were drawn from among their own.

It is worth noting that this same proactiveness was nowhere to be found when a similar complaint of harassment was raised against the same individual on an earlier occasion, by a different young woman. One can only wonder what treatment would have been meted out to the other victims had their names been revealed or maybe this is why they never came out with any formal complaints and only confided in their contemporaries and seniors who offered a safe space. Perhaps the Bar Associations' stand was predictable.

What, in truth, did the Advocate General, the State's highest law officer, stand to gain by "castigating" the Bar Associations, as they now claim he did? This is how the Associations have chosen to repay a man who gave up a roaring practice in Delhi, lived away from his family and friends, and worked consistently and tirelessly for the betterment of the State and its Bar. History shall be kinder to you, Mr. Advocate General.

(The writer is an advocate practising in the Supreme Court of India and in courts across India. He is a graduate of NLSIU Bangalore. He is the former National Organising Secretary of People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCIL).)

What focus do the said Bar Association then have in claiming that their reputation was tarnished when they have once already failed to acknowledge the ordeal of a female advocate and have still not acknowledged the second survivor of sexual harassment at the hands of the same man that they continue to rally behind. Perhaps it would be wise for the said Bar Associations to open their eyes to the fact that failure to prevent occurrence of even one instance is a FAILURE nevertheless. Do the said Bar Associations expect to be applauded for their misogynistic stand of failing to even acknowledge the assault on the young student while taking no time in closing ranks around one of their own. Do the Bar Associations expect to be commended for their attempt to portray it as a single, contained incident and continue to bury the concerns of the female members? Should the Bar Associations not have considered the occurrence of one instance sufficient to proactively take up the issue of women's safety? One is then forced to ask the question: how many instances are enough for the Bar Associations to take up the issue of female advocates' safety or will the said Bar Associations continue to bury their heads like an ostrich, in perpetuity?

The sequence of events that unfolded over the next couple of days have only worsened the situation. On the very day of the hearing before the Chief Justice's Court, the two Bar Associations called an extraordinary general body meeting for 05.08.2026. At that meeting, held in the Advocate General's absence, a resolution was passed expelling him from both Associations, in apparent disregard of the 150-year-old principle that an advocate enjoys absolute immunity for statements made before a court in the course of proceedings. What is even more concerning is that the said resolution was passed by a show of hands where no hands raised, but the signatures of the attendees on the attendance sheet, irrespective of their agreement or disagreement with the decision, were counted in support of the resolution.

That the two-time accused advocate was merely suspended, while the Advocate General who had simply raised the issue of women's safety at the workplace was expelled without so much as an opportunity to defend himself, ought to give anyone pause. In disregarding the most elementary principles of natural justice and charging ahead like an unruly horse, the Bar Associations invite an obvious question: is the true intent to distract from the issue of women's safety or to perhaps settle personal scores or maybe to ensure that the skeletons in their closets remain hidden as they have been and to trample on the voice raised by a young law intern, and ensure that the same does not snowball into another #MeToo Movement. At this point, "protecting the Bar Associations' reputation" looks like a thin explanation for an institution that has failed its women members, thickened the glass ceiling, and raised the barriers to entry into what remains, in effect, an old boys' club.

What, in truth, did the Advocate General, the State's highest law officer, stand to gain by "castigating" the Bar Associations, as they now claim he did? This is how the Associations have chosen to repay a man who gave up a roaring practice in Delhi, lived away from his family and friends, and worked consistently and tirelessly for the betterment of the State and its Bar. History shall be kinder to you, Mr. Advocate General.

(The writer is an advocate practising in the Supreme Court of India and in courts across India. He is a graduate of NLSIU Bangalore. He is the former National Organising Secretary of People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCIL).)

Subversion of systems

SYSTEMS, obviously, are falling apart. The dust is yet to settle on the NEET questions leak fiasco of epic proportions, leading to mass mobilization in the national capital seeking the education minister's scalp and much embarrassment to the Narendra Modi-led NDA government. Close on its heels, now comes another embarrassment to the establishment in the name of bloomers in the University Grants Commission's National Eligibility Test (NET) examinations for admissions/ postings to universities across the nation. There's egg, again, on the face of the National Testing Agency (NTA), which drew much flak for the NEET mismanagement. Now, the Agency has come up with a statement that it would conduct a re-examination for English, Commerce and Sociology subjects, as a panel has cited several factual, typographical and translation errors — and more — in the question papers, "which also repeated portions from previous examinations." Note the fact that the UPSC's preliminary exams conducted in May also ended up in a row over question paper leak. Shamelessness of the establishment knows no bounds. The entire systems in the country are getting subverted; the mismanagement of major national-level tests being only the tip of the iceberg, and are getting instantly noticed.

The Emperor, they say, is without clothes. The subversion of the systems is a slow and steady process. This has been going on for the last many years, and not specific to the 12 years of the Modi-led NDA government. Every system is getting hugely corrupted thanks to the footloose indulgences of a growing breed of uncouth politicians occupying top positions of power. Incompetence and greed mark their conduct. They lack the will, disposition, and grooming to run the affairs of a nation or a state. The UPA's two consecutive terms in power ended in an expose of huge scams — the 2G Spectrum, the CWG and Coal scams that numbed the conscience of the nation. The disquiet of the people was taken advantage of by the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who ousted the UPA and grabbed power in 2014. While Modi's government concentrated its attention principally on infrastructure development and minimum welfare outreach to silence the masses, it is by now clear that the ineptness of this dispensation has taken the situation from bad to worse. Modi projected an image of a super hero in politics as he charmed the ordinary masses with his stage performances. Behind these dramas, things began falling apart with a new frenzy.

Modi neither showed the courage to discipline the systems nor did he field a set of competent hands to handle various ministries. For instance, the railway ministry lost an annual budget of its own, which had been the norm for long. Instead, Modi merged figures with the annual Union Budget. The ministry also lost a full-time minister. The ill-effects on the ground are deadly. Several ministries are having faceless figures heading them. Dharmendra Pradhan, who was forced to resign following the NEET protests, had no special entitlement to handle Education. That some 23 million aspiring youths appearing for a national test were badly let down was no small matter. So with the fiascos related to the NET exam. This is no governance. It is mis-governance on a grand scale.

Letters to the Editor

Solidarity Beyond Borders: A Lesson in Governance

Editor,
The recent successful tracing of Mr Kwis Sum-er highlights a vital lesson in governance: human lives matter more than state boundaries. The efficient collaboration between the Meghalaya Government and the Karnataka Police deserves immense praise.

By working hand-in-hand with civil society groups and community networks, our institutions proved that the safety of a citizen is non-negotiable. This case sets an inspiring example of what can be achieved when leadership prioritises real service over public spectacle.

As a quiet witness to this entire operation, I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who silently worked to bring hope to the family.

Yours etc.,
Morning Star Sum-er,
Via email

How safe are Meghalaya's hotels/homestays/ guest houses

Editor,
It is deeply saddening to read the news item, "Five Meghalayans on pilgrimage killed in WB temple town fire." (ST Aug 18, 2026) The news of five residents of Dalu in West Garo Hills, in-

cluding two young children, losing their lives in the tragic hotel fire at Tarapith in Birbhum district of West Bengal is heartbreaking. They had gone on a pilgrimage with faith and devotion, little knowing that the journey would end in such a terrible tragedy.

However, apart from the immediate cause of the fire, there is a larger issue which, in my opinion, needs serious attention—not only in West Bengal but also here in Meghalaya.

As reported in the newspaper, the emergency exit of the hotel was found closed and the fire alarm was reportedly not functioning. A short circuit is suspected to have caused the fire. The authorities have now initiated an investigation to ascertain whether the hotel had complied with the prescribed safety measures.

While that is necessary the question that naturally arises is: why are we checking safety compliance only after precious lives are lost?

As of now, the investigation may establish whether the hotel had followed the required norms or not. But what about the system of regular inspection before such an incident takes place? If a hotel is supposed to have an emergency exit, who ensures that the exit remains open and usable at all times? If a fire alarm is mandatory, who checks periodically whether it is actually working? If electrical wiring is a potential source of fire, how often is it inspected?

These are not merely technical questions. They are questions concerning

The Jaintia Hills is a gently rolling landscape of forested hills and river valleys that slopes southwards towards Bangladesh, with a small portion extending northwards into Assam. It lies on the eastern portion of the Shillong Plateau, an upthrust formed by the collision of the Indian and Asian tectonic plates, making the area geologically unique.

It lies between 25°02' and 25°45' N latitude and 91°59' and 92°50' E longitude. It is bounded by Assam to the east and north, the East Khasi Hills District to the west, and Bangladesh to the south. The region covers an area of 3,819 square kilometres.

According to the 2011 Census, the Jaintia Hills had a population of 395,124, with a female to male ratio of 1,013:1,000, compared with the all India ratio of 940:1,000 and the Meghalaya state ratio of 989:1,000. Tribal communities comprise 95.2% of the population. The literacy rate is 65% among females and 58% among males. Most of the population lives in rural areas, with Jowai and Khliehriat being the two largest towns.

The district economy is largely agrarian, with rural-based agriculture contributing significantly to the state's economy. Income and employment depend largely on agriculture, much of which is subsistence farming. Coal and limestone mining, along with sand and stone quarrying, are also important economic activities in parts of the Jaintia Hills. Limestone and boulders are extracted for export to Bangladesh, while limestone mining by more than ten cement plants is another major activity in the twin districts.

Ethnic and Linguistic Identity

The word Jaintia is an exogenous name that generally refers to the geographical area, but it is also used to denote the different tribes living in the two districts, including both Austroasiatic Mon Khmer speaking and non Mon Khmer speaking communities, as well as both matrilineal and non matrilineal populations.

The indigenous communities living in the Jaintia Hills can be broadly distinguished according to the topography of the areas they inhabit. Those living in the highlands are known as Pnar, while those living on the southern slopes are known as War.

The Jaintia Plateau

In West Jaintia Hills, the majority of the population is Pnar who live in the elekas of Nangbah, Jowai, Nonggingi, Shangpung, Nartiang, Maskut, Raliang and Labang Nongphyllut. The Pnar living in the uplands have a tradition of wetland cultivation, as

human lives.

In the eventuality of a fire, every second counts. Thick smoke can fill a building within minutes. People may panic, particularly when they are asleep and have no idea what is happening. In such a situation, a closed emergency exit can turn an otherwise survivable incident into a major tragedy. As a matter of fact, an emergency exit that remains locked or inaccessible is no emergency exit at all.

The Tarapith incident should therefore serve as a wake-up call for us in Meghalaya, too. We have several hotels, lodges, guest houses and homestays, particularly in Shillong, Tura, Sohra, Jowai and other places frequented by tourists and visitors. Many of these establishments accommodate people who may not be familiar with the building or its exits.

Do we know if all such establishments are regularly inspected? Are their emergency exits actually functional? Are their fire alarms and extinguishers in working condition? Do we know if the electrical wiring is periodically checked? And, most importantly, do the hotel staff themselves know what they are supposed to do if a fire breaks out in the middle of the night?

These questions deserve an honest answer.

There is another aspect which Meghalaya cannot afford to overlook. Our State is highly vulnerable to earthquakes and falls under Seismic Zone V, the highest seismic-risk category in India. Therefore, when we

revealed through their stories, traditions and festivals. Today, the major farming activities of the highlanders are rice and vegetable cultivation, along with some rearing of domestic animals.

Apart from the Pnar, there are also many villages with predominantly Khasi populations whose inhabitants migrated from Mawshai, the Smit and Mawkyntew areas. These Khasi communities live in villages across the Myngkhen or Umkhen River, including Sohphoh, Nonglatem, Nongrim Bamthong, Bamkamar, Thadmynti, and others. The people in these villages practise rice cultivation, but vegetable farming is their major livelihood activity. Their Khasi descent is evident from their clan names, yet because they live in the Jaintia Hills, they are often referred to as 'ki nong Jaintia' by their kiths and kin in East Khasi Hills.

In the East Jaintia Hills

East Jaintia Hills district was created in 2012 by dividing the erstwhile Jaintia hills into two districts. The Pnar population in this district can generally be divided according to the elekas in which they live, including Sutnga, Rymbai Narpuh, and Nongkhlieh and the Biate lives in the Saipung sadarship. The jurisdiction of the Daloi of Jowai also extends to Tuber, which is part of East Jaintia Hills, up to Lad Rymbai. The slopes bordering Assam and, to some extent, Bangladesh are occupied by the War Jaintia people. These include villages such as Ratacherra, Kuliang, Umkiang, Lejri and Dona, among others.

The War Jaintia Area and the Amwi Dialect

The entire area known as War Jaintia is administratively classified as the Amlam-er subdivision. Traditionally, however, it falls under five daloships: Nongtalang, Satpator, Darang, Amwi-Sohmynting and Jowai. The Amwi-Sohmynting daloship appears to be a more recent arrangement in which villages in War Jaintia, such as Thangbuli, Jaraifi, Umladkhur and Skhentlang, have been grouped with Pnar speaking villages extending from Skhenpyrsit and Mupyt to Sohmynting. These villages not only speak different dialects but also have varying farming practices, customs and traditions.

The case of Padu and the Raid Pamchadong areas is, however, unique. Despite differences in language, customs and traditional practices, these villages were included under the Eleka Jowai. There is an oral narrative explaining how these villages became

talk about safety in hotels and other public accommodation facilities, we should not restrict our attention to fire safety alone.

An earthquake can occur without warning. In such an eventuality, guests may rush towards exits in panic. Staircases may become crowded, electrical systems may fail, glass panels may break, heavy objects may fall and, in a poorly maintained building, structural damage may create an additional danger.

Therefore, hotel safety inspections in Meghalaya should ideally cover both fire safety and earthquake preparedness. There should be clearly marked and unobstructed escape routes. Emergency doors should be capable of being opened immediately from inside. Staircases should never be used as storage spaces. Emergency lighting should be available in the event of a power failure. Fire extinguishers and alarms should be checked regularly. Staff should be trained to guide guests calmly towards safe exits.

Above all, in earthquake-prone Meghalaya, attention should also be given to the structural condition of buildings. Heavy water tanks, signboards, glass fittings, electrical equipment, false ceilings and other fixtures should be properly secured wherever necessary so that they do not become additional hazards during an earthquake.

Regular mock drills could also make a significant difference. A person who has never been told where to go during an emergency is likely

part of Eleka Jowai, but that story will be left for another article.

The War people living on the southern slopes of the district bordering Bangladesh speak the War Amwi dialect and follow the broader Hymniew Trep culture. Although there are slight variations among the dialects spoken in areas such as Satpator, Nongtalang, Padu Nongbareh, Khonglah, Sohkhia and Lamin, they originate from War Amwi. The people generally prefer to refer to the common language they speak as War or War Jaintia.

War Amwi is an Austroasiatic language spoken by about 16,000 people in Bangladesh and approximately 43,844 people in about 90 villages in the East and West Jaintia Hills, according to the 2011 Census. It may also be noted that, except in a few villages, War Jaintia serves as the lingua franca among the Khasi Jaintia diaspora living in Bangladesh, Assam and even Tripura.

According to Ka Histori Ka Thoh Ka Tar by R.S. Lyngdoh, the War Amwi dialect, also known as Tlangwai or Tlangwae and spoken by the people of three villages Thangbuli, Um/Amladkhur and Jaraifi, is considered the origin of the Austroasiatic Mon Khmer group of languages spoken in the Khasi and Jaintia areas, commonly known as Khasi. The term Amwi or Amwai is believed to have originated from the river that the Pnar call Thlu-muvi. Amwi or Amwai is also believed to be a deity connected with the Tariang clan.

Non War Jaintia Speaking Population

In the War Jaintia area, apart from speakers of War Amwi, the villages of Duki or Dawki, Darang, Shnongpdeng, Lymba and Kong-wang speak a War Khasi or Pynursla dialect. War Jaintia and War Khasi are distinct dialects. For example, I am conversant in War Jaintia but find it difficult to follow the War Khasi dialect.

In the War Jaintia area, there are two villages, Amtapoh and Amlanai, whose populations are predominantly Khasi. Their inhabitants are Khasi people who migrated from the Mawkyntew area of the East Khasi Hills yet they are called ki nong Jaintia.

Another unique village in the Satpator area is Amlari, which, despite being surrounded by people of War Jaintia descent, has a population of Pnar of Sutnga descent. Its story is unique and connected with the famous oral narrative of Ki Sutnga Dait Khla, a story for another article.

to panic. But a person who is trained and has participated in a mock drill is more likely to respond sensibly.

In fact, safety certificates and inspections should never become a mere exercise in paperwork. Their real purpose is to ensure that people can sleep peacefully in a hotel without having to worry about whether the emergency exit will open if something goes wrong.

The concerned authorities in Meghalaya may therefore consider conducting a fresh and comprehensive safety audit of hotels, lodges, guest houses and other accommodation facilities across the State. Such an exercise should not be undertaken merely as a reaction to the Tarapith tragedy and forgotten after a few weeks. There should be a system of periodic inspection and accountability.

The tragedy at Tarapith has already taken away five precious lives from Meghalaya. Nothing can bring them back. But if their deaths make us examine our own safety arrangements and prevent even one such tragedy in Meghalaya, their loss would at least leave behind an important lesson for society.

The best time to inspect an emergency exit is not after a fire. The best time is before one occurs.

I sincerely hope the authorities concerned will treat this tragedy not merely as an incident that occurred in another State, but as a warning for all of us.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Along the Indo Bangladesh border, there is a village the population of which is predominantly Karbi. Bhoi is an exonym used by the Pnar for their Karbi neighbours, and the village itself is called Hawai Bhoi. Along this border, there are also communities known as Patros/pathor, perhaps belonging to tea tribes or Scheduled Castes.

Until a few decades ago, the War people were predominantly jhum cultivators, with orange orchards in some places. Today, areca nut and betel leaf cultivation are among the most popular farming activities among people living on the slopes. More recently, broomstick cultivation has rapidly become a major cash crop throughout the Jaintia Hills.

Other Tribes of the Jaintia Hills

There are also non Mon Khmer speaking groups in the Jaintia Hills who follow a patrilineal family system. These include the Biates in the Saipung area, the Hmar in the Khaddum area and the Khelma Sakachep of Saitsama. These tribes, particularly the Biates and the Saitsama community, are commonly known as Hadem by the Pnar.

Jaintia: One Name, Many Communities

The Jaintia Hills is inhabited by both Austroasiatic Mon Khmer speakers who follow a matrilineal culture and non Mon Khmer speaking communities that follow a patrilineal family system. Hence, "Jaintia" is the only all-encompassing name for all these communities, including the Khasis living in the West Jaintia Hills District.

The term Jaintia is used when referring collectively to all the tribes living in the area. Without going into the history and other details, Jaintia is therefore an all-inclusive name for the different tribes inhabiting the Jaintia Hills.

The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950

Legally, the constitutional recognition of Scheduled Tribes in the country came through the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. The Gazette of India, issued by the Ministry of Law New Delhi on 6 September 1950, recognised the following tribes in Part I of the Assam Autonomous Districts: Dimas (Kachari), Garo, Hajong, Khasi and Jaintia, Any Kuki tribe, Lakher, Any Lushai (Mizo) tribe, Mikir, Any Naga tribe and Synteng.

To this day, I am not aware of anyone who identifies as Synteng or claim Synteng as their Scheduled Tribe status. In short, the Constitution also recognised three major tribal groups in the state Khasi, Jaintia and Garo.

LPG Bottling Plant

Editor,
Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad K. Sangma had announced to the general public as per media reports in April, 2026 that an LPG bottling plant would be set up in the State. Till date there is no news as to where that LPG bottling plant would be set up and when. However, it is a welcome step taken by the Chief Minister as it will ease the demand of LPG consumers in the State. As we know, the demand for the LPG cylinders is increasing day by day with the exponential growth in the number of households in and around Shillong. The general public is depending on gas cylinders for their day to day cooking unlike in the past when they used fire wood, kerosene stoves or charcoal for cooking.

Till date Meghalaya depends entirely on the supply from the Assam. Assam has its own LPG bottling plant but as far as I am aware, Meghalaya has none. Hence this should be a priority for the Government to set up because short supply leads to price rise which in turn leads to black-marketing.

Will the Government therefore inform the public where the bottling plant will be located and when it will be made operational.

Yours etc.,
I.R. Dkhar,
Shillong-6

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

India-Bangladesh ties hit hard by Hasina's August epiphany

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

The history of Bangladesh has seen much political upheaval in August. For Sheikh Hasina, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the month is especially fraught: her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, widely recognized as the man instrumental in the creation of Bangladesh, and most of her immediate family members were murdered on August 15, 1975. Almost 50 years later, on August 5, 2024, Hasina had to flee from Dhaka to save her life from angry mobs ravaging the streets of that nation's capital.

These incidents not only seriously affected Bangladesh, they hit the trajectory of India Bangladesh relations hard. Earlier this month, after a couple of years in the relative obscurity of exile in India, during which period trials were staged against her, Hasina chose the anniversary of her forced August exile for an epiphany as it were, not only causing an upheaval in the unsettled political climate within Bangladesh, but simultaneously throwing a large spanner in the already troubled relationship between India and her home country, thereby threatening a serious fracture.

In an audio address to the media gathered in New Delhi's Foreign Correspondents Club, the ousted Premier announced she would return to her country in December, a month associated in her mind with victory and good, to stand with the oppressed people of the country she said. Hyperbole and rhetoric aside, Hasina faces a death sentence should she actually return to Bangladesh, after she was tried, in absentia, by a special International Crimes Tribunal and sentenced to death on November 17, 2025 for committing "crimes against humanity" by ordering a brutal crackdown on anti-government protesters, including a large number of students, resulting in numerous deaths.

For the Tarique Rahman-led Bangladesh government, which came to power after the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) swept the peacefully conducted election in February, the announcement has thrown government functioning out of gear and relations with India again on a very slippery trajectory, despite India's assertion that it was not involved with what transpired. A furious Rahman has indicated he will not visit India until New Delhi makes amends for allowing Indian soil to be used to make provocative statements against his administration.

Dhaka officially expressed outrage at the content, tone and tenor of Hasina's statements in the one-way interaction with the media in Delhi, terming it "venomous vitriol" from the "absconding convicted genocider," and has urged India to hasten her extradition to Bangladesh if it is serious about repairing bilateral ties. As pressure mounted in Bangladesh threatening to completely derail bilateral relations, India's High Commissioner Dinesh Trivedi, a seasoned politician sent recently to Dhaka to stop the downward spiral in bilateral ties since Hasina's ouster from office, managed to meet with Rahman to offer assurances of India's deep commitment to the India-Bangladesh partnership and the people of that country. Although Bangladesh, too, is raising the level of its diplomatic engagement with India by sending the current Foreign Secretary, Asad Alam Siam, as its next envoy to New Delhi, there are indications that nothing short of Hasina's extradition would assuage the BNP

government. Trivedi's nearly hour long meeting may have helped to soothe some of Dhaka's concerns on the bilateral front, but the prospect of Hasina's return has sent alarm bells ringing within the Bangladesh security establishment and seen a churn in the polity, particularly the dispirited Awami League (AL) party which she leads. Hasina's announcement could well have been intended by her to revive the Party, which has appeared moribund after it was banned as an entity from participation in any future polls. But it has hit Delhi's ties with Dhaka hard.

It remains to be seen whether the likelihood of her return would revive the AL, but the possibility of her being assassinated is real, giving the government nightmares. The optics of such an eventuality would severely tarnish the BNP government's international standing, while incarcerating her behind bars would provide the AL a focal point around which to rally. It would also provide other opposition parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami, which played a pivotal role in arranging Hasina's ouster, to revive and intensify their political activity.

With Rahman's clear electoral victory, parties like the Jamaat have taken a back seat and allowed the new PM to focus on getting the economy back on track. For that to happen, India remains a very central part of the equation, however outraged the Bangladesh government may be. China may have deep pockets, but its model of economic assistance has led to disastrous results across some countries in Asia, most closely in neighbouring Sri Lanka, for example. India is Bangladesh's closest geographic neighbour and, despite the communal vitriol spewed about "infiltrators and terrorists" around election season, particularly from administrators in Assam, is still counted as a vital stakeholder in the welfare of the people of Bangladesh. It needs to step up that role by placing communal rhetoric on the back burner and focus on the people; who remain the primary stakeholders at the heart of the relationship.

The Indian government is caught in a tough bind. Despite the BNP government's outrage, for New Delhi to hasten Hasina's extradition is not an option it can seriously consider. She sought and has been provided asylum, for the second time in her life, after August turmoil. Although India is being identified in Bangladesh as Hasina-centric, New Delhi cannot hand her over to Dhaka.

Instead, it needs to lay out a short-term, easily achievable package of proposals to revive the real people-to-people linkages, such as border "haats" or trading outposts across West Bengal and the North-Eastern states, and provide trade facilities overland, which were halted after Hasina's ouster. India must provide greater access for medical care and tourism and improve ground level connectivity, such as improved power grid and rail links, reportedly close to Rahman's vision for economic revival. These, and incremental measures such as concessions in river waters agreements are options that India is considering in the short term to counter some of the very negative bilateral fallout of Hasina's August epiphany. Whether they work to assuage Dhaka's anger and revive an equitable bilateral relationship remains to be seen. But the immediate efforts will have to be from India's side.

"Everyone chases after happiness, not noticing that happiness is right at their heels."

—Bertolt Brecht

The Shillong Times

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Confrontation No Solution

ON Wednesday evening all shops across Shillong were closed because the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) had threatened to take out protest marches in different localities. Their 5-point demand includes scrapping the Shree Cement Project hearing. The KSU wants the total cancellation of the July 31, 2026 public hearing pertaining to the Shree Cement's proposed mining project at Lum Syrmam in East Jaintia Hills because they allege the hearing was rigged, non-transparent, and that the consent was manufactured. In this respect many environmentalists and concerned citizens would agree with the KSU since the limestone mining would destroy a heritage cave system – the longest in Asia. The Union demanded strict disciplinary and departmental action against the local Deputy Commissioner (DC), Superintendent of Police (SP), and Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) officials for allegedly manipulating the entire public hearing to silence those who had serious concerns about the mining happening in a sensitive ecological site. The other demand is the implementation of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016 with functioning facilitation centres across all 18 entry-exit points in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, alongside mandatory visitor verification checked through the local Dorbar Shnongs (traditional village councils) rather than through online registration. In its eagerness to protect jobs for locals, the KSU also demands strict enforcement of the Meghalaya Identification, Registration (Safety & Security) of Migrant Workers Act and the amended parts added to the Act in 2020 and 2024. The KSU says this is imperative to control illegal immigration, monitor influx, and protect local job opportunities.

What is not understood is how the KSU can intrude into the affairs of the North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) and make demands that the Institute's appointment policies mandate an 80:20 female-to-male hiring ratio for nurses, apart from reviewing the current 7.5% institutional quota to favour more local Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo candidates. The demand to hold recruitment exams within Meghalaya under direct institute control because exams conducted outside are subject to irregularities is also problematic. This is protectionism gone overboard. While the KSU may place its demands before the Union Health Ministry regarding NEIGRIHMS. It cannot hold the state government responsible for this. As far as protests against nepotism and favouritism in state government recruitment tests etc., are concerned the KSU has every right to demand transparency and a merit-based recruitment system but to seek the abolition of personal interviews is impractical because a candidate can be better assessed only after he/she speaks and expresses his/her opinion. And this is irrespective of which category of employees are being recruited.

The demand for a complete overhaul of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) and District Selection Committees (DSC) is timely and it is in the fitness of things that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are in place for all public recruitment boards. In a democracy demands are put before an elected government for it to study and respond. No organisation can get into a confrontational mode and disturb the peace. The public of Shillong are well aware of the consequences of such confrontations which inevitably result in violence against particular targeted groups and bringing the city to a standstill. The eco-system today is no longer what it was in the 80's and 90's when the economy was largely in the hands of non-tribals. Today tribals run several business organisations and they will not tolerate anything that would paralyse their businesses. Hence KSU needs to learn lessons in adversity.

What makes a Homestay memorable? Lessons from Meghalaya

By Dr Carnegie L. Nongrum & Benjamin Lyngdoh

The contents in this column are extracted from the Ph.D. work titled 'Service Quality of Tourism Homestays of Meghalaya' conducted by Dr. Carnegie L. Nongrum. The full document is available at <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/730112> and at NEHU Central Library, Shillong.

Our experiences with homestays in Meghalaya over the last couple of years have given us the privilege to meet wonderful families and travellers from all walks of life. Some conversations lasted only a few minutes over a cup of tea while others went on late into the evening around the dinner table. Each homestay had its own story, but one simple question has always stayed with us throughout our research journey.

Whenever we met visitors staying in homestays across Meghalaya, we would often ask them before they left, "What will you remember most about your stay?" Many visitors smiled before answering. It was almost as if the question brought back the moments that mattered most. The answers were rarely what one might expect. Very few spoke about the room, its amenities or even the spectacular landscapes. Instead, they recalled the host who insisted on a second serving of jadoh, the family members who stayed up late because they arrived late at night or the host family who welcomed them like they were long lost friends.

After hearing similar stories time and again, one thing became impossible to ignore. What those conversations revealed is something important. A homestay is much more than an overnight stay. It is often a place where tourists get to experience the real essence of Meghalaya: its people, its traditions and its local way of life. It may well be a reason why homestays have emerged as one of the state's most successful tourism initiatives. Over the years, homestays have become much more than places for tourists to stay. They support livelihoods, boost small-scale entrepreneurship and give visitors a chance to explore destinations beyond the conventional tourist trail. This characteristic is worth celebrating, not just because it strengthens tourism, but because it allows local communities to directly participate in the state's economic development. However, every success also invites reflection.

Are we paying attention to quality?

In many conversations

with homestay owners and visitors, one message inherently became very clear. The hospitality of Meghalaya was always warm and consistently appreciated by visitors. Many described feeling less like customers and more like guests welcomed into a family's home. That is perhaps the greatest compliment tourism can receive for a state whose greatest asset is its people. At the same time, visitors also pointed out areas that deserve attention. Internet connectivity was often unreliable, some rooms needed better upkeep, communication before arrival could be better, and the quality of food and service varied across homestays. Few visitors also mentioned the visual appeal, inconsistencies in basic facilities and occasional delays in responding to guest requests. Individually, none of these concerns appeared significant. But collectively they shape how visitors remember their experience.

However, none of this should be viewed as a criticism of our homestay owners. Most homestays in Meghalaya are family-run enterprises, managed by parents, children and relatives opening their homes in the hope of earning an honest livelihood. In fact, few entered the tourism sector with formal hospitality training. Yet, despite the lack of professional training, they often displayed warm hospitality by welcoming guests in the same manner they would welcome friends and family into their own homes. Maybe that is exactly what gives Meghalaya's homestays their unique charm and authenticity. The conversations throughout this study however point towards an important lesson. Hospitality alone is perhaps no longer enough in the rapidly changing tourism scenarios. The tourist arriving in Meghalaya today is very different from the tourist who came decades ago. They still seek authentic experiences, but they also expect reliable Wi-Fi, hygienic food, quick responses to enquiries, accurate online information, and professional service.

Does this mean that homestays should strive to become hotels? Or put differently, would improving service quality turn them into conventional stays? We believed the answer is 'no.' In fact, that would defeat their very purpose. People choose homestays because they offer something that hotels cannot. One of the most memorable sights during

our field visits was observing guests and hosts continue their conversations long after dinner was over. Those unplanned conversations, shared over simple home-cooked meals, local traditions and stories, often became the most memorable part of the visitor experience. Authenticity remains the essence of the homestay experience, and should always be its strongest advantage.

So, the real challenge is therefore not to make homestays more luxurious. But it's to make them more dependable while retaining the warmth that makes them special. Clean rooms, hygienic food, reliable internet, prompt communication and honest information add to authenticity by giving visitors a feeling of respect and care. Another important lesson was the diversity of the visitors themselves. Different travellers seek different experiences. Younger visitors often appreciate modern amenities and reliable internet connectivity. On the other hand, middle-aged guests and families appreciate prompt service and dependability. Older visitors often show more interest in deep and meaningful conversations, learning about local culture and experiencing genuine hospitality. Moreover, greater professionalism is generally expected by visitors with higher educational qualifications.

During the course of the study one thing became clear. Good hospitality is not about treating all guests the same way. It is about understanding which type of visitor is knocking at the door and responding thoughtfully to their expectations. The encouraging part is that a lot of these improvements do not require large investments, they simply require greater attention. Simple gestures, like quickly answering guest questions, keeping rooms clean, explaining the story behind a traditional meal, suggesting off-beat places or simply spending a few more minutes chatting with guests cost very little. But these are often the moments that visitors remember long after they have returned home.

Now, should homestays be centered on Shillong, Sohra, and Dawki only?

While there is little doubt that these destinations will continue to attract visitors and remain amongst Meghalaya's most popular tourist destinations. Yet they tell only a fraction of the story. Beyond these well known places are

communities rich in culture, traditions, and natural beauty, each with unique stories waiting to be shared. Encouraging quality homestays in these emerging destinations would not only spread the benefits of tourism more evenly but also create new rural livelihood opportunities.

Nonetheless, Government of Meghalaya has already taken significant steps to promote homestay development through financial assistance and various tourism initiatives. However, it is imperative that as the sector continues to mature, the next phase of development may well focus on investing in the people behind these homes alongside physical infrastructure. This could include developing simple Homestays Standard Operating Procedures (HSOPs) to further improve service delivery with a focus on hospitality training, homestay management, communication and digital marketing. Concurrently, encouraging our homestay operators to design experiences that go beyond lodging—through local food, cultural interactions, village experiences, and personalized service—will not only help build successful businesses but also create memorable visitor experiences. Equally important is recognising that different travellers value different experiences. Supporting homestay owners in adapting their services to the diverse expectations of visitors can further strengthen Meghalaya's position as a destination known not only for its natural beauty, but also for its distinctive hospitality.

In the end, this research journey tells us that a homestay is far more than an accommodation. It is a reflection of how people connect with one another. A memorable stay is shaped not only by what a tourist receives but also by how they are welcomed, cared for and made to feel at home. Every guest who walks through the front door also steps into someone's home, culture and way of life. That human connection is something no hotel can easily replicate, and it remains at the heart of Meghalaya's tourism. As visitors' expectations continue to change, the challenge is not simply to increase the number of homestays. It is to ensure that every stay reflects the warmth, authenticity, and quality. After all, beautiful landscapes may attract visitors, but it is the genuine hospitality and quality service that gives them a reason to return.

(The writers can be reached at carlmez3@gmail.com and benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

Look Higher: What Rebecca Suchiang's Journey Can Tell Meghalaya's Girls

By Dr. Bijoy A. Sangma

A few months ago, after joining the Meghalaya State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission as a Member, I went to meet Rebecca Vanessa Suchiang. Our offices are in the same building, hers on the first floor and mine on the second. I went to meet her as a courtesy, but she was not in her office that day. I returned, thinking I would come back another time.

I never did. I am sad about that now.

I had wanted to hear about the years before she eventually occupied the office. What was it like to enter the Indian Administrative Service in 1989? Which assignments shaped her? What did it mean to become the first Khasi woman to serve as Chief Secretary? Those questions remain unanswered. Yet that missed meeting has made me think about her career and what it might say to young women in Meghalaya.

When Rebecca Suchiang took charge as Chief Secretary on 30 September 2021, she became the first Khasi woman to hold the position. P. P. Trivedi had been Meghalaya's first woman Chief Secretary in the late 1980s. But Rebecca Suchiang's appointment carried a different significance for Meghalaya. A woman from the state itself had reached the top of its administrative system. She was the first Khasi woman of Meghalaya to head its bureaucracy.

Her career had begun long before that appointment. She was a 1989-batch IAS officer of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre. Over the years, she served in important administrative positions, including Personnel and Administrative Reforms, Finance and Home. She had spent more than three decades in public service. A photograph of a Chief Secretary shows the position. It does not show the examinations, postings, decisions and responsibilities through which a career is built. In Rebecca Suchiang's case, it also reminds us that a woman's first degree does not have to determine the limits of her working life. Her academic background was in Botany. She entered the civil service and eventually led the state administration. What mattered was being prepared to take the next opportunity when it came.

A young woman may work hard enough to qualify for an opportunity, but family circumstances and expectations can still determine whether she can take it. Education expands choices only when those choices are taken seriously. A girl from Meghalaya should be able to imagine becoming an IAS officer, judge, scientist, professor, lawyer, doctor, entrepreneur or the head of a major institution. An opportunity outside the state should not be dismissed simply because it is far from home.

When a daughter wants to go

Rebecca Suchiang's journey came back to me when a friend from Guwahati recently called about her daughter. The young woman had secured admission offers from National Law Universities and other leading law institutes. She joined a prestigious institution in Pune, but the family later withdrew her. She subsequently received offers from institutions in Haryana and Sikkim. Again, the parents were hesitant to send her so far from home. Distance, unfamiliar places and the weather were among their concerns.

Her story made the question sharper. In 1989, Rebecca Suchiang entered the Indian Administrative Service. More than three decades later, she was in the Chief Secretary's office. Getting from one point to the other took years of preparation, responsibility and new assignments.

Parents naturally worry when a daughter leaves home. They should ask about safety, the quality of the institution, accommodation, finances and the support available to her. Those are responsible questions. Once those are answered, another question remains: are we responding to a genuine risk, or letting our discomfort with an unfamiliar place decide how far our

daughter can go?

My advice to my friend was straightforward. If the institution is credible, the environment is reasonably safe, and the education is strong, her daughter should be given the opportunity to go. If she has earned a place where she can receive a good education, distance alone should not decide her future. Sending a young person away for education still requires careful thought. A college should be judged by its academic quality, safety, cost and opportunities, not simply by distance.

Many parents face this dilemma when a daughter receives an opportunity outside the state. Will she manage alone? Will she be safe? Will she adjust? What if she needs us and we are far away?

All these questions matter. Another question is worth asking: what if saying no to a good opportunity means fear has decided more of her future than her ability?

There also comes a time when parents have to trust their daughters. A daughter who has earned an opportunity deserves the chance to show that she can handle it.

Rebecca Suchiang's career gives us one example. She entered a demanding profession and spent decades taking on greater responsibility. We cannot know where another young woman's journey will lead, but we can decide whether she gets the chance to begin.

The first should not be the last

Rebecca Suchiang's career did not end with the Chief Secretary's office. After retiring as Chief Secretary in July 2022, she continued in public service, including as Director General of the Meghalaya Administrative Training Institute. In 2025, she became Meghalaya's first woman State Chief Information Commissioner.

Few careers follow the plan made at the beginning. A person does not need to know at eighteen where she will be at fifty. She needs sound education, discipline and the confidence to consider opportunities when they arise.

The young law student may become a lawyer, enter the judiciary, work in public policy, teach or choose a direction none of us can predict. What matters now is whether she has the opportunity to find out.

Young women also have a responsibility. If they ask their parents to trust them, they must prepare themselves for that trust. Leaving home requires discipline, sound judgement, personal safety, and a willingness to ask for help when necessary. Rebecca Suchiang's achievement gives the next generation an example from Meghalaya itself. A young woman preparing for the civil services, studying law, or aspiring to careers in education, science, business and public life can look at her journey and see that such positions are within reach. She can look at the office of Chief Secretary and know that a Khasi woman has occupied it. She can look at the State Information Commission and know that a woman has led it. I regret that I never returned to Rebecca Suchiang's office. I had wanted to hear her story from her. That opportunity may have passed, but her career tells a story worth hearing.

Another young woman is now deciding where to begin her legal education.

Her parents may be anxious about sending her away. That anxiety is understandable. But after the questions of safety, quality and cost have been answered, there is one more question they may want to ask. What if their fear of sending her away keeps her from an opportunity she has worked hard to earn?

Rebecca Suchiang's generation had to show that a Khasi woman could reach the highest levels of public administration. The young women who follow should not have to ask whether they belong there. They should be able to ask how far they can go. That may be the real meaning of a first. It is not where one woman stops. It is where another woman begins.

Letters to the Editor

Manufactured Consent: Shree Cement Public Hearing Must Be Scrapped

Editor,
As a deeply concerned citizen of our state, I feel compelled to express my profound disappointment and anger over the deeply flawed public hearing conducted on July 31 for the proposed Shree Cement project at Lum Syrmam, East Jaintia Hills District. What was legally mandated to be a transparent forum for community consultation instead unfolded as a masterclass in civic suppression and institutional high-handedness. A public hearing is supposed to be the bedrock of democratic governance, ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable and directly affected stakeholders are heard. Instead, news and social media reports painted a grim picture of exclusion. Roads leading to the venue at Lad Tongse were physically sabotaged with trenches to block anti-mining groups, and local landowners.

To compress a high-stakes environmental decision into a rushed, 46-minute session dominated entirely by project proponents is a mockery of the law. It was, for all practical purposes, a private gathering masquerading as a public hearing. When the state uses its machinery to lock out local farmers and genuine pressure groups, it doesn't just silence dissent—it manufactures consent. When citizens are denied their constitutional right to speak peacefully within a designated forum, frustration inevitably spills onto the

streets. Development should never come at the cost of democratic principles. If this mining project is truly beneficial for our state, it should be able to withstand the scrutiny and questions of its critics in an open, unrestricted environment. Forcing it through by silencing the local community is an admission of fear.

I therefore urge the government and the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority to take immediate note of these severe procedural lapses, scrap the July 31 proceedings. Last but not the least let us remember that suppression of local stakeholders is not merely a violation of civil liberties; it is a direct hazard to survival. At the end of the day, true development should lift people up, not crush them. It must never mean destroying the ecosystem and silencing the very stakeholders who call that land their home.

Yours etc.,
Iahmi oo Khyriem
Via mail

Designing for the Hills: How Smart Floor Plans Protect Shillong Homes

Editor,
Building a home in Shillong demands more than good construction, it demands climate-conscious design. Months of relentless monsoon rain, heavy fog, damp air, and freezing winters can lead to mould, peeling paint, cold interiors, high energy bills, and constant repairs.

The secret to a healthy, low-maintenance home in the Khasi Hills lies in orientation-based spatial design—placing each room where sunlight,

airflow, and natural drainage work for you rather than against you.

1. The North-East Entry: Early Morning Sun & Fresh Air

The North-East welcomes the early morning sunlight and fresh, clean air into a hill home. Because fresh air enters from this direction, this zone must be kept light, open, and uncluttered. Placing entrances, living or study rooms here allows gentle morning UV rays and fresh wind to sterilize the interior, sweep out overnight dampness, and keep the home mentally energizing.

2. The South-East Kitchen: Drying Out Monsoon Damp

Cooking generates steam and high humidity. In Shillong's climate, an ill-placed kitchen quickly breeds black mould under cabinets. The South-East quadrant receives strong, direct midday sun, naturally sterilizing preparation surfaces, keeping spices dry, and ensuring wet utensils dry rapidly.

3. The South-West Master Bedroom: Winter Heat Retention

Winters demand heavy heating, but a South-West room acts as a natural heat bank. It absorbs maximum solar radiation during late afternoon hours, holding natural warmth well into the night. Structurally, keeping this corner solid and heavy shields the building against monsoon storms.

4. The West Bathrooms & Slope Drainage: Hygiene & Moisture Control

Toilets generate stale air. Placing them along Western walls allows late-afternoon sun to sterilize tiles and cut mildew. Crucially, all household water drainage must channel downward toward the North-East slope. Directing greywater and rainwater out

cleanly prevents waterlogging under the foundation and stops rising dampness.

Building for Peace of Mind: A well-planned Shillong home uses sunlight, airflow, and natural drainage to stay warm, dry, healthy, and low-maintenance for generations.

Yours etc.,
Dr Paloma (PhD),
Via email

FCRA, Faith, and Facilitation: Why Meghalaya's Approach Matters

Editor,
The Centre's decision to refer the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) is a welcome step. At a time when concerns are being raised by religious and charitable institutions, such a move signals the importance of wider consultation and democratic deliberation.

For states like Meghalaya, the debate around the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) is not merely legal or procedural, it is deeply tied to the functioning of everyday social infrastructure. For decades, churches and community-based organisations have played a central role in delivering education, healthcare, welfare and community services, especially in remote and underserved areas. Any disruption in their ability to receive and utilise foreign contributions has immediate and tangible consequences.

It is in this context that the intervention of Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma assumes significance. His initiative to lead a delegation of church leaders and com-

munity representatives to meet Union Home Minister Amit Shah reflects an understanding that policy must be informed by those it impacts the most. Such engagement ensures that Meghalaya's unique circumstances are heard at the highest levels of decision-making.

At the same time, the concerns surrounding the FCRA framework are not new. For nearly two decades, organisations in Meghalaya have faced recurring challenges, delays in renewal of licences, procedural complexities, and the logistical burden of navigating processes that are largely centralised in Delhi. For smaller institutions, these hurdles are not just administrative, they can threaten their very ability to function.

Against this backdrop, the Meghalaya Cabinet's decision to establish a dedicated FCRA Cell within the State Home Department is both timely and pragmatic. This initiative has the potential to significantly ease the operational burden on churches, NGOs, and charitable institutions by providing localised support for applications, renewals, and compliance requirements. More importantly, it creates a bridge between the state and central authorities, enabling faster resolution of issues that would otherwise require prolonged engagement with distant offices.

This is not merely an administrative reform; it is a governance response rooted in ground realities. By facilitating compliance rather than merely enforcing it, the state government is acknowledging the critical role these institutions play in society. It is also recognising that regulation and service delivery must coexist, not conflict.

The relief expressed by organisations engaged in charitable work across Meghalaya is, therefore, understandable. For many, the establishment of the FCRA Cell represents not just bureaucratic convenience, but institutional reassurance. It signals that their concerns have been heard, and that the government is willing to act as a facilitator rather than a distant regulator. Importantly, this initiative does not preclude the broader debate on the FCRA Amendment Bill. That conversation must continue, both within Parliament and through platforms like the JPC. Civil society, opposition parties, and religious organisations have a legitimate role in shaping that discourse. However, while the national debate evolves, states must also address immediate, practical concerns, and Meghalaya's approach demonstrates how that can be done.

The creation of the FCRA Cell reflects a broader aspiration, one shared by a large number of religious and community organisations that run schools, colleges, and hospitals across the state. It underscores a governance philosophy that is responsive, consultative, and grounded in the realities of its people. Ultimately, governance is measured not only by policy positions, but by the ability to translate intent into impact. Meghalaya's response to the FCRA challenge through both advocacy at the national level and facilitation at the state level, offers a balanced and constructive way forward.

Yours etc.,
F. Lyngdoh
Shillong

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"A person's a person, no matter how small."

— Dr. Seuss

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 2026

Mismanaged railways

THE less said about Indian Railways the better. Government after government not only undercut its forward momentum but also ignored the interests of crores of railway passengers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi who made big promises about railways' modernisation too has done precious little to uplift its image. Strengthening the public perceptions about a near-total failure of the present government to improve the railway services overall, a report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) this month indicted the government for its irresponsible ways. It noted that some 90 per cent of the railway stations lacked basic amenities. Travel on trains remains a major struggle due to crowded compartments, lack of sufficient trains on most routes, poor passenger amenities, lack of proper maintenance, and an overall lethargy on the part of the authorities. The CAG report stressed that while funds were available, the problem plaguing the railways was "deficiencies in planning and execution." Under-utilization of budgeted grants ranged from 36 to 44 per cent. In other words, nearly half of the earmarked funds have not been put to use. This, the CAG noted, also compromised the safety of rail travel. Some 89 per cent of the 512 stations the CAG inspected for a study of the ground-level situations lacked minimum essential amenities like drinking water, toilet, fans, water coolers and signage. The drift is appalling. Many platforms no longer carry the name boards/plates on station pillars; and where they carry, these are wrongly positioned and not visible from inside the parked trains. Most of the well-organised systems that the British Raj had introduced have been tampered with or mismanaged, signifying a lethal mix of corruption and ineptitude.

Narendra Modi, who claims to have worked wonders during his three terms in strengthening the infrastructure sector, did precious little to uplift railways' fate — other than introducing the Vande Bharat trains in select sectors. In terms of speed, this is no great shakes either. His much-publicised initiative to introduce bullet trains to the country remains a dream. The pilot project that he initiated 10 years ago on the Ahmedabad-Mumbai sector has not materialised, with only the first 100km stretch, or one fifth of the total project length, getting set for inauguration. It would take decades more for the pilot project's completion, if it progresses with the current tardy phase. The incompetence of our governance systems led by the political leadership and plagued by red tape is legion. Modi, it would appear, could not find a better way to set serious things right even as his government is credited with massive highways development. There too, as CAG had previously noted, there's the scent of huge fund misappropriations, a part of which might likely go into the ruling party's election coffers. The mismanagement of the railways is most evident in the fact that it does not have a full-time minister now. Modi did away with the Rail Budget from the very start of his innings as PM. Instead, this was merged with the general Union Budget, allegedly as part of a cover-up operation. The results of such mismanagement are spectacular.

The violence during the KSU rally was highly unfortunate, but it was expected, considering that past rallies have invariably turned aggressive. Violence cannot be condoned because it will ultimately only hurt the local community. This particular rally was called on five demands, viz., overhauling the MPSC and DHS systems to stop corruption and nepotism, and ensuring fair appointments; implementation of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA) 2016 till ILP is enacted; implementation of the amended Migrant Workmen Act, 2020; addressing structural and operational recruitment grievances at the NEIGRIHMS; and cancelling of the public hearing regarding Shree Cement projects in East Jaintia Hills. Now that the government has talked 'there is some hope that, at least on some of the demands, there will be some breakthrough. There are some demands that are a little bit difficult for the government to accept on its own, e.g., the ILP, but there are some that can be accepted without much hassle.

The demand that can easily be accommodated by the government is cancelling the Shree Cement public hearing, which was a farce. There is enough evidence to suggest that the hearing was not conducted in a fair manner. It will be best for all if the 31st July hearing is cancelled and a new hearing is announced where every stakeholder is allowed to take part without intimidation. The Jaintia Students' Union (JSU) has already filed an application before the National Green Tribunal challenging Shree Cement's mining project in East Jaintia Hills. The government's reluctance to cancel the public hearing is actually very confusing, as this is the easiest demand that can be met (by the time the article is published, hopefully the government might have already done so). In fact, I personally think that the deadline set by the KSU and the rally might not have happened if the demand had been initially accepted. This is a political blunder by the government.

Regarding the other demands, the one on enacting measures to prevent influx, especially, the ILP has been

the most persistent, and time and again, there has been violence over the issue. Personally, for a long time, I never supported the issue because Census reports had clearly shown that the non-indigenous population has been consistently declining in the state. It was around 20% in the 1971 Census, which has declined now to just around 13%. However, the popular perception has always been that illegal immigration to the state is increasing. In the last few months, there have been reports of Bangladeshi nationals being caught in the border areas of Meghalaya as they were entering the state or trying to use it to return to their country. I suspect that this has been going on for a long time. But why is this not reflected in the Census? The answer is very simple. These immigrants were not residing in the state.

Most of these migrants were using Meghalaya as a transit corridor. They would enter the state and then use it to travel either to Assam or, most likely, to other parts of the country, especially metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Mumbai and others. Some villages around the border, such as those near Ichamati and Majai, have always had a substantial non-indigenous population. However, the immigrants who come from across the border are Bengali Muslims, while the non-indigenous populations in these areas are Bengali Hindus. Considering the animosity that Bengali Hindus have towards Bengali Muslims, I find it difficult to believe that the former would give the latter sanctuary in their villages. But if there are residents, they could be long-time residents and cannot simply be termed illegal. This was actually connected to my other concern.

The non-indigenous population is treated as a second-class citizen in the state and disenfranchised in terms of jobs or other means of livelihood (the whole trading licence issue that erupts every now and then). So, if the ILP is implemented, there will be harassment of the permanent non-indigenous population, who will always be singled out for inspection and two reasons. Why I never

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

er supported the ILP, viz., the data does not support it and the concern about increased harassment of the permanent non-indigenous population. However, I have changed my stance, and I believe ILP should be implemented in the state.

The first reason, again, is related to data. While the state-level data shows a decrease in the non-indigenous population, their numbers have actually increased in the Garo Hills region. So, the state-level decline more accurately reflects the situation in the Khasi region, where the numbers have consistently gone down, but this is not the case in the Garo region. If the trend continues there will be adverse political implications for the indigenous population. This is the reason behind the agitation for removing the non-indigenous population from participating in the ADC elections. But we cannot have ILP only for the Garo region. If ILP is to be implemented, it has to be for the whole state. So, based on the data, ILP is a legitimate demand.

Some of my own non-indigenous friends have suggested that it is better for ILP to be implemented since it has become an issue that has been used to target them for a long time. They contend that since this provision will apply to those who are not residents of the state (whether indigenous or not), in time, the permanent non-indigenous population will be left alone. In the short term, there might be some hardships, but in the long run, it will bring peace. I also believe that the issue has been used as an excuse for stalling development in the state, for example, the opposition to the railways, which is needed so that Meghalaya's dependence on Assam is reduced. It is high time this excuse is removed.

There has always been an argument that ILP is not feasible in Meghalaya because it is a transit state. However, that can be easily solved. Suppose a bus carrying passengers from Guwahati to Silchar passes through Meghalaya. At the checkpoint, the bus will submit the list of all the passengers to the officials, who will verify the

passengers, keep the list and pass it on to the next checkpoint (they can simply take a picture and send it to the next checkpoint through WhatsApp). When the bus reaches the next checkpoint, the list will be verified again. If there are people missing from the list at the second checkpoint, the bus driver can be arrested and a case filed against the owner of the bus. This will act as a deterrent for those looking to break the law. As for those entering the state to stay for a certain period, they will need to get an ILP. So, done this way, the problem of the state being a transit point is not needed, as there will be no need for an ILP for those looking to pass through.

The KSU rally is a wake-up call to the government because it is not just about a law-and-order issue: Many people may not support the violence, but they do support the demands. Some of the non-indigenous population may continue to leave the state, but many will stay back because they have no other option. So, even if the ILP demand is ignored today because of the violence that took place during the rally, it will resurface again in the future. The fact that Himanta Biswa Sarma had to appeal to people who moved to Assam from other states to list Assamese as their mother tongue in the upcoming Census proves that not only illegal immigrants from across the border, but also people from other parts of the country are changing the state's demography. Arunachal Pradesh is also experiencing tensions, and just a few months ago, former Arunachal Pradesh MP Nabam Rebia demanded the inclusion of Arunachal Pradesh in the Sixth Schedule and the amendment of Article 371-H of the Constitution of India to protect the land rights of indigenous peoples in the state. How long are we going to be held hostage over this issue, and how long will the permanent non-indigenous population be used as the scapegoat? In the future, any agitation could become much more volatile, and if it crosses a line like it did in Manipur, fixing it will be very difficult. We must avoid going there.

(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)

When Protest Crosses the Line

By Tynshain K Lyngdoh

I find the events surrounding the KSU bike rally in Shillong deeply disturbing. A protest is a legitimate part of democracy. People have every right to disagree with the government, raise concerns about the future of the state and demand that their voices be heard. But there is a line that should never be crossed. When people who have nothing to do with the issue are assaulted, vehicles are attacked, property is destroyed and public monuments are vandalised, it is no longer simply a protest. It becomes an assault on the ordinary citizen.

What is especially troubling is the reports that in-

net Swami Vivekananda, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose or any other historical figure are vandalised. Respect cannot be reserved only for the people and symbols that we ourselves hold dear. If we want others to respect U Tirot Singh and U Kiang Nangbah, we must also be prepared to respect the historical figures who matter to others. That is not weakness. It is simply fairness.

I also believe that we should be careful not to make an accusation against every member of the KSU for the actions of individuals whose identities and roles still have to be established. The KSU leadership has

"If this is established by the investigation, we need to ask ourselves honestly what it says about the nature of the violence. A vehicle registration number should never become a person's identity card for deciding whether he or she deserves to be safe on the streets of Shillong. A non-tribal person travelling through the city is not an enemy."

nocent people appear to be suffering. Police have reported that 31 vehicles were damaged and that people on the streets were assaulted. There are also reports of a passenger bus being attacked while people, including children, were inside. An elderly man was reportedly beaten, and a NEIGRIHMS faculty member was allegedly attacked while returning from duty. These are not people who were taking part in the protest. They were simply going about their lives.

There is another aspect of the incident that cannot simply be brushed aside. Several reports have spoken of vehicles belonging to non-local people, including Assam-registered vehicles, being targeted. If this is established by the investigation, we need to ask ourselves honestly what it says about the nature of the violence. A vehicle registration number should never become a person's identity card for deciding whether he or she deserves to be safe on the streets of Shillong. A non-tribal person travelling through the city is not an enemy. Nor is someone from another state automatically an outsider who can be abused or attacked.

This is particularly important in Meghalaya because people from different communities have lived, worked and built their lives here for generations. Non-tribal citizens work in our hospitals, schools, colleges, offices, businesses and markets. Many have spent most of their lives in Meghalaya and regard the state as their home. They may not belong to an indigenous tribe, but that does not make them lesser citizens or make violence against them acceptable. The protection of indigenous identity and the protection of innocent non-tribal citizens are not opposing ideas. Both can and must exist together.

The reported vandalism of the statues of Swami Vivekananda and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose is another matter that deserves serious condemnation. These figures may be viewed differently by different people, but they are part of India's historical figures. Public monuments cannot be treated as convenient objects on which to vent political anger.

And here I would ask a simple question: What if the statue of U Tirot Singh or U Kiang Nangbah had been desecrated in the same manner? Would we have considered it merely an expression of anger? Surely not. We would have been outraged, and rightly so. We would have said that our history and our heroes had been insulted.

Then the same principle must apply when the statues

denied responsibility for the violence and has reportedly blamed unidentified miscreants. That claim should be tested through a proper investigation. But the opposite is equally true: If anyone participated in assault, vandalism, arson or the destruction of property, that person must face the law. Organisational affiliation cannot be used either to condemn the innocent or to protect the guilty.

The authorities therefore have a difficult but important responsibility. They must investigate the incidents fairly, identify those who were actually involved and take appropriate legal action. At the same time, innocent people who suffered damage to their vehicles, property or livelihood should not be left to bear the consequences alone.

I would also appeal to the leadership of every student and social organisation in Meghalaya to think carefully about where street mobilisation can lead when emotions get out of control. Once a crowd begins attacking people simply because they appear to belong to a particular community or because their vehicle carries a particular registration number, something has gone terribly wrong. A movement that seeks to protect the dignity of one community cannot build that dignity by humiliating another.

There is nothing wrong with standing firmly for indigenous rights, cultural identity or the interests of the people of Meghalaya. These are matters that deserve serious public discussion. But they must be pursued through argument, democratic pressure, dialogue and lawful protest. Violence weakens a cause rather than strengthening it.

I condemn, therefore, the reported attacks on innocent people, the reported targeting of non-tribal and non-local citizens, the damage to vehicles and property, the assault on passengers and pedestrians, and the vandalism of public monuments. I condemn these acts not because they are wrong, but because they are a Khasi or Jaintia person were attacked simply because of his identity, we would rightly demand justice. The same justice must be demanded when a non-tribal person is attacked because he is perceived to be non-tribal. There cannot be one standard of humanity for ourselves and another for others. Meghalaya has enough wisdom in its traditions and enough strength in its people to settle disagreements without turning ordinary citizens into targets. We should not allow a culture of fear to take root in the name of protecting identity.

Letters to the Editor

ADCs Versus Traditional Institutions

Editor,

It was heartening to see that a delegation of the Synjok Ki Nongsynshar Shnong Ka Bri U Hynniewtrep (KSU) and Synjok Ki Rangbah Kur Ka Bri U Hynniewtrep (SRKBH) met Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma and Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong, who also holds the District Council Affairs portfolio, on August 7 and submitted a memorandum outlining their objections. The meeting followed discussions between representatives of traditional institutions and the Governor. The delegation said it was acting on the Governor's advice to take up its concerns with the state government.

At the centre of the dispute is the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Amendment Bill, 2026, passed by the KHADC during its June session. SNSBH secretary and SRKBH spokesperson R. L. Blah read out the memorandum before the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister. He urged the state government to request the Governor not to assent to the amendment and instead return it to the KHADC

for reconsideration. If the appeal to the Governor and the state government does not bear fruit, what could be the next step for the SNSBH and SRKBH given the implications of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Amendment Bill, 2026, passed by the KHADC during its June session. The Khasi bodies could argue that deleting Section 16 of the original act violates established judicial precedent requiring consultations with Dorbars. The court may view the amendment as eroding the constitutional essence of tribal autonomy, making it vulnerable to being struck down or modified.

The Khasi bodies could pursue if they decide to challenge the KHADC land amendment in court under Article 226 of the Constitution on grounds of violation of Sixth Schedule protection, erosion of customary law, and lack of procedural fairness (no consultation with Dorbars). If the High Court ruling is unfavourable, it can appeal to the Supreme Court under Article 136 so that the apex court would weigh whether KHADC, a creature of the Indian Constitution, exceeded its legislative powers under the Sixth Schedule.

A successful challenge would reinforce traditional institutions as central to land governance. It could set a

precedent across the Northeast that autonomous councils cannot bypass customary law. If upheld, it may trigger calls for constitutional reform to clarify the balance between the ADCs and the Dorbars. That would be a strong constitutional case by highlighting how the amendment undermines Sixth Schedule protections and customary law, with courts likely to test whether KHADC's move is proportionate and consistent with tribal autonomy. Some of the key judicial precedents are as below:

1. T.N. Raghunath v. State of Meghalaya (1993)

The Meghalaya High Court upheld the primacy of customary law under the Sixth Schedule. It ruled that autonomous councils must respect traditional institutions in matters of land and governance.

2. Ka Khyntiewlang Nongbri v. KHADC (2000s)

The court emphasized that Dorbar Shnong decisions carry legal weight when tied to customary practices. It reinforced that councils cannot override traditional institutions without proper consultation.

3. Supreme Court on Sixth Schedule Autonomy (Assam & Tripura cases)

The Court has repeatedly held that Sixth Schedule provisions are meant to preserve tribal identity and self-governance. Any law

or amendment that dilutes this autonomy must be tested against constitutional guarantees.

4. Recent Meghalaya High Court Orders (2020s)

Courts have intervened when Councils attempted to bypass Dorbar Raid and Dorbar Hima in land matters. Judges stressed that consultation is not optional but integral to the Sixth Schedule framework.

Yours etc;

VK Lyngdoh,

Via email

College Students Living With Anxiety

Editor, College is supposed to be a place where dreams take shape. Students spend years studying, sacrificing, and planning for a future they believe they achieve. When they do so with a programme, they choose to trust that the institution will stand by the promises it makes.

Today, many students in one of Shillong's prestigious colleges find themselves in a difficult and frustrating situation. They enrolled under the expectation that they would be able to complete the fourth year of their undergraduate programme.

They attended classes, cleared examinations, and planned their futures around that promise. However, as the time for the fourth year approaches, clarity remains absent.

What hurts students the most is not just the uncertainty but the feeling of being left in the dark. Questions are asked, meetings are held, and concerns are raised, yet clear answers seem hard to come by. Instead, students continue to receive assurances that a decision will be made soon. For many, these assurances are beginning to feel less like hope and more like a delay in facing reality.

Behind every student affected is a personal story. Some planned to pursue higher studies that require a four-year degree. Others hoped to strengthen their academic profile through research opportunities offered in the final year. Many have spent countless hours working toward a future they believed was within reach. Now, they are forced to wait, uncertain about what comes next.

The issue is not merely academic; it is emotional. Students are anxious. Parents are worried. Months that should be spent preparing for the future are instead spent searching for answers. The silence and lack of transparency have created frustration among those who simply want to know where they

stand.

No institution is free from challenges. Administrative difficulties, policy changes, and resource limitations can arise. Students understand this. What they find difficult to accept is the absence of honest and timely communication. If there are obstacles preventing the implementation of the fourth year, students deserve to know. If there are plans in place, those plans should be communicated clearly.

A college earns its reputation not only through academic excellence but also through the way it treats its students. Prestige means little if the voices of students are ignored. Trust is built through transparency, accountability, and respect.

The students are not demanding special treatment. They are simply asking for certainty about the future they were promised. After years of dedication and hard work, they deserve more than vague assurances and unanswered questions. They deserve honesty. Most importantly, they deserve to be heard.

Yours etc,

Name withheld on request,

Via email

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"Our life is what our thoughts make it."

— Marcus Aurelius

The Shillong Times

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Pressure Groups Imperative to Democracy

PRESSURE groups play a pivotal role in shaping the policies and decisions within a democratic framework. But such groups must themselves be subjected to the laws governing other citizens. Pressure groups are elected by a select membership and have a set of priorities they choose, to put pressure on the government for what they believe are wrong policies that have negative consequences. An example is the demand to scrap the Shree Cements hearing in Daistong, East Jaintia Hills held on July 31, which was seen to have gone against the principles of transparency and fair play and with clear intentions of silencing voices of dissent against the company's operations. What happened on the day of the hearing and the day prior to that — where the road leading to the public hearing venue was dug up to prevent dissenters from reaching the place shows a well-orchestrated attempt to ensure the hearing was conducted in a manner that favored those supporting the Company's mining operations.

The MDA Government cannot be in denial of this flagrant wrong-doing where the primary environmental protection norms prior to starting a cement company — namely, a public hearing — was sought to be cleverly manipulated in favour of the Company. Why did the Government allow such a thing to happen? What special benefits is Shree Cements which will be yet another cement company in a district already having 8 operational cement companies going to bring to Meghalaya that the other companies have not? Granted, Shree Cements is one of the oldest cement manufacturing plants with its largest manufacturing plant in Rajasthan, but it has corporate offices in Gurgaon and overseas in the UAE. The Company operates across North and Eastern India and now wants to venture into North East India mainly Meghalaya and Nagaland. Why could Government not have facilitated a public hearing that had followed all the norms? Why the need to prevent this public hearing from happening if there was no cause of concern in the entire limestone mining operations and the setting up of a yet another flourishing cement company? The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) had this as one of their protest agenda. If Government had nothing to hide, this matter could have been discussed with the Union before the end of its 15-day deadline. But this did not happen.

While the KSU protest that lead to mayhem and violence is uncalled for the attitude of the Government in delaying the inevitable too is not beyond reproach. In a democracy dialogue with civil society groups — the main stakeholders of the democratic process is the only way out of any impasse. Why was this opportunity missed or come when it was too late? Pressure groups are organized bodies that seek to influence government policies and decisions without the intention of acquiring political power. These groups represent the interests of specific sections of society, such as farmers, workers, businesspersons, and even environmental activists. Unlike political parties, pressure groups do not directly contest elections but instead use lobbying, advocacy, and other methods to sway the decisions of policymakers. It is important for the Government to read the signs of the times and provide an open space for such deliberations, rather than riding roughshod over public opinion.

Letters to the Editor

Deeds, Not Words Anymore

Editor,
Common sense requires context, and the history of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) has been marked by incidents of skirmishes and violence. Has this become normalized among the organization's leadership? Past protests — such as those during the Anti-Uranium movement — were conducted openly, often without masks or fear. One wonders about the current role and relevance of the Advisory Committee within the student body. There is an urgent need for experienced, wise elders to guide such organizations. While the frustration of the youth is understandable and widely shared, every action inevitably provokes a reaction. Meghalaya, being heavily reliant on central funding, now sees ordinary citizens — those simply seeking jobs or medical treatment — bearing the brunt of unrest and disruptions. A clear line must be drawn for such actions. Students must return to dialogue and debate.

As in 90s Bollywood movies, where the police would inevitably appear at the climax, yesterday's events felt like a replay. Michael Sheehan, former NYPD Deputy Commissioner for Counter Terrorism, once emphasized the need to remove "dead wood" from the force to create robust policing. If the Special Branch or intelligence divisions exist within our police, now

is the time to foster competitive, innovative solutions. Declaring demonstrations as peaceful and allowing free maneuvering through vulnerable areas only reveals a weak mindset. Likewise, fortifying the Secretariat merely to shield political masters is a sign of incompetence. Who, then, will defend the weak and helpless?

The State Security Commission, filled with well-connected and sometimes retired faces, often lacks strategic foresight. Effective leadership demands field analysis, situational awareness, operational experience, and a hunger for knowledge. For those seeking to understand the challenges of urban unrest, Dr. David Kilcullen's book, "Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla," is highly recommended. It sheds light on the complexities of modern, crowded cities plagued by dysfunctional governance and exploited by non-state actors.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Laurence
Gathpho
Shillong-10

When a Protest Turns Violent

Editor,
A protest is a democratic right. People have every right to take to the streets, raise their voices and demand accountability from those in power. But when a protest crosses the line into assault, vandalism and destruction, the very cause being championed risks being overshadowed by the violence surrounding it. The recent black-flag bike

It is the oldest dog and pony show in Meghalaya. We saw it with the demand for ILP. We saw it with the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill. And we are seeing it today. And each time, both the Government and pressure group leaders get away with it. The Government is ultimately let off the hook for its lapse on critical issues that affect the people and the pressure groups leaders never face any serious consequences for the violence they create. During the demand for ILP, violence ensued, arrests were made, but the lives of the pressure group, leaders were never really marred by such arrests. They get on with their lives and do better than the average person. The Government also gets away with it. Not only was ILP not implemented, but a substitute law was given to the people: the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, 2016. Not only that, but an amendment to the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 through an illegal adaptation order made no more mention of Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the ILP regulation, and no one batted an eyelid. During the protest against the CAB, there were clashes between government forces and protesters, but it all proved to be a flash skit that led to nothing. Even the Member of Parliament from the Garo Seat voted in favour of the CAB, with no one really taking her to task at home.

I call it the Government-Pressure Group playbook. It is a flash skit that happens every time there is a major issue, but it opens to nothing. Pressure groups lead the protests, violence ensues, arrests are made, the issues eventually die down, and the people are emotionally divided between supporting the pressure groups and condemning the violence. The violence creates further retaliation from other communities who may be at the receiving end, which further divides each person between condemning the pressure group's violence or uniting with them in response to the communal retaliation. We have all witnessed this drama throughout the years, and even though we all have good pattern recognition

ability, yet we stop short of connecting the dots because we are held hostage by our emotions. Is this a form of that thing called Stockholm Syndrome? I leave it to professional psychologists to confirm, but the signs of Stockholm Syndrome are feelings of a strong bond with the person who causes harm, making excuses for their bad behavior, and seeing any act of kindness as favors huge enough to overlook the harm they do. What pushes people toward Stockholm Syndrome is the threat of danger.

During the Sweeper Lane incident of 2018, when violence ensued between Khasis and the residents of Sweeper Lane due to news of a Khasi being assaulted in the area, certain writers on the Liberal side wrote that the Khasis who thronged Iewduh are racists only interested in communal violence. One even proposed that the people should enter state-sponsored programmes to force integration. Such are the extreme views of some liberals. I had to write a counter article that appeared in The Meghalaya Guardian, wherein I showed that there is no racist factor here — although we can all be communal — but the reason is that the average conservative person interested in protecting his indigenous land and identity has no representation in the government, the intellectual class, the media, or any public discourse. This incident also occurred after years of the Government rejecting any demand for ILP which is the only protection for both the tribal and genuine non-tribal residents against demographic threat. This was also a time when the vocal intellectuals in academics and the media were dominated by liberal views, even while the politics in the rest of the country had become very Hinduised. So, this bogeyman or threat, coupled with zero representation for the average conservative person in the media and intellectual discourse, naturally made the pressure groups the only outlet for the common man's emotions. Lastly, since the intellectual discourse was dominated by liberal views, the common man did not know how to articulate his

feelings and wisdom, only how to express it through disruptions and violence.

But things have changed a lot since 2018 for three reasons. Social Media has allowed the common conservative man to make his voice heard. Social Media also gave a platform to intellectuals and academicians who were not too liberal to be more vocal and their articulation has helped the common man express his reality differently. Social Media interaction helped the common man find a way to articulate his feelings, making him less expressive through violence and more expressive through articulation and logic. The media too seems to have changed gears and allowed for more conservative views to also fill its paper and screens. The talk shows and panel discussions that fill up the digital media have also allowed the common man's views to be articulated, giving him representation.

The media is no longer driven by ideology but by a balanced approach, keeping a wider audience in view for its ratings and viewership. But the biggest change has been the emergence of a new regional political party, the VPP. Of course, like all regional parties, it espouses indigenous rights and regional interests, but where it hits differently is that it engages in street protests. When a political party espousing regional and indigenous interests takes to the streets to rally, protest and demonstrate, it lends a voice to the common man in a way he never had before — a major representation of the common man in the political class. This is a good thing, allowing people to break free from the violent expressions that have historically defined protests. The change that we see today, where people are less supportive of the pressure groups' violent protests, is only because they now have a major representation in the political class.

Of course, we must address the root cause of the problem. There is lawlessness from the top echelons of power right down to the bottom rung of the people.

Whose fault is this? The High Court has stated time and again that the State Government itself is complicit with the mining and transport mafia in the state in view of the rampant illegal coal mining, illegal coke plants, and illegal transportation of coal across the state. And one of the industries that use a lot of coal is the Cement industry. We have seen the lawlessness of the Cement companies in the recent disruption of the Public Hearing at East Jaintia Hills, where supporters of the Shree Cement Ltd. allegedly prevented other parties from attending the hearing, and even dug up the road. The lawlessness displayed in the KSU rally on 19th August also serves no benefit to the people and does nothing to fulfill the demand for the issues that affect them. In fact, if we were to rely on our pattern recognition ability and suspend all emotional attachment to the pressure groups, we would have to conclude that it is all a dog and pony show, and that the lives of the pressure group leaders will not be marred by the arrests and they might even do better than the average person, and the Government will be let off the hook, and the issues will die down. The action of the police on the night of the 19th is also condemnable. According to the local MDC of Jaiw, the police used expired tear gas.

In conclusion, there is lawlessness in the state from the top rung of powers to the bottom rung of protesters. But what I fear most is that this is the same old flash skit from the pressure group — Government playbook that leads to nothing and we are all being taken for an emotional ride and the price we pay is communal tension. But there is a silver lining, and that is that the changes that have happened in the intellectual and political sphere, which gives more representation to the common man and has given him an alternative to violence and thinking on emotions alone. The overwhelming public opposition among the Khasis to the violence that ensued on the 19th is not a sign that the common man does not care about the issues taken up by the KSU, but that the common man now sees senseless violence as a lack of seriousness on the issues.

themselves facing suspicion or hostility elsewhere simply because they are from Meghalaya.

Meghalaya is not a playground for violence. It is home to ordinary people — students, workers, traders, drivers, business owners, families and visitors — who deserve to live and travel without fear. A strong movement is not measured by how much fear it can create. It is measured by how effectively it can make its demands heard without destroying the rights and safety of others.

The government must act on legitimate grievances through dialogue and lawful mechanisms. Protest organisations must ensure discipline and accountability among their supporters. And law-enforcement agencies must ensure that anyone responsible for violence is held accountable, regardless of affiliation.

Peaceful protest must remain protected. Violence must not.

Yours etc.,
Rangme R Marak
Tura

How Long Will Non-Tribals Be Victimised?

Editor,
When a section of the population repeatedly feels vulnerable because of its identity, the constitutional rights begin to appear more theoretical than real. The truth is that, living in Meghalaya increasingly involves accepting a fundamental condition that personal safety and the

constitutional rights are conditional upon circumstances beyond one's control. When acts of intimidation, vandalism or violence occur openly and when victims find that accountability is absent, it confirms that the State is unwilling to discharge its most fundamental responsibility of protecting its citizens without discrimination. The breakdown of faith in the judicial and policing system does not necessarily arise from cynicism. It is the result of accumulated experience. For many, this is not merely a question of the present generation. If, after two-three generations, the underlying insecurity remains unresolved, a legitimate question arises, what security can reasonably be expected for the next generation?

The larger issue, therefore, is not whether non-tribal residents should stay or leave Meghalaya. That must remain an individual choice. The real question is why any citizen should feel compelled to make that choice on the basis of fear. Fifty years of unresolved apprehension is too long for any community to be asked simply to wait for circumstances to improve. The ultimate test of Meghalaya's constitutional culture should not be whether minorities are permitted to remain, but whether they can remain without fear.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

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

A just cause does not give anyone a free pass

By Nazia Pearl Sooting

I find myself at odds with two rather simplistic reactions to the events that unfolded in Shillong on the August 19, 2026.

First, that because the Khasi Students' Union raised legitimate and praiseworthy issues, everything done in the name of the protest has to be excused, and second that because some of the KSU's supporters went too far, the issues they raised have to be pushed aside as unworthy of attention.

I can't agree with either perspective.

This mobilization is in fact responding to an important issue. The KSU has brought up significant matters like the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, the regulation of migrant workers, recruitment processes through the MPSC and DSCs, hiring at NEIGRIHMS, and the controversy surrounding the Shree Cement public hearing. These matters most definitely require discussion, deliberation, and resolution.

However, just because a cause is legitimate doesn't mean the means by which it is advanced cannot be questioned, and that is where the KSU goes wrong. The KSU's rally on August 19, 2026 involving the vandalism of Ne-taji Subhas Chandra Bose's bust at Rynjah, the destruction of dozens of vehicles on the roads, and attacks on civilians should not be written off as an unfortunate fallout of a much larger protest but instead needs to be understood as a manifestation of hooliganism and delinquency at a protest or rally.

Regardless of one's opinion on politics, monuments, civilians and assets should not be a target for frustration aimed at a contemporary government. If protesters have a bone to pick with ministers, departments, laws, or policies, then that's where their ire should be directed, not at the people who are trying to live their lives in a country governed by those laws, policies, and officials.

Sabotage, destruction and desecration do nothing to alter government policy. It doesn't bolster an argument especially not when a rally that supposedly represented the voices of the people was taking place which meant the people who were harassed and vandalized by their fellow citizens had to leave their homes, jobs, and lives to participate in a protest they may not have even known much about.

Just because people find themselves in the midst of a political clash doesn't mean they're part of it. They have their own lives to lead, homes to get back to, businesses to run, jobs to attend, and families waiting for them. Most of them are not even remotely aware or involved in the issues being protested. A movement that claims to represent everyday folks needs to think about what those ordinary people are being asked to endure. Protests are meant to shake things up and rightly so; people have every right to express their anger, be loud, cause a bit of inconvenience, and demand change, especially when they feel let down by traditional political avenues.

However, there are boundaries. Intimidation, violence, and property damage can't be justified as part of making one's voice heard. However, the KSU should not be so eager to absolve itself of all responsibility for the actions by those participating in the rally under its banner. As such, I think the union should not have relied on a single press conference regarding the apology. This is where the union's moral authority is most definitely undermined. It is not enough to simply state that the violence and damage to public and private property were not condoned by the Union in a press release. You have to actually do something about it. The KSU has to take responsibility for the political climate in which the riot occurred.

That said, I don't think it is entirely unreasonable to ask that the government do the same. After all, while it is undeniably true that the government was not directly responsible for the riot that broke out yesterday, the authorities can and most definitely should be asked: if

they were indeed not aware of the potential for damage to civilians, the risks the rally posed to the roads, and the risk of violence in the wake of a political procession, were the government officials completely unaware of the potential for a riot? PTI's report suggests that no less than hundreds of police personnel stood guard at the Secretariat as VPP's rally was taking place earlier this month with multiple road-blocks erected to control the rally. Now while it is perhaps unfair to directly compare the VPP's rally to the KSU's rally, it does raise the question as to how secure the government deems a politically sensitive procession to be. If they were indeed aware of the scale of the procession and its black flag motorbike contingent, then the authorities should have been fully aware that it would result in large-scale traffic diversions as well as heightened political tensions.

Were precautions taken ahead of time to ensure the safety of civilians in the wake of the rally? Were vulnerable points identified, police deployed on the roads, and measures taken to ensure the safety of civilians, the road-blocks, political tensions, and motorbike rallies not deemed to be enough? These are all questions that the government has to answer for itself to the people of Meghalaya since it is the government's basic responsibility to ensure that civilians are safe from riots, violence, and other disturbances of the peace to the extent possible under the circumstances.

However, playing Devil's Advocate, a potential government oversight should not excuse rioters from their responsibilities and Rioters cannot simply rely on the security forces to protect them from their own violence. Rioters have responsibilities too.

That's why I believe, Meghalaya needs two distinct investigations. The first should focus on what the protesters did and ensure those responsible are held accountable while the second should look into what the administration was aware of beforehand, what security measures were put in place, what risks were identified, and whether any preventable issues were ignored.

Neither investigation should be tailored to fit a political agenda, nor should they be used to create one. The riots in Shillong today are not something that should fuel communal hatred, nor should the misbehavior by a few rioters be used to cover up or overshadow legitimate criticism of the government as well as a legitimate need for the government to address its faults. At the same time, though, the people of Meghalaya cannot use legitimate concerns about tribal administration, migrant workers, and other causes as an excuse for attacking civilians who have nothing to do with those issues.

Meghalaya is simply too small for that kind of divisive politics to end well.

We don't have to pick between safeguarding indigenous interests and advocating for peaceful protests. It's possible to challenge government policies while also denouncing vandalism, support the right to protest while making it clear that civilians and public property deserve protection.

We must hold everyone accountable, regardless of whether we agree with their stance or not.

Meghalaya's political struggles deserve a better approach than resorting to violence, and its people shouldn't have to suffer as collateral damage. If the aim is genuinely to safeguard the rights, dignity, and future of the people of Meghalaya, then those very rights and that dignity can't be upheld by putting others at risk. Just because a cause is fueled by anger doesn't make it valid and a government doesn't gain credibility simply by criticizing those who challenge it. The only question remaining now is whether Meghalaya is ready to hold everyone accountable for the events that unfolded, including both those in power and those who chose to protest.

WHY TOURISTS SEEK SITES OF TRAGEDY

This summer, Laureano Oubina, a major Galician drug trafficker, launched a "drug trafficking tour" through the Arousa estuary. He offered his clients a boat ride through the places that defined an era and promised the story told firsthand — with lunch included. The initiative has since been banned by Galicia's regional government for infringing on tourism laws.

This is an example of "dark tourism" — the practice of visiting places marked by death, violence and crime. Oubina's proposed tour poses the question of whether this increasingly popular phenomenon is getting out of hand.

But dark tourism is a broad umbrella term. It is both a commercial label linked to the tourism industry's need for constant novelty, and a social phenomenon. It is of great academic interest to the field of cultural criminology, which studies the ways people understand crime and perceive violence.

Cultural criminology also looks at the popular non-fiction genre known as true crime. These are series, podcasts, books and movies that analyse serious criminal offences. Both true crime and dark tourism follow trends, offering valuable information about the way we understand violence and crime.

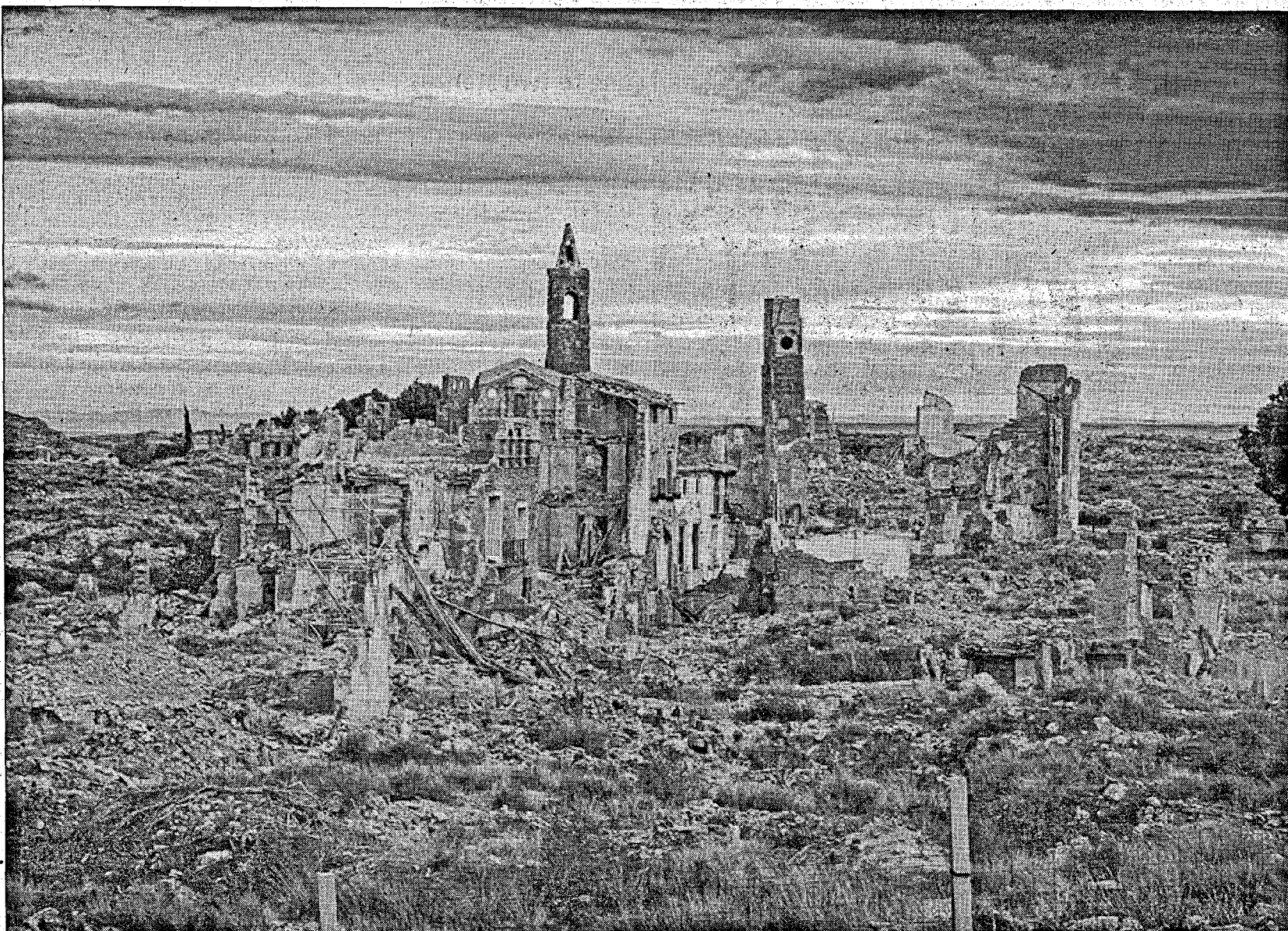
They show that society's response to criminal, violent acts is complex. Curiosity mixes with a need to reflect and remember, to try to understand their causes, and to make sense of them.

Favelas, Alcatraz, war memorials

The dark tourism that interests criminologists focuses on crime, violence, and justice. It takes many different forms. Much of it consists of destinations related to traumatic events or serious human rights violations, such as visits to concentration camps and memorials.

Places associated with armed conflicts, from Vietnam to the Second World War, can also be included in this trend. So can visits to historic prisons such as Alcatraz.

But it also includes trips to urban areas with high crime rates, off the beaten track of more conventional



tourist routes. This is the case with dangerous neighbourhoods in New York, or visits to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

Guided tours are sometimes deliberately designed to dispel the stigma associated with crime. In Mexico City, for instance, local authorities organise the "Tepitour" to offer a different perspective on the infamous Tepito neighbourhood, where the Union Tepito cartel operates. Some other routes even follow in the footsteps of a famous criminal, such as the Pablo Escobar tour in

Colombia.

These neighbourhoods and memorials are all places associated with crime or violence, but there are major differences. A visit to a concentration camp such as Auschwitz is not at all the same as a walking tour that retraces the supposed footsteps of Jack the Ripper through London — an activity that even allows pets.

The boom in mass tourism means the tourism industry has to seek out new and original experiences to meet growing demand,

including those that do not seem particularly "touristy". The rise of dark tourism is also linked to the growing significance of criminology in pop culture.

Dark tourism in Spain

Spain, one of the world's leading tourist destinations, has become a dark tourism destination, with specialised blogs highlighting many visits and itineraries linked to the Spanish Civil War. Notable examples include Guernica, the Basque town bombed by the German army during the con-

flict, and the old town of Belchite in Aragon, whose ruins still stand as a testament to the conflict.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of tourist routes linked to bunkers and sites where some of the major battles of the Spanish Civil War took place, as well as historic sites associated with witchcraft and its suppression, such as Zugarramurdi.

Though more focused on social activism, the walking tours in various Spanish cities that take in sites linked to political and urban plan-

ning corruption also fall under this umbrella.

What about the victims?

Dark tourism is often promoted in order to boost destinations' economies, and it reflects the tourism industry's capacity for innovation. For sites linked to historical memory, it can also raise social awareness and reinforce their educational value.

But it also poses significant challenges. Many of these sites were conceived as spaces for remembrance, mourning and healing. Catering to tourists was not among their priorities. One of the main risks of dark tourism is therefore that it trivialises their original purpose. This is evident in disrespectful behaviour such as selfies at Auschwitz and other sites of remembrance.

Furthermore, these sites often embody uncomfortable heritage that requires complex and controversial processes of interpretation. This is the case with Spain's Valle de los Caídos, the Valley of the Fallen, a vast mausoleum complex that previously housed the remains of Spain's former dictator Francisco Franco.

It is also essential to respect the memory of the victims and to consider the impact that tourism can have on people living in places associated with crime or violence. The marketing of products or experiences that might justify or glorify criminals is particularly problematic here.

For all of these reasons, dark tourism must be conducted ethically, providing context for the events and respecting the victims to avoid causing them more suffering. When managed ethically, it can encourage learning and reflection on traumatic events that have left their mark on society.

As French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne said, "every society gets the criminals it deserves". Following his logic, every society also gets the kind of dark tourism that reflects its priorities. (*The Conversation*)

Authored by Jorge Gracia Ibanez, San Jorge University, Zaragoza (Spain)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, AUGUST 23, 2026

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon/trine Sun on your solar return chart ensures an excellent year ahead. You will be popular and sociable at work and will be appreciated by peers and family. You will have the energy and ability to do perfect things. This will prove to be a wonderful period. You will be raring to go and achieve best in your field. Partners will support you in your ventures. You will be able to take people along with you. Your popularity in family and social circle will increase. You would also like to give lot of time to your family. Somebody known to you may get attractive to you and there could be a cosy affair leading to marriage. Your family will support you fully. There are possibilities of your going to an exotic location with family for vacations. This will give you respite from hectic work schedule. Financially you will be well off. Your health overall will be fine.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) There is a need to do some assessment now about the turn your life is taking. Perhaps you are too busy with your work and have even neglected some other aspects. You need to look at your likes and interests too. And leave little time for yourself too. The elders of your family will guide you well. You will get surprising results. You will come up to the expectations of people around you. Your business too will prosper and flourish. You will enhance your name and prestige. There are chances of a promotion and increase in salary. You will also attend a marriage function or party. You will also plan to go on a short trip with family for fun and relaxation. It is a pleasant week for you.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Your responsibility towards people will increase. You will fulfill the expectations of those who are dependent on you. You will also look after your elderly people in the family well. You will also have monetary gains. You will plan to buy a vehicle or property. You will also invest in books, shares, gold and mutual funds. A new person can enter your life suddenly, leading to a warm and fulfilling relationship. The time will be happily spent among your own people. You will also have professional gains. Your house will reverberate with the laughter of guests. You will also fulfill your dreams. You will be made to work hard. You will not mind it. You will materialize your plans at the last moment. Your health will remain perfect. And you will remain cheerful and happy.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) You would like to stay with your family. And spend some time with them. You will work and plan in that direction to make your life happy and prosperous. You need to re-focus on some of your priorities and make changes accordingly. You will pay attention to your family, work and relationship. Your friends will help and guide you. You will also feel a lot different emotionally and physically. You will understand the feelings and expectations of your close ones. You matter a lot to them. Lovebirds will have a wonderful time and bonding. You will have to go out for work. Your trip will be successful. Your bosses will be satisfied with your performance. You will pay high respect to your elders. You will also take out time to rest along with doing work.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) Your time will be full of gains and profit. The decisions taken in your business will prove to be right. You will also progress in your job. Your peers and superiors will be happy with your performance. Your financial position will remain stable and strong. You will also make best use of your communication skills. Your work will get done with ease. You will feel you are at the crossroads, and you need to do something special. You will also assess yourself and others. You will take steps for your self-development. You will get satisfaction with your progress. You will come forward to help others. You will get pleasure in the company of your family and friends.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) It is an amazing week for you. You will make a program for going out of station on a trip with your family for fun and relaxation. You desperately need a break from your hectic work schedule. You will also make good relations with everyone. You will also meet some of your old friends and colleagues. You will earn lot of money. There will be opportunities for sudden gains. Your efforts will fetch you good returns in your business. Increasing interaction with people will be beneficial. You will take the right decisions regarding marriage, investments, property etc. Money wise you will get best results. You will make new friends. Your health will remain fine. The circumstances will be favorable. Your children will study hard and will follow your advice. Your popularity will increase.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) It will be a peaceful time for you. Your attention will be focused on family and work. You will remain devoted to your work and make progress. You will also lead a quality life. Your business plans for expansion will get

underway. Your colleagues and associates will remain fully in your support and look forward to guidance. You will remain in total control and manage things well. You will pay equal attention to your family ties and discharge your responsibilities well. You will work with a cool mind, and all things will turn in your favor. The graph of your prestige will go up. You will have no health issues. Travel will prove profitable. Your self-confidence and determination will be high.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) You will get job opportunities, and you will take no time to accept them. You will feel a lot more confident and not afraid to accept challenges. Your boss and colleagues will be happy with your work. There are chances of promotion, increments etc. too. You will also impress your life partner with your dedication and sincerity. He/she will come closer to you. You need to take care of health of your elder family members. Also, you need to curb your expenses. You will never be sort of funds. Money will keep coming. Your enemies will try to bother you but will not get success. Your hard work and efforts will bring success.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) As you need to meet work deadlines in office the work pressure will be too much. You will get very little time for yourself. But you will have to investigate and take care of your health. Taking a short break from work and going on a trip with family will do a world of good for you. Gradually you will feel relieved from all the troubles that have been bothering you for some time. Your financial condition and status will also be good. You will also buy some insurance policy and make investments in banks and shares. You will be successful in all your efforts to get money. The relations with your brothers will be better. You will receive some good news from somewhere.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) You will work on the path of success due to your intelligence and patience. Honesty, work passion and truthfulness will be on your mind constantly. This will win you lot of admirers and your bosses will be impressed by your work and performance. Disputes related to assets will be solved in the presence of an experienced person. You will also enjoy the trust and confidence of your colleagues and associates. Your brothers will also listen to you and give equal respect. Love mates will enjoy bonding and trust. There will be a great improvement in the relationship between husband and wives. You will also take care of your children. You need not lose your patience and discipline in certain matters. You can have a lengthy discussion with your superiors on a matter of vital importance.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) Your problems will be resolved with ease. You will be successful in job, business and investments. There are chances of continuously gaining money. You will also get lot of name and fame. You will also accomplish a certain responsibility at your workplace. You could get promoted. You will also feel full of energy and motivated and ready to accept any challenge. You will also meet an influential and inspirational person. Your financial status will be strong. Your partner will be a source of strength. Despite being busy with your work, you will give time to your family. You will be successful in your love relations. A decision regarding marriage can be taken after taking your family elders into confidence. All your plans and career will be successful. You will get rewards for your efforts.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) The beginning, middle and end of the week will be fantastic. These are the days to execute your plans and ideas. Your good work will be appreciated. You will feel a lot more confident. Whatever you do will be done with full loyalty and dedication. There will be give and take in relations. Your family members will come close to you. You will also enjoy perfect equations with your mate. You will continue to do brilliant work. You will move forward in the right direction because of your maturity and right thinking. Your entire attention will be on to your family and house. You will feel enlightened and relaxed.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) There will be happiness and bliss in your personal life. You will plan to go on a trip with family. You will witness joy, cheer and unity in the family. Family members will love and respect each other. You will understand the needs and demands of your children and do your best. They will also listen to you. You will also walk on the path of spirituality. It will make you feel peaceful and relaxed. You will also indulge in your interests and give time to gardening, walking and other leisure activities. You will face still competition in your business but that will not worry you much. Your government related work will get done with ease. Tax disputes will be resolved.

Researchers develop new tool to estimate biological age of cells

Researchers have developed a new tool that can estimate the biological age of a cell by analysing its gene activity and determining which genes are active or inactive.

The tool, named 'Pasta' and described in a paper published in the journal *Advanced Science*, can also help identify substances that influence cellular ageing. It can distinguish between older, senescent cells and more youthful cells that have characteristics similar to stem cells, according to the researchers.

Researchers from Sweden's Karolinska Institutet and Stockholm University said ageing is a major risk factor for many diseases, but there is currently a lack of methods that can reliably measure how quickly individual cells age.

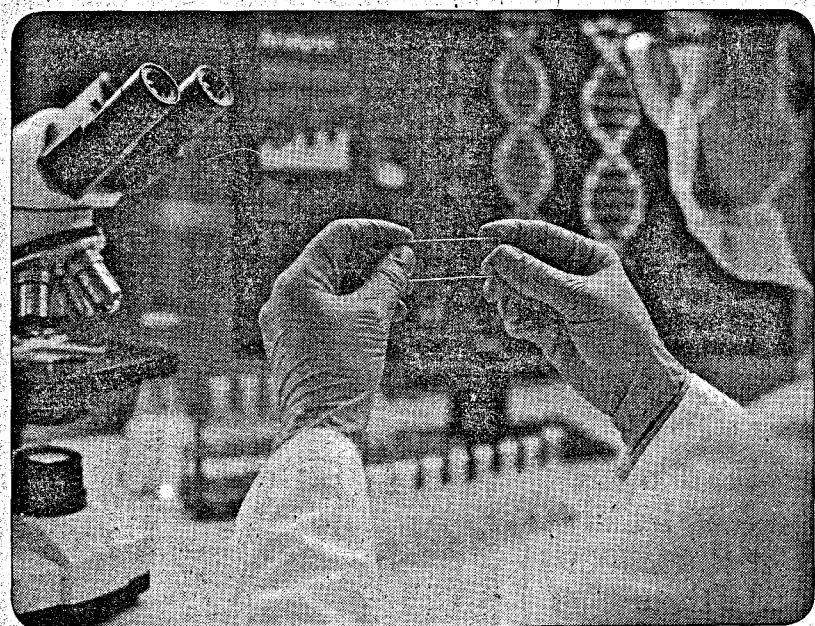
Biological age does not necessarily correspond directly to the chronological age of an organism. Cells within the same body can age at different rates, and changes in their biological state can be reflected in the activity of their genes.

The researchers found that cells with a high biological age often exhibited increased activity in genes associated with DNA damage and cellular stress. Such changes in gene activity can provide clues about the processes taking place inside ageing cells and may help researchers better understand the mechanisms that drive cellular ageing.

To develop Pasta, the researchers analysed gene activity data from more than 17,000 tissue samples obtained from healthy people. The large dataset allowed them to examine patterns of gene activity across different tissues and biological states and use those patterns to estimate the biological age of cells.

In the next stage of the research, the scientists used Pasta to analyse more than three million gene profiles available in public databases. The cells represented in these databases had been exposed to thousands of drugs and genetic alterations.

By comparing the gene activity patterns, the researchers were able to identify substances and biological signalling pathways that appeared to either increase or decrease a cell's biological age. Some of the findings were subsequently tested and confirmed through laboratory



experiments using human cells.

"With this tool, we can track how cells change over time and gain insights into the mechanisms driving ageing," lead author Jerome Salignon, a researcher at the Karolinska Institutet, said.

The researchers said such a tool could be useful in studies aimed at understanding why cells age differently and what factors may influence those changes. It could also provide a way of screening large numbers of potential compounds to determine whether they affect the biological age of cells.

"The tool can help us identify candidates for future treatments of age-related diseases and cancer. In laboratory experiments, we validated two new candidates: pralatrexate, which accelerated cellular ageing, and piperlongumine, which made the cells more youthful," Salignon said.

The findings point to the possibility of using cellular biological age as an indicator when studying potential treatments for diseases associated with ageing. Substances that appear to make cells biologically younger could potentially be investigated further, while compounds that accelerate cellular ageing could provide insights into mechanisms involved in disease and cellular decline.

However, the researchers cautioned that the results so far are

based on cell-based experiments. Further research will be needed to determine whether the findings can eventually be translated into treatments that are safe and effective for patients, Salignon said.

The researchers noted that previous tools developed to measure biological age often worked only for a particular tissue or relied on a specific type of data. This limited their usefulness when researchers wanted to compare cells from different tissues or use different laboratory techniques.

Pasta was designed to address some of these limitations by being broadly applicable across a range of tissues and cell types. The researchers said the tool could potentially allow research groups to analyse data they have already collected, without having to rely on a single type of biological sample or experimental method.

"We built Pasta to be broadly applicable across many tissues, cell types and laboratory techniques, so that all research groups can apply it to the data they already have," the researchers said.

The researchers said the tool could therefore support further investigations into the biological processes associated with ageing and help scientists identify potential targets for future research into age-related diseases and cancer. (*PTI*)

Gathering gloom

SEASONS change. What came as a lightning strike in the national capital at the behest of the newly formed Cockroach Janata Party and powered principally by students aggrieved over the NEET fiasco carried with it a strange dynamic to change the style of political discourse at this critical hour for the nation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose principal target for his discourses was the country's large mass of the gullible, illiterate poor—feeding them with words and empty rhetoric—is now bent upon changing the plate and wooing Gen Z, or the youth, in whom he sees a threat to his throne. Modi is repeatedly posting videos on social media platforms, soliloquies again, calling them "friends". The young generation, which once backed the BJP, is obviously disgruntled. Public mood is given to periodic swings.

For many, Modi was tolerable for two terms. He seemed to provide political and economic stability to the nation, but closer scrutiny now—as reflected in comments by former Union Finance/Home Minister P Chidambaram at a nationally televised interaction—would show his government is seriously faltering on the economic front. The feel-good factor was largely a segment-specific effect. When India claimed to be the fastest-growing economy, it slumped to the sixth position from the assumed fourth in global GDP terms. Starkly, as the national economy is "strengthened," through big talks from the pulpit, this growth is not reflected in the wages/salaries of the working class. This disconnect is glaring. Jobs are scarce. Salaries are poor. Ordinary people are caught in a hard struggle for their existence. The manufacturing sector that should provide jobs to millions is failing to gain steam. Even the trickle-down effect, a theory once propounded by Manmohan Singh, is not visible on the ground. Flight of funds from India to tax havens abroad is steadily increasing. Fewer FDI fails to impress. If the fall in crude prices since 2014, which came at the right time for Modi as PM and helped stabilize prices for years, that scenario has abruptly changed with the Strait of Hormuz crisis. The Monsoon has failed after many years. The gathering gloom is inescapable.

Perceptions are that Modi's third term, past its halfway mark, is annoyingly boring. He has no new ideas to hold forth. While progress across sectors is a natural phenomenon, faster progress is what makes governance impressive. For this, structural reforms are a prerequisite. Economic liberalization of the Rao-Singh era since the early 1990s helped the nation get out of a grim financial crisis and power growth. Singh had also initiated GST, but BJP stonewalled it in the Rajya Sabha. Later, Modi implemented it. Yet, economic progress is stalled by the increasing grip of bureaucracy through a surfeit of rules and regulations, which, as Chidambaram noted rightly, created a scenario worse than that of the Licence Raj that Singh sought to abolish in the 1990s. Regulations Raj is stonewalling economic progress. Meaningful structural reforms are the way forward, but Modi and his team have proven incapable of any such intellectually demanding engagements. This will retard the nation's forward march.

Letters to the Editor

KSU Violence Brings Disrepute & Suffering to Meghalayans

Editor,
Through your esteemed office, I would like to ask why the leaders of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) do not realize that their actions antagonize people in neighbouring states. People from Assam have not shown the same kind of violence as the so-called student organization, yet they blocked the supply of essential goods to Meghalaya. Who is suffering? I believe everyone in our state. I am not against peaceful protest for reasonable demands, but we must all condemn any assault on innocent citizens and destruction of public properties.

As reported, tourist arrivals have dropped to zero, causing a serious economic setback. Homestay owners, who depend entirely on visitors, are left without income. Will KSU leaders take responsibility for feeding their children? Farmers are unable to export vegetables, broom grass, ginger, bay leaves, and cinnamon to the plains. Who will bear this burden?

Even a blockade of petrol for ten days will create chaos. Already, the Petroleum Mazdoor Union in Assam had stopped loading Meghalaya-bound tankers, leading to panic buying at petrol pumps in Shillong. According to reports, 31 vehicles were damaged and 16 people injured during the KSU rally, where Assam-registered vehicles were specifically targeted.

KSU members should go through social media to see how people of Meghalaya have been called names. Will people from outside the state understand that this violence was caused by a few miscreants, while the rest are peace-loving Meghalayans? Many are now blaming the entire state, which is a matter of deep shame for Meghalaya.

Prior to social media, such incidents remained local. Now, the world learns within minutes. Barbaric assault against innocent citizens has been heavily condemned. The good name and integrity that Meghalaya once enjoyed have been tarnished. KSU leaders must understand that their reckless actions are destroying the state's reputation and the trust of its people.

If the KSU truly cares for the people, it must stop these destructive tactics permanently; otherwise, the future of this state is dark. Meghalaya's future depends on peace, cooperation with neighbors, and safeguarding the livelihoods of its citizens, not on vandalism, assault, arson, blockades, harassment of innocent people, and the destruction of public property.

Yours etc.,
Robin Lyngdoh
Via email

Negative Consequences of Ethnocentrism

Editor,
The recent violence that took place in Shillong has perturbed everyone. What began as a black flag bike

Violence truly has no place in a modern democratic society. Every right-minded person in the state should condemn violence in all its forms, but citizens have the right to ask: Why did the violence happen? Why couldn't the state government prevent such an untoward incident from happening? When unpleasant incidents happen, the government should own up to responsibility because, despite having all the intelligence machinery in place, it has not been able to prevent the violence.

Ignoring Is Not a Strategy

The irony is that the KSU gave the government a 15-day notice to address the highlighted issues, yet the government did nothing. The first rule of conflict management is dialogue; only through dialogue can an issue be resolved, yet the government chose to ignore the KSU's demands. The government should have invited the KSU for talks before the deadline ended to show it was at least interested in solving the issue, as listening to one another is another important way to resolve a crisis. The government's turning a deaf ear to the KSU's demands was the last straw that lit the fire.

The Violence Government Overlooks

It must be reiterated that the violence perpetrated by the miscreants among those who took part in the rally organized by the KSU is condemnable. But there was also violence perpetrated by government agencies, or by those supported by the government.

While we condemn Wednesday's violence in the state capital, we should also not forget the violence perpetrated by the state government against members of the public who were on their way to attend the public hearing at Lum Syrman in Eleka Nongkhlieh. People were attacked, and not even an ambulance was spared. Yet the government has remained silent about what happened and has said nothing about the circumstances surrounding what was clearly a one-sided and biased public hearing.

The only public road connecting Smta and Saipung was deliberately dug up by people who sought to prevent farmers from Shnongrim and others from reaching the hearing site to voice their concerns. Shnongrim is a village located downstream on the River Letai and is

rally by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) turned into a deliberate rampage through the city. Masked participants of the rally destroyed vehicles bearing Assam registration, intimidated tourists, vandalized properties, and injured bystanders, trampling the law and order in the daylight. This exposure of xenophobic tendency is not new in Meghalaya. In the quest for indigenous autonomy, the state recorded several similar incidents of violence where non-tribals were horribly targeted.

Since achieving statehood in 1972, Meghalaya's tribals have blamed non-tribals and other communities for taking their jobs, businesses, and lands. Every non-Khasi face is deemed an outsider here. Whenever clamors of anger and frustration reached a crescendo in the name of claiming land rights, jobs, and empowerment, it never receded without taking a few lives in Meghalaya. Every non-tribal residing in the land has paid the price of 'being other' at some point. From time to time, the state has witnessed arson and killings in the name of "ethnic cleansing," ignoring the fact that a large number of Meghalaya locals depend on tourism and each act of violence can cost them economically. The effects of each stone thrown at a car from another state can ripple immediately and hamper the hotel and travel industry in the form of low tourist footfall. In fact, there is evidence of how blockades imposed on the Assam-Shillong highway in retaliation for treating Assamese as outsiders have led to severe economic loss in

famous for the Letai Valley. The legend told to us as children was that the rice stalks in the valley could reach the height of a human being. This valley will be affected if the government proceeds with permitting the cement plant to operate. The question is: why has the government still not arrested those responsible for digging up the road? Or is the government suggesting that this road is not public property, and that those who obstructed it are therefore not accountable? If the leaders of the KSU were arrested for the unrest and for damaging public property, the same yardstick should apply to the Daloi and the leaders of those who support setting up the cement plant.

Why is the government silent about what happened at Lum Syrman? Why have those responsible for attacking members of the public and obstructing their access to the public hearing not been arrested? If such acts are allowed to go unchallenged, what message is the government sending to the people?

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

The irony is that when an untoward incident happens in the far-flung areas of the state, nobody bothers to ask questions. But when something happens in the heart of Meghalaya, the state's conscience is suddenly pricked. This is a classic case of the government—and even the honourable court—being unmoved by injustice and unfair treatment when it happens to people in rural areas, yet responding quickly when it happens in Shillong.

In my opinion, this time at least, the government must also be held accountable for what is happening in Shillong. It cannot condemn violence in one place while remaining silent about violence and intimidation elsewhere. Silence in the face of injustice is not neutrality; it risks becoming complicity.

The MDA's Selective Conservation

The MDA-led government cannot be trusted when it comes to protecting the environment. In fact, this government's logic is sometimes confounding. Take, for example, the fact that the government made every effort and spent a huge amount of money from its resources to get the Living Root Bridges a UNESCO heritage tag, yet in

Meghalaya in the form of supply and transit disruption.

The broader question is how Meghalaya can develop and create job opportunities when one of its student bodies (KSU) has successfully impeded the entry of railways in the state for over 40 years. The reason behind this was that railways could lead to a mass influx of outsiders, according to them. Can a state flourish by depending only on roadways? Many businessmen moved out of Shillong between 1994 and 2000, facing heavy tax payments to non-state armed actors. This revealed the gap between the government's promises of security and protection and the actual reality in Meghalaya.

In a state where pressure groups enjoy "Carte Blanche" to carry out acts of intimidation and vandalism with impunity and the government plays mum for fear of facing electoral backlash, little can people expect about stability and protection there. Meghalaya's problem lies somewhere else, so unnecessarily targeting innocent people will not help. Meghalaya government needs to maintain a clear transit policy with its neighbouring states and neutralize the fringe elements which always wanted to destabilize the state. Civil society should openly condemn hatred and mobocracy whenever they crop up. If the state is to expand its tourism industry, it cannot allow law and order to collapse. A parochial mindset and isolation will always lead to economic stagnation rather than development.

Yours etc.,
Kabir Ahmed Saikia,
Jorhat

Shillong Violence: It Takes Two to Tango

By H.H. Mohrmen

the Nongkhlieh area it chose to allow a cement operation that will inevitably destroy the cave system there. I question the logic here: it takes a few hundred years and human intervention to make a living root bridge—yes, living root bridges cannot come into being without human intervention—while caves are entirely of nature's own making, without any human intervention. Instead of declaring caves that took millions of years to form as heritage sites, this government has chosen to permit mining in the area, which will inevitably destroy these irreplaceable natural heritages. In fact, the government does not even see the need to protect these caves.

The Government and Its Lopsided Logic

There are other instances where the government exposes its topsy-turvy logic. Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, in one of his press briefings regarding the cement plant at Nongkhlieh, argued that many people also support setting up a cement plant in the Nongkhlieh area. Following this logic, would the government also do away with national parks and sanctuaries if many people wished to do away with the protection and preservation of Balpakram National Park or the Narpuh Sanctuary? Will the government even consider the plight of the farmers of the area, whose livelihoods will be affected by the mining activity and the proposed cement plant? Does this not imply that the government is there not to protect the farmers, but to protect the interests of the cement companies?

Nongkhlieh: It Is Not About Limestone Only

In the aftermath of Wednesday's violence, while travelling on a public vehicle from Jowai to Shillong, [someone] remarked that cement companies are swarming East Jaintia Hills because of the quality of the limestone in the area. That may be true, but East Jaintia Hills certainly cannot feed the construction requirements of the entire world. The state has to decide when enough is enough. Nongkhlieh also has certain natural produce unique to the area, and not many people—not even the locals—know about this. The topsoil of some villages, like Shnongrim, Tongseng, and even up to Daistong, is not

ordinary soil, but clay. The government would do itself a favour by confirming this and making local residents aware of the facts, because if we sell the land for a song, we will find ourselves in the proverbial situation of a diamond in a pigsty.

The clay that covers almost the entire tableland could be a source of employment for locals, who could make crockery, and this livelihood would not only be sustainable but would remain within local control. Yet this government, which claims to help create entrepreneurs out of young locals, has instead chosen to bring in corporate companies to start cement plants in the area.

The Repercussions of the Imbroglio

This time, the repercussions of the violence from the KSU programme will clearly have a long-lasting impact on the Assam-Meghalaya border, but there could also be a positive outcome from this issue. Bhogtoram Mawroh has suggested that what happened could serve as a model for a permanent solution to the Assam-Meghalaya tourist taxi issue. This would be a win-win solution for both sides: Assam tourist taxis would ferry passengers entering Assam, and Meghalaya would do the same.

Hitting Two Birds with One Stone

The government could make the facilitation centre at Umiling also serve as an exchange point where tourist taxis from the two states can exchange passengers. The centre would not only help the state register all tourists and visitors, but could also serve as a checkpoint to control illegal entry into the state.

If only taxis registered in Meghalaya shuttled tourists and visitors within the state, the government could more easily monitor and control the to-and-fro travel of visitors. The state could also more easily control state-registered tourist vehicles in the event of crime. Finally, moving vehicles are also a major source of waste generation in the state, so if only Meghalaya-registered vehicles operated within the state, it would be easier for the government to monitor this part of the problem too.

In conclusion, the government cannot wash its hands of what happened in Shillong on Wednesday, August 19; like the saying goes, "it takes two hands to clap." Yet the government remains silent.

Black Flag Rally Incident Raises Concern Over Violence and Unity in Meghalaya

Editor,
The recent black flag rally organized by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) is a matter of serious concern after some people turned the situation violent. What was meant to be a peaceful protest was misused by a few individuals who started attacking dharm (non-tribal) people they met on the way. There were also reports of vandalism, including damage to the statue of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Swami Vivekananda etc. Such actions are completely unacceptable and go against the values of peace and respect.

Due to these incidents, the entire blame is on the KSU. This has created a bad impression of the organization in public eye. It is also unfortunate that some KSU leaders were arrested because of the actions of others, which raises concern about fairness and proper investigation. The wrong actions of a few should not define the intention of the whole organization.

The incident has also increased division between the Khasi and dharm communities. This kind of tension is harmful for the unity and harmony of Meghalaya. The state is known for its peaceful co-existence, and such incidents should not be allowed to damage that relationship. Acts of violence and hatred must be strongly

condemned by all sections of society. At the same time, KSU has been raising important issues about protecting the land and identity of indigenous people. Meghalaya is a small state, and there is a genuine concern about the effect of free entry of outsiders on land, culture, and resources. However, it is also the responsibility of KSU to ensure that protests remain peaceful and disciplined so that no one can misuse such movements.

We therefore request the government to kindly take necessary action to protect the land and the people. Proper implementation of the Meghalaya Resident Safety and Security Act is needed to regulate the entry of outsiders. Concerns regarding the Shree Cement project should be handled carefully, keeping in mind the interest of local communities considering the pros and cons. Fair recruitment in jobs for local people must be ensured. The Migrant Workmen Act should be strictly enforced to monitor outside workers. The issue of uranium mining also requires wise and careful decision-making for the safety and well-being of the people.

In conclusion, violence and division must be rejected. Peace, responsibility, and unity are very important. Only through understanding, justice, and timely action can Meghalaya move forward in harmony and security.

Yours etc.,
Rilang Iki Bamon,
Via email

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Beyond the Black Flags: Cultural Claims, Violence and the Test of Justice in Shillong

By Anusuya Baruah

The black-flag motorcycle rally organised by the Khasi Students' Union in Shillong on 19 August 2026 was meant to press a five-point charter of demands: reforms in public recruitment that prioritise local residents, fuller implementation of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act to regulate migration, tighter controls on migrant labour, accountability over certain public-sector appointments, and the cancellation of a controversial public hearing for a cement plant. What unfolded instead was widespread violence—stone-pelting, assaults that left sixteen people injured, thirty-one vehicles damaged (many bearing Assam registration plates), two vehicles set ablaze, and the vandalism of statues of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Swami Vivekananda. Three senior KSU leaders were arrested and remanded to judicial custody; an SIT has been constituted; and tensions quickly spilled across the Assam-Meghalaya border, stranding tourists and dis-

ties. Mere "macro-level" democracy (elections and formal equality) is insufficient when everyday governance and economic opportunity appear skewed against the historically rooted community. A thicker, more deliberative approach is required: one that opens institutional space for indigenous voices without collapsing into exclusion.

Yet Deveaux is equally clear that respect for cultural pluralism cannot mean licence for violence or the unilateral erasure of others' standing. Targeting vehicles from neighbouring Assam, assaulting pedestrians, and damaging public symbols do not advance recognition; they corrode the mutual respect and agency rights that must underwrite any durable settlement. Violence against non-tribal residents and visitors risks reproducing the very hierarchies of exclusion that indigenous groups rightly protest. It also hands opponents an easy narrative that cultural claims are inherently majoritar-

"The episode is not merely a law-and-order failure. It is a stark reminder of the dilemmas that political philosopher Monique Deveaux examines in Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice. Deveaux argues that justice in culturally plural democratic societies requires more than thin toleration or formal neutrality. It demands genuine "respect for cultural pluralism"—recognition of the standing of cultural communities, especially those whose identities are largely non-voluntary and rooted in shared history, language, and customary institutions, and the practical opportunity for those communities to help shape the public norms and institutions that bind them. When such recognition is withheld or reduced to administrative accommodation, the result is often frustrated claims that can turn confrontational."

rupting daily movement.

The episode is not merely a law-and-order failure. It is a stark reminder of the dilemmas that political philosopher Monique Deveaux examines in Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice: Deveaux argues that justice in culturally plural democratic societies requires more than thin toleration or formal neutrality. It demands genuine "respect for cultural pluralism"—recognition of the standing of cultural communities, especially those whose identities are largely non-voluntary and rooted in shared history, language, and customary institutions, and the practical opportunity for those communities to help shape the public norms and institutions that bind them. When such recognition is withheld or reduced to administrative accommodation, the result is often frustrated claims that can turn confrontational. Conversely, when groups themselves resort to violence or the targeting of outsiders, they undermine the very principles of reciprocal respect and political inclusion that alone can secure lasting justice.

Shillong's history makes these tensions especially acute. From its establishment as a permanent colonial administrative capital in 1874, the city has been a frontier contact zone where colonial planning logics intersected with Khasi shnong, raid and hima institutions, producing layered spatial hierarchies and enduring questions of belonging between tribal and non-tribal residents. The KSU's demands—protection of indigenous demographic and employment space, regulation of migration, and a stronger voice in decisions that affect the hills—echo legitimate concerns about cultural survival and political inclusion that Deveaux identifies as central to justice for national and ethnic minori-

ties. The path forward lies not in repression or in endless cycles of agitation and crackdown, but in the deliberative liberalism Deveaux advocates. This requires the state to move beyond neutral administration and engage seriously with the substance of the five-point charter through inclusive dialogue that takes Khasi cultural membership and historical claims seriously. It also requires student organisations and civil society to renounce violence as a method and to recognise that legitimate justice claims must be pursued in ways that preserve the agency and dignity of all residents of a hybrid city. Only then can Shillong's layered urban history become a resource for negotiated belonging rather than a site of recurrent rupture.

The recent clashes have injured people, damaged property, strained inter-state relations and wounded the city's reputation as a place of learning and hospitality. They also present a choice. Will the response be limited to arrests, SITs and temporary restrictions, or will it open genuine institutional space for cultural recognition and shared decision-making? Deveaux's framework reminds us that the second course is both more just and more sustainable. Respect for cultural pluralism is not a zero-sum game; it is the difficult, ongoing work of making democratic institutions thick enough to hold difference without descending into domination or violence. Shillong, and Meghalaya, still have the chance to choose that harder, better path.

(The writer is a PhD Scholar, Cotton University, Guwahati)

“If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.”
Mark Twain

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Accountability Critical

THE events of August 19 raise many serious questions about how a supposedly peaceful protest led instead to violence and mayhem on the streets, as if following a familiar playbook. The procession left the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) office after due diligence regarding how the two-wheeler protest march should move and what route to take etc. What is difficult to comprehend is how that bike rally passed through localities and not on the main thoroughfare. A group of bikers passed through RR Colony, Rynjah, damaging Netaji Subhas Bose's bust. A similar attempt was made to damage the statue of Swami Vivekananda. Netaji Subhas Bose is a freedom fighter and a national hero who does not belong to a particular community. However, what is problematic is whether the district administration granted permission for the bike rally to pass through localities, especially vulnerable ones. And the fact that there was no police bandobast along these areas raises more questions than there are answers to. Normally when VIPs come to the state the entire stretch of road along which they travel is well guarded. Since there is a history of such bike rallies going berserk and violating the terms of agreement it would have been prudent to fortify the security measures.

This time the Meghalaya High Court has taken suo motu cognisance of the incident, particularly taking note of the damage to government (read public property), outstation and public-transport vehicles and assault on unarmed, ordinary citizens going about their work. The fact that the attackers did not even spare a school bus and a tourist vehicle with children in it shows their ruthlessness. They were executing an agenda, but for whom and at whose behest? The High Court has directed the State to report what action has been taken and whether the perpetrators have been arrested. The problem arises when public property is destroyed – in this case the burning of government vehicles - the funds used to replace them would go from public funds which could have otherwise been put to better use. Hence the next time any organisation desires to call a protest march they should be asked to sign a bond that if there is any destruction to public property during the protest, that would have to be compensated by the organisation calling the protest. This might bring in some accountability among the sundry pressure groups that have their grouse against the government. In the August 19 protest citizens are questioning the absence of the police which allowed the masked bikers to go berserk. Did the KSU leadership sanction the wearing of masks by the protesters and also covering up the registration numbers of their two-wheelers? Is that not a clear intent to hide their criminal acts? For some reason it appeared to the man on the street as if there were failures in intelligence gathering and preparedness.

This time, the state has to get to the root of the matter and find the culprits responsible for the attack on vehicles and defenceless individuals. For too long, groups have got away with violence and bloodshed. Since 1979 till date there has not been a single conviction of the perpetrators of violence in Meghalaya. While Meghalaya's indigenous identity and constitutional protections are important, the defence of indigenous rights cannot be associated with intimidation or violence against people perceived as outsiders. And who exactly is an outsider? How long does a person have to have been a resident of Meghalaya to remove the tag "outsider." Demanding accountability does not mean suppressing the right for just demands. It means answering for anything untoward that happens during a protest for which permission is given and an undertaking also has been given by the protesting organisation.

FCRA Bill: Can Regulation Protect Both Accountability and Institutions?

By Dr. Bijoy A. Sangma

In Meghalaya, the FCRA debate is not taking place only in Parliament. Its implications are being discussed in churches, educational institutions, hospitals and community organisations, because many of these institutions have received foreign contributions at some point. Schools, colleges, hospitals, hostels, charitable organisations and social-service programmes have served communities across the State for decades. Many have religious affiliations. Some have received foreign contributions at different stages, while their present activities may depend largely on domestic resources.

The concern is how changes in the law could affect institutions that have accumulated assets over many years, often from different sources. The Lok Sabha's decision on August 12 to refer the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 to a 31-member Joint Parliamentary Committee provides an opportunity for these questions to be examined. The referral neither accepts nor rejects the arguments on either side. It allows Parliament to consider what should remain, what may need revision and what safeguards may be required.

Why the Concern Is Real?

The issue came into sharper focus after Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma took it up with the Union Government. On July 5, the Chief Minister led a delegation including representatives of the Presbyterian Church of India, the North East India Christian Council, the Catholic Archdiocese of Shillong and the Garo Baptist Convention to meet Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The delegation raised concerns about the proposed amendments and their possible implications for religious, educational, charitable and social-service institutions. The concern is understandable.

A school may have been established with one source of support and expanded later through domestic donations, fees or institutional income. A hospital may have received foreign assistance for one project while later buildings and equipment were financed locally. Over time, the financial history of an institution can become complex. That is where the proposed law needs practical examination.

The Property Question

Much of the concern surrounding the Bill relates to what happens to assets when an organisation's FCRA registration ceases.

The existing FCRA contains provisions concerning the vesting of foreign contribution and assets created

from it after cancellation or surrender of registration. The 2026 Bill proposes a more detailed framework for provisional vesting, management, supervision and eventual disposal, and extends it to circumstances in which an FCRA certificate ceases.

There is a legitimate administrative question. If an organisation no longer holds an FCRA certificate, the State needs a lawful mechanism for dealing with foreign contribution and assets created from it. But Meghalaya's experience raises another question.

Suppose a hospital was established decades ago with some foreign assistance. Later buildings were financed through domestic donations, loans, institutional income or other resources. The hospital may now function almost entirely through domestic resources: What happens to its property if its FCRA registration ceases?

The answer should depend on records, evidence, valuation and a clear procedure. The issue becomes harder when foreign and domestic funds have been used together over many years. A building does not identify which source paid for each room or later extension.

The law therefore needs clarity on how mixed-source assets will be identified and valued, and how legitimate domestic interests in such assets will be established. That is a question for legislative scrutiny, not political assertion.

Renewal Deserves Attention

Another issue deserves attention: renewal of FCRA registration.

The proposed framework deals with cessation in circumstances including non-application for renewal, denial of renewal or failure to obtain renewal before expiry. These situations may arise for different reasons and should not necessarily be treated alike.

An organisation that deliberately violates the law is different from one facing a procedural deficiency. An organisation whose renewal application is pending is also different from one whose renewal has been refused after examination.

PRS Legislative Research has identified concerns about the absence of an appeal against refusal to renew an FCRA certificate and the absence of an express opportunity of hearing before such refusal. If cessation can affect institutional assets, the procedure leading to such a decision deserves attention.

A sound regulatory system should be firm where there is deliberate violation,

while allowing correction of deficiencies where the law permits. Decisions should be clear, reasoned and capable of timely review. That does not weaken regulation. It makes regulation more predictable.

Meghalaya's Political Response Has Been Broader Than One Position

The political response has not followed a single line. The NPP has pointed to Chief Minister Conrad Sangma's engagement with the Centre and representatives of Christian bodies. BJP legislator Alexander Laloo Hek has called for wider consultation. The Congress has opposed the amendments and held a protest in Shillong. The UDP has raised concerns about safeguards and wider consultation. The VPP has written to the Prime Minister on issues including institutional assets and due process and has welcomed the JPC referral.

These positions differ in emphasis. They are political and stakeholder representations, not established findings about what the final law will mean.

This Is Larger Than One Community

Meghalaya has particular reasons to pay attention because of the role played by churches and faith-based organisations in education, healthcare and social services. But the FCRA debate should not be reduced to a Christian or Northeast issue.

Mizoram and Nagaland have also sought greater scrutiny. The Tamil Nadu Assembly has passed a resolution seeking withdrawal of the Bill in its present form. Nationally, Opposition parties and civil society organisations have raised concerns, while the Union Government has defended the legislation on transparency, accountability and national interest.

The larger question is how India should regulate foreign contributions while allowing legitimate institutions to function with reasonable certainty. That is a national question.

Responsibility Runs Both Ways

Organisations receiving foreign contributions have statutory responsibilities. Accounts must be maintained, donors and expenditure documented, returns filed and assets recorded. Governing bodies must understand the compliance requirements.

An organisation receiving foreign money should be able to explain where it came from and how it was used. The State, in turn, has a responsibility to maintain clear rules and predictable

procedures. Decisions should be based on evidence. Where registration or renewal can have serious consequences, there should be an appropriate opportunity for representation and review. Accountability cannot work in only one direction.

What the JPC Should Examine From Meghalaya's Experience

The JPC now has an opportunity to examine practical questions arising from Meghalaya's institutional experience.

These include the identification and valuation of mixed-source assets, treatment of pending renewal applications, safeguards before permanent vesting and remedies against adverse decisions. A provision framed nationally may have different implications for a remote school or hospital. Meghalaya can contribute to the national discussion through evidence and practical experience rather than demands for exemption.

A Chance to Get the Balance Right

The Union Government has a legitimate responsibility to ensure that foreign contributions are transparent, properly accounted for and consistent with India's national interests. Organisations receiving foreign contributions have a corresponding responsibility to comply with the law.

The task before Parliament is to make these responsibilities work together. The JPC can hear the Government, State governments, affected organisations, legal experts and other stakeholders and examine the Bill provision by provision.

For Meghalaya, there is no need to argue for weaker accountability. There is also a case for ensuring that institutions that comply with the law have reasonable certainty about their registration and assets.

The FCRA debate has moved beyond Shillong. Meghalaya's concerns form part of a wider national discussion. Political parties and institutions have made representations. The Union Government has explained its objectives. Parliament has opened the door to detailed examination. The next stage should focus on whether the final law works.

A sound FCRA framework should protect India's interests, ensure accountability for foreign contributions and give institutions that comply with the law reasonable certainty about their registration, assets and ability to continue serving the communities that depend on them.

That is a balance worth pursuing.
(Views expressed here are personal)

A Protest Rally That Missed the Mark

By Barnes L Mawrie (SDB)

On August 19, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) decided to undertake the so-called "peaceful protest march" to demonstrate their 5 point demands from the Government. What was meant to be peaceful ended up in utter chaos, and the spill-over of violence is being witnessed in the days after. No one would deny a citizen or any group the right to protest peacefully, for we are in a democratic country. I am an ardent supporter of any peaceful protest

at Khanapara, we can expect food shortages and price rises in commodities. Fuel supply has also been badly affected. Since Saturday, we have seen a shortage of fuel, and most petrol pumps remained closed. All this is an unnecessary crisis caused by the unwise and irresponsible behaviour of some.

Generally, every democratic protest leads to a positive outcome, either a total victory or a feasible compromise. The recent Jantar

What has the KSU protest achieved? If they had protested peacefully and democratically, they would have achieved some success, or at least the general public would have sympathized with their cause. But the goon-like behaviour of the protesters has obliterated all chances of success and antagonized them not only with the non-Khasis but even the Khasi community as well.

rally when it comes to addressing issues that affect our countrymen. However, the principle of democracy is not *laissez-faire* (do as you like), but as rightly pointed out by a popular saying, "our freedom ends where the other man's nose begins," meaning that my freedom ends where the other man's freedom begins.

According to John Stuart Mill, "the concept of individual actions is only limited to prevent direct harm to others." The protest rally of August 19 does not bear any semblance of a democratic action. First of all, the youth came out with black masks over their faces. Only thieves and robbers go about in masks because they want to hide their identity during their mischief. It appeared that this was pre-planned to commit arson and other anti-social activities. The result of the rally was total mayhem: vehicles were charred, Assam tourist taxis were attacked, passengers were manhandled, and national monuments were vandalized. Even the passengers travelling in Ka Bos Jongngi were not spared.

Reading in hindsight, it is evident that the KSU leaders had absolutely no control over their cadres. If their intention was to hold a peaceful protest rally, how could such violence and destruction be permitted before their very eyes? For any group to organize such an event without ensuring full control is utter stupidity and a lack of discernment. This KSU rally also demonstrates how the youth can be manipulated and motivated toward the wrong path. As they say, youth power is tremendous and is like the undercurrent of water in a reservoir. If this water is properly channelled, it can produce electricity or water the fields. However, if it is let loose, it will destroy everything in its way.

The August 19 rally clearly proved that youth power had been wrongly channelled. Emotions were allowed to burst out violently, leading to collateral damage. Probably, as many are inclined to believe, some political forces were behind them, perhaps for their own political agenda. Using a biblical expression, "because the KSU ate sour fruits, the teeth of the Khasi community are set on edge." This is evident from the fallout of this unwanted blunder. Meghalaya vehicles are unable to go to Guwahati, which has caused tremendous inconvenience to our people, especially the sick who need better medical treatment in Assam or those who must travel by train or flight for studies or work outside the state.

On the other hand, consider our poor people in tourist places like Sohra and elsewhere who earn their daily living from the thousands of tourists who frequent these places daily. Probably all the homestays are empty now, and the flow of income has also stopped. We are neither an industrialized nor an agricultural state, and our people depend mostly on tourism for their living. With this blunder, we have shot ourselves in the foot and are paralyzed to a great extent. Our food supply comes entirely through Assam, and with this blockade

Mantar protest rally of the youth led by the Cockroach Janta Party (CMJ) did not result in chaos despite the huge crowd of protesters. The outcome of that protest was the victory of the youth with the resignation of the education minister. What has the KSU protest achieved? If they had protested peacefully and democratically, they would have achieved some success, or at least the general public would have sympathized with their cause. But the goon-like behaviour of the protesters has obliterated all chances of success and antagonized them not only with the non-Khasis but even the Khasi community as well.

What really went wrong with our student group was their modus operandi. They allowed their cadres to go berserk and take matters into their hands, which resulted in the present chaotic situation. Furthermore, this has led to a clash between the Assam and Meghalaya tourist taxi drivers, who have resorted to mutually blocking tourist vehicles. These two groups have already clashed before, so this seems like an old wound festering again. The Meghalaya tourist taxi drivers are not happy with their Assam counterparts, as they view the latter as snatching away their livelihood. But we should not blame the Assam party either, because the current situation favours them. Imagine if there were a railway station at Bymihat and a full-fledged Shillong airport; tourists would definitely land in these locations, and then the Meghalaya tourist taxis would surely be the ones picking them up and taking them to different tourist spots. As of today, we have neither a railway station at Bymihat nor a fully functional airport, so tourists who travel either by flight or train would naturally land in Guwahati. Undoubtedly these tourists would hire the Assam tourist taxis to make their trips to Meghalaya. Therefore, it is of no use for the Meghalaya tourist taxis drivers to envy their Assam counterparts. They should blame the various Meghalaya pressure groups that vehemently oppose the coming of railways to Bymihat and also blame the past and present Government for the snail-paced development of the Shillong Airport.

In conclusion I would perhaps say that the KSU should re-evaluate its own ideology and modus operandi. The movement is vital to our Khasi community, and its end goal to protect the "jait-bynryng" is praiseworthy. However, the end does not justify the means, so resorting to a violent method, as happened on August 19, is evidently counter-productive. On the other hand, I would not agree with the Assam students' leader's blunt accusation against the KSU. He has gone so far as to brand the KSU as a terrorist group. This is purely a racist and hate speech which should not be tolerated by any civilized society. Ultimately, all Northeast states will benefit more from peaceful coexistence. We are known as the "seven sisters," so let us prove it by our civilized behaviour and our solidarity and collaboration. Long live Northeast India.

Letters to the Editor

Who Will Protect Meghalaya's Non-Tribal Citizens?

Editor,

The violence and vandalism witnessed in Shillong on 19 August 2026, including the alleged vandalism of national icons and symbols, cannot be dismissed as an ordinary incident arising out of a protest. The disrespect shown to national figures and public property is deeply disturbing and must be condemned in the strongest terms.

The incident also raises a fundamental question about the role of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). If KSU is a student organisation, then it must explain how its members or supporters became involved in acts of violence, vandalism and intimidation. Being a student organisation does not give anyone the right to take the law into their own hands. The right to protest is democratic; violence and vandalism are not. No organisation—whether

a student body, NGO or any other group—can claim the authority to become the police, the court and the law on the streets.

The Meghalaya Government has now announced FIRs, arrests and the constitution of a Special Investigation Team (SIT). These steps are welcome. But the people of Meghalaya have a right to ask: What happens after the arrests? Will there be time-bound investigation, chargesheets and, ultimately, convictions?

For decades, people have witnessed a pattern where violence occurs, arrests are made, cases continue for years and the deterrent effect remains extremely weak. The conviction outcomes in cases involving such violence have often been a matter of serious public concern. If there is no meaningful punishment, what prevents another organisation from repeating the same conduct tomorrow?

We have seen this pattern before. The 2022 incident during the FKGP-related agitation, in which non-tribal citizens were subjected to violence, should have served as a warning. Yet, after several years, we have

witnessed another serious incident.

So the question is - If the authorities already knew that such agitations could turn violent and that ordinary non-tribal citizens would be at the receiving end, what preventive security measures were put in place? What if another organisation conducts a similar agitation tomorrow, will the Government again wait for violence to occur and then constitute another SIT? How many SITs will Meghalaya need before a permanent preventive mechanism is created?

The joint meeting between the Governments of Meghalaya and Assam on 22 August 2026 has rightly taken several important decisions. The Meghalaya Government has assured the Assam Government that Assam-registered vehicles and tourists will be protected and safely escorted through the State. That assurance is welcome. But where is the same clear and unequivocal assurance to the non-tribal citizens of Meghalaya?

The non-tribal citizens of Meghalaya are not tourists. We live here. We work here. We run businesses here. We pay taxes here. Our families

have lived here for generations. We contribute to the economy and development of this State. Yet, following the recent violence, there has not been a similarly strong and specific public commitment from the Chief Minister or the Home Minister of Meghalaya assuring non-tribal citizens that the Government will protect them and will ensure that such incidents will not repeat.

At the national level, whenever concerns arise regarding the safety of minority communities, governments are expected to intervene, provide protection and reassure citizens. Then why should the principle be different in Meghalaya simply because non-tribal citizens are a minority here? The Constitution does not provide one level of protection to a majority and another level to a minority. Security is a right of every citizen.

We therefore appeal to the Government of Meghalaya to make a clear public commitment to the non-tribal citizens of the State—not merely through administrative meetings, but directly and unequivocally from the Chief Minister and Home Minister.

The issue is not only about the incident of 19 August. It is about the fear that has accumulated over decades. Whenever major processions or agitations take place, ordinary non-tribal citizens worry about their shops, vehicles, businesses, homes and personal safety. When violence occurs, they often feel that they are left to face the consequences. This cannot continue.

I also want to make it absolutely clear that the Khasi community as a whole must not be blamed for the actions of any organisation or group. Thousands of peace-loving Khasi citizens have themselves condemned violence and vandalism. This is not a fight between Khasi and non-Khasi citizens. It is a fight between law and lawlessness.

The larger concern is that thousands of people from Meghalaya—both tribal and non-tribal—live, work and study in different parts of India. If people elsewhere begin targeting citizens because of their State, community or identity, who will be responsible for their safety? We cannot demand safety for our people outside

Meghalaya while remaining silent when others are made to feel unsafe inside Meghalaya. Meghalaya must not become known as a place where people are afraid to travel, open their shops or conduct their businesses whenever an agitation takes place.

The Government must therefore establish a permanent security and accountability mechanism for major protests and processions, including adequate police deployment, preventive intelligence, protection of vulnerable commercial areas, immediate action against violence and time-bound investigation and prosecution.

We only want the State Government to assure us that the law will protect us and that no organisation will ever again be allowed to make ordinary citizens feel that they are unsafe in their own State.

Yours etc.,
Homnath Gautam,
Shillong-2

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"If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door."

— Milton Berle

The Shillong Times

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Islamic NATO, Dhaka

TALKS about an Islamic NATO are in the air. This, however, is a natural follow-up on the August 7 summit in Mecca involving Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan where a joint defence agreement was signed. Styled as the Mecca Pact, it pledged to "strengthen collective security, deepen cooperation and promote peace and stability," in the geopolitical region. The message it sent out was that an attack on any one country would be treated as an attack on all its member-nations and responded to accordingly. With heads of government, including Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, personally present to ink the pact, this naturally sent out strong signals to the outside world. With a top official from Bangladesh stating two days ago that this eastern nation might also aim to be part of this alliance, New Delhi should naturally be on additional alert.

On the surface, the pact emphasizes "collective deterrence," but the details are not fully disclosed. This agreement could also involve cooperation between member nations on the economic front for mutual advantage. Investment flow between these nations could eventually increase, as could trading. All these could lure Bangladesh to join the alliance. Such an agreement could also guarantee national security for Bangladesh. Relations between India and Bangladesh have substantially lost their warmth after the exit of Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina following a mass uprising against her government in August 2024. The authorities in Bangladesh have been seeking her extradition from India to try her there for her "crimes against humanity" during her rule. The recently formed BNP government of Tarique Rahman has been cautious in its responses to India on bilateral matters and says it would broadly adopt an "Interests of Bangladesh First" policy in its relations with other nations including India. His proposed first visit to India is still facing hurdles due to several emerging issues, compounded by concern in Dhaka about Hasina and her son addressing the media in New Delhi earlier this month, with critical comments about the goings-on there. Breaking traditions, Rahman as PM, chose China for his first foreign visit, and kept India waiting. Several of his actions sent wrong signals to India, while the previous interim administration and its adviser Muhammad Yunus had already kept a distance from India.

Simultaneously, Bangladesh is warming up to Pakistan, and the two have selectively boosted bilateral ties. Yet, the past weighs heavily on Dhaka regarding its ties with Islamabad. This is bound to be a dampener in any attempt by Bangladesh to join the Islamic NATO, wherein Pakistan is already a major player. On India's part, several actions by the Narendra Modi government in recent years sent wrong signals to Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim nation. While the Modi government mostly retained India's traditionally strong ties with the Bangladesh government, its pushes against Muslim migrants — mostly poor labourers — to the eastern states like Bengal and Assam (and spread elsewhere too) likely set many in Bangladesh against India.

KSU Agitation: When Indigenous Assertion Crosses the Limits of Law

By Subash Deb

The latest agitation by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) in Meghalaya is apparently a continuation of a crusade for the protection of indigenous rights and interests and against the interests of the so-called 'outsiders' aka non-tribals. Over and again, definitions of 'outsiders' have evolved, with an analogy between genuine non-tribals of the state and those from outside sinking well with the people of the state. But the irony is that the definition has remained elusive for pressure groups in the state, particularly the KSU. On the flip side, with due credit to the student body, it has handed a 5-point charter of demands to the Government of Meghalaya, which, unless addressed within a 15-day ultimatum, should face a public 'protest'.

As usual, the Government remained a silent spectator to public meetings and awareness demonstrations, allowing the ultimatum to expire. On August 19, 2026, the KSU received conditional permission from the East Khasi Hills district administration to carry out a black-flag bike rally within the bounds of law and order. However, the three-hour rally descended into chaos, causing severe damage to life and property. As the bike-rally moved through the town, shutters were down, and the hustle and bustle of Shillong city fizzled out in thin air. The protesters became unruly, rampaging through the streets, hitting vehicles and passers-by, and more. As the situation went out of control with allegedly 'masked elements' blending with the rally, this tribal protest against the Government's failure to deliver on their demands added another dimension beyond violence — whether it had a religio-ethnocentric or even anti-national colour. For sanity's sake, this author would assume 'no' until the administration gets to the bottom of the matter and understands the nuances of protests that invite court proceedings and public ire at large.

In the spree of violence, the so-called anti-social elements among rallyists went berserk, committing not just arson and hurting civilians, but this time going a tad further to desecrate national figures. Despite swift action by the police leading to arrests of KSU top leadership and the District Administration imposing Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, an air of distrust has again set in between the fragile bonhomie of non-tribals and tribals, as has fear psychosis among the general public.

The larger question is what causes such a law-and-order situation when the Union this time had been well within the bounds of law, starting from

serving an ultimatum to obtaining permission? Moreover, what details genuine demands and protests? Is it the inaction or apathy of the Government, or the mayhem that overrides the genuine agenda? Moreover, how can the state of Meghalaya ensure protection of indigenous identity, land rights, employment quota, and local interests without denigrating legitimate demands down to intimidation, violence, or extra-constitutional enforcement?

The question merits non-biased introspection of the demands of pressure groups, which have been in the larger interests of its people since its inception. The decades-old KSU-led social and political movement, majorly directed at protecting and safeguarding indigenous people and their rights, has always taken precedence over the interests of minorities or legal immigrants/migrants (genuine non-tribals) of the state. This apparently peculiar experience in a constitutional democracy like India sets the region apart from other states. It's tribals vs. non-tribals, a loose idea of the binary as in: Scheduled Tribes vs. General and other castes. Let's put this binary into context. One context is the historical bonhomie and regional camaraderie that existed between the Khasis and regional non-tribals leading up to the Hill state movement; the other relates to the gradual denigration and diminution of the same owing to many reasons: apolitical and political interests, both.

What existed historically is the former. The social dynamics of the Khasis and regional non-tribals have been one of co-existence and shared cultural ethos and values rooted in East Bengal British India. Even though there are contrasting versions of the origin and evolution of various tribes of northeast India. What didn't exist within the cosmos of indigenous tribes such as the Khasis and regional non-tribals (majorly Bengalis, Assamese, and Buddhists) are migrants from other states and countries, particularly the Islamic state of Bangladesh, and the non-inclusion of the Indo-Nepal treaty within the idea of co-existence. Therefore, Xenophobia against outsiders poses a serious question: who are these outsiders?

Since the partition of India in 1947, migration has been a continual issue from across the border. Whether it has been an illegal or legal migration, it has to be looked at in perspective. Post-partition, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan, which is now present-day Bangladesh. To the uninitiated, those who have officially

migrated to the northeast and other parts of India through a legal route have been victims of religious persecution in East Pakistan. Interestingly, these people have never been counted in the cohort of Bangladeshis because they were largely from East Bengal. Despite Bangladesh being formed along majority Muslim lines, persecution of minorities has blotted the secular character of Bangladesh for years together. These minorities — remnants of the erstwhile East Bengal — often resort to illegal migration routes. It's in fact the real problem. No official records cite such instances, except for owing responsibility to the porous border. As a matter of fact, the panacea lies in identifying and differentiating between legal (genuine non-tribals) and illegal immigrants. In fact, not all migrants from across the border are Bangladeshis.

Established in 1978 as a student organisation, the KSU slowly but steadily turned out to be one of Meghalaya's most powerful pressure groups. Five decades into their chequered existence, the KSU has gone strong with a mass indigenous support base whose collective concerns around issues such as influx, land, employment, natural resources, citizenship, and indigenous rights have earned them an edge over their counterparts within the region and other states. That said, the fear of outsiders, Xenophobia, still continues to dominate the mindscape of the indigenous population. Now, who are these outsiders? Have they co-existed with the indigenous tribes since time immemorial, meaning from the period of pre-partition India? The answer is a big yes. The long-drawn campaign around the Inner Line Permit (ILP) — an apparent antidote to the woes of influx — has compelled governments to respond to demands that might otherwise have gone unattended. ILP is a mechanism to check the influx of illegal immigrants into the state of Meghalaya post-1972 (the cut-off year drawn on the Assam Accord).

The current agitation demonstrates how quickly legitimate demands can become a law-and-order crisis when confrontation replaces negotiation. However, the current confrontation, which is no different from past intermittent episodes of violence, reflects untoward elements of protests that witnessed not only arson, injuries to civilians, damage to public properties and vehicles, but also desecration of statues of national figures, namely Swami Vivekananda and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. This denigration is a worry because it threatens our democratic right to protest.

A history that cannot be ignored
KSU's present state of affairs won't sit well with others without delving into its history.

The Union's crusade against perceived demographic displacement is an age-old one. Beginning in the 1980s, the severe agitation led by the student body against foreigners, non-tribal settlement, and the eventual demand for an Inner Line Permit caused statewide unrest, leading to reverse migration or ethnic cleansing of the population who was once part of the larger tribal interests advocating independence or bifurcation of the United-Khasi-Jaintia Hills from Assam.

According to official records, the period from 1987–88 witnessed communal clashes causing mass deaths and bloodshed, and the failure of state machinery to control the situation forced the Centre to step in and deploy additional para-military forces to control the dire situation from spiralling into a purportedly worst-ever genocide.

In 2013, KSU and other state-based organisations and allied political bodies again held a prolonged agitation demanding the implementation of a stringent mechanism such as the ILP to check illegal migration into the state.

The continuity has never broken. From the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests of 2019–20 and the Mukroh episode of 2022 to the anti-CAA mobilisation at Ichamati in 2024 and protests against influx, railways and investment in 2025.

In conclusion, the anxiety of the native people of Meghalaya largely revolves around volatile demographic security, which is purportedly vulnerable to outsiders' interests such as taking over their land rights, jobs, and fear of assimilation of their culture and language.

No wonder parochialism and jingoism are often equated with anxiety. But the fact of the matter is anxiety is real and hence has legislative backing in the form of the Sixth Schedule — a unique constitutional arrangement that ensures protection of tribal communities, land, and traditional institutions. Therefore, identity and demographic issues find a populist place in regional/national politics and academic backing to translate them into policy-making. Having said that, the legitimacy of the issues of influx, identity, and demography doesn't empower democratic bodies such as the Khasi Students' Union to legitimise every method to pursue it.

The author is a media professional and founder editor of debcubspark.com-Digitimes.

Make Shillong Walkable Again Reclaiming Footpaths for Everyone

By Akanksha Roy

Indian roads appear less accommodating for pedestrians. This concern is exhibited in studies across the country. While India has a high walking share, with over 45 million Indians walking to work, infrastructure in urban areas presents a significant challenge. This includes the state of footpaths and sidewalks often used by people to commute.

Taking Shillong as an example, pedestrians depend on footways to go to work, school, or simply to enjoy a walk. However, these paths are poorly maintained and discontinuous, exposing people to road safety risks. This also challenges captive walkers who mainly depend on walking or non-motorized transport, underlining a need to address the concern.

Hidden hazards on Shillong's footways: The absence of streetlights in certain areas, such as the

footways and sidewalks an afterthought, focusing primarily on road expansion projects as urban areas grew, while footpaths remained unchanged in many places.

Narrow paths, dark stretches: Gap Analysis

Although walking remains a common mode of transport, urban mobility is often assessed by vehicle speed and movement rather than pedestrian accessibility. Over 90% of vehicles are registered every minute. Infrastructure projects like flyovers, road widening and traffic decongestion initiatives are frequently seen as visible signs of development, whereas pedestrian pathways receive comparatively less focus.

The number of vehicles plying on the road increases daily, fueled by a perception that associates vehicle ownership with modernity. A report by the Ministry of

"The apex court ruled that the right to use footpaths by pedestrians is guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, a Fundamental Right. An ideal initiative launched by the Smart Cities Mission was Streets4People, which nudged cities to make spaces walkable. These guidelines pave the way to make places more pedestrian-friendly and inclusive."

footpath along State Central Library, undoubtedly restricts mobility for many. The deplorable condition of footways in Laitumkrah, often narrow, especially near the Cathedral, makes it difficult for walkers to pass by.

A multi-city survey conducted in 2019 found that pedestrians are the largest category of road users, exceeding two-wheelers, cars, and public transport users.

Despite this, we still see broken pavements, uneven footpath and sidewalk heights, vehicles parked on pedestrian spaces, and obstructions like electric poles in the middle of footways. In some cities, two-wheelers ride on sidewalks to avoid traffic, forcing pedestrians to yield. Narrow stretches also make walking difficult. These issues reveal a defin-

Housing and Urban Affairs (2019) maintains that 70% of road space is allotted to vehicles despite over 40% of regular trips being made on foot. This signals an importance inclined towards vehicular development.

Walking is widely seen as a basic right that serves numerous benefits needing no explanation.

Most travel trips in Indian cities are short distances, which absolutely paves the way for promoting a walking culture.

Success nearby, insights to learn

In contrast, we also see success stories from several Indian cities that reinstated walkability. Cities like Chennai have made their roads inclusive to pedestrians' needs by adopting the Non-Motorized Transport Policy, transforming over

Although walking remains a common mode of transport, urban mobility is often assessed by vehicle speed and movement rather than pedestrian accessibility. Over 90% of vehicles are registered every minute. Infrastructure projects like flyovers, road widening and traffic decongestion initiatives are frequently seen as visible signs of development, whereas pedestrian pathways receive comparatively less focus.

ing gap between the aspiration of walkable cities and people's lived experience.

Policies exist: Urban transport policies have addressed the need to design cities for people. For instance, guidelines spelled out by the Indian Road Congress mandate footpaths to be 1.8 m wide in residential areas and 2.5 m in commercial zones, requiring an unobstructed path.

It is also recommended to divide footpaths into frontage, pedestrian and furniture zones for better accessibility. The idea is to create space to enhance walkability in the pedestrian zone and, keep obstructions like trees, electric poles, vendors in the furniture zone.

The apex court ruled that the right to use footpaths by pedestrians is guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, a Fundamental Right. An ideal initiative launched by the Smart Cities Mission was Streets4People, which nudged cities to make spaces walkable. These guidelines pave the way to make places more pedestrian-friendly and inclusive.

However, city planning may have considered

100km of streets to scale up street transformation. Chandigarh is a city with dedicated pavements for pedestrians, highlighting the inclusion of walking in its development plans.

While places of importance in Shillong are located at a walking distance, the weather throughout the year is almost pleasant, most areas have footpaths and sidewalks and these are the perfect conditions to make Shillong a walkable city. It must be an individual task to keep them clean, at least that is the basic step we can take to improve their state. Furthermore, the issues should be addressed at the highest level of competence to include pedestrian safety in urban mobility projects. Important guidelines mandated for the construction of footpaths should be acknowledged and incorporated in subsequent city plans. Therefore, with further improvements made to the state of footways, making it imperative to include the rights of pedestrians and offer a safe environment to them will automatically harness the potential of this beautiful city to become essentially walkable.

Letters to the Editor

Assam Taxi Union Blockade is Senseless

Editor,

The Assam State Taxi Driver Union is wrong to impose a blockade on Meghalaya vehicles. The violence perpetrated by those in the KSU rally was not limited to Assam vehicles. They attacked even our own state's bus and other ML vehicles.

This is just a show of ego and power by the Union, simply because Meghalayans have no other route but through Assam. The blockade of vehicles and petroleum is illegal and disproportionate. The reason for their actions may be communal hatred, personal ambition, or diverting attention from other important issues.

On the other hand, many well-meaning Assamese people have posted on social media showing support for the Khasis, or at least stating that the blockade is unnecessary since both states stand to lose from it.

Most striking to me is one post by an Assamese person saying this whole blockade serves to divert attention from two environmental issues in both states: the encroachment of Kaziranga National Park in Assam and

the establishment of Shree Cement in Meghalaya.

Lastly, why should innocent Meghalayans suffer just because of some goons? Does this mean that the innocents should suffer for the killings of Khasis at Mukroh and Langpih? This kind of logic is senseless and will lead to situations like in Manipur.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor H. Blah,
Shillong

Time to Rethink Railway Connectivity for a Self-reliant Meghalaya

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I would like to draw attention to the ongoing Assam-Meghalaya tensions and the difficulties faced by ordinary people, tourists and transport operators.

The recent disruption of fuel supplies and restrictions on vehicles have once again highlighted how dependent Meghalaya is on its neighbouring state for essential transport connectivity. This situation should make us seriously rethink the need for better railway connectivity and a well-connected airport within Meghalaya.

It is worth remembering that when the government had earlier proposed bringing railway tracks into Meghalaya, there were strong protests and opposition from various NGOs and organisations. At that time, there were concerns regarding land, identity and other issues. However, in view of the situation we are facing today, isn't it high time that the government revisited the issue and held a fresh discussion with the people and stakeholders?

Meghalaya is one of the country's most beautiful tourist destinations and attracts visitors throughout the year. Yet, a significant part of the tourism transport business is handled by tourist vehicles from Assam. If Meghalaya had better railway and air connectivity, tourists could enter the state more directly. This would also create greater opportunities for local taxi and tourist vehicle operators to earn their livelihood by transporting and serving tourists within Meghalaya.

Improved connectivity would benefit not only tourism but also students, patients, traders, businesses, and ordinary citizens. It would reduce our dependence on a single neighbouring state for transportation and make Meghalaya more economically resilient during times of interstate tension.

The government should therefore seriously reconsider railway connectivity, improve airport infrastructure, and strengthen a local tourism transport network. Meghalaya's tourism industry should primarily provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the people of Meghalaya.

The present crisis should not merely be treated as a temporary dispute. It should serve as a lesson and an opportunity to build a more self-reliant, better-connected, and economically stronger Meghalaya.

It is time to look beyond short-term solutions and ask ourselves: If Meghalaya wants to be a major tourism destination, can we continue to remain so dependent on another state for our basic connectivity?

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Shillong

The GenZ Challenge

Editor,

Last month the nation witnessed something which was hitherto not seen in 12 years of the BJP government. What began as a protest against the alleged NEET paper leak by CJP has finally culminated in the resignation of the Union Education Minister, revealing the fact that when indignation and frustration

ferment among the public, it could lead to consequential action. Before this, nobody knew that an online satirical campaign would morph into a formidable force that will push the BJP government on the back foot and become a counter to the right-wing jingoism, which has always channelized the question of accountability towards the edge of polarization where debates could be won under majoritarian narratives.

In a country where jobs are vanishing, despite promulgation of a high GDP growth number, exams like NEET are not just a mere entry pass to a medical college; they are the gateway to a promising career and economic stability. And when such examinations are cancelled due to incapacities of testing agencies, it breaks the confidence of those who have deemed merit as a last resort to overcome the barriers of impoverishment. When seeking accountability regarding students' future is labelled as anti-national and peaceful dissent meets authoritarian crackdown, it raises questions about the fairness of government, which is expected to uphold democratic norms at any cost. Because democracy thrives when accountability is deemed a constitutional responsibility, not a selective preference. When executives insulate themselves from public grievances, trust erodes.

Will the rise of CJP lead BJP to a decisive shellocking in the next assembly election? The answer is difficult to determine right now since political narratives can be managed, engineered, and changed at the very last moment before voting. But statistics say that about 380 million of Gen Z will be voting by 2029. And if the indignation against the government continues, it could bring negative outcomes for the BJP in the upcoming elections. It should be remembered that we have entered the age of technology and information, where public faith cannot be retained long by claiming to have built roads using space technology and then having humongous potholes occur on expressways just a few days after construction.

Government cannot continue to ride on a system which considers every uncomfortable question as "Rastra Virodhi." At present, youths are on the streets demanding accountability where systems have failed or have acted with levity. Now, where this anger and dissatisfaction of Gen Z will lead is still a conjecture.

Yours etc.,
Kabir Ahmed Saikia
Jorhat

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

Revisiting Meghalaya's Tourism Policy
MEGHALAYA'S Tourism Policy enacted in 2023 uses all the correct wordings. It speaks of sustainable & eco-friendly growth and focuses on developing around 30 major tourist destinations with an emphasis on protecting natural environments, local ecosystems, and community livelihoods. It is always the "how" of every policy that is never clearly answered. How can local environments be protected when there are no garbage management systems beyond Shillong? Today the precipices all along the road to Sohra are littered with garbage and are in such dangerous places that retrieving the garbage might cost a life. While the Sohra Tourism Association has tied up with a private firm to convert waste to other by-products it will take long before that project is in place. This is a perfect case of putting the cart before the horse. A robust garbage management system should have been in place in all tourist sites before they were opened up to the public.

Among other things the Policy requires all visitors to register via the official Meghalaya Tourism Portal and through local accommodations using the state tourism app, alongside restrictions on self-driving rental vehicles to improve traveller safety. What the Policy has failed to envisage is what happens to day tourists coming in from Guwahati in the morning and returning in the evening, many carrying their own food. What do they really add to the Tourism economy? And are they not the ones who leave behind only carbon footprints? Is there any way to regulate such tourists? The fact is that governments have no time to go deep into the positives and the pitfalls of tourism as we see it playing out today. Universities and Colleges offering Tourism courses are supposed to come up with enlightened views after due ground research and to present policy prescriptions to the Government. NEHU has a vibrant Tourism Department and its faculty are constantly sharing views publicly through articles. Why can't NEHU and Lady Keane together come up with a more far-sighted and progressive Policy that will address the current loopholes.

Firstly, what is Meghalaya's (and in particular Sohra's) carrying capacity per day. Who will put a cap on the footfalls if tourists don't book online to enter the state? Second, the living root bridges have been touted to be a heritage left behind by the ancestors. They were conceived of thousands of years ago by villagers to cross rivers when the concept of bridges were unknown. Today they are wonders and tourism attractions. But how many footfalls can they take per day? The ancestors walked bare-foot. Today tourists literally stomp on those delicate root bridges. Isn't it time to tell people to remove their shoes while stepping on those roots? The roadside cooking part has been addressed and just as well. It would also be good for NEHU to conduct a ground research on the accruals from Tourism per day based on the number of vehicles entering and leaving Meghalaya. All the above aspects need to be taken care of if Meghalaya is not going to turn to another crowded, noisy and dirty destination. As far as sustainability is concerned there is urgent need to assess at how sustainable the current model of tourism in Meghalaya is and what policy changes are urgently needed.

The Violence is Condemnable. The Grievance Cannot Be Ignored

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

There was an incident that happened to me almost a decade ago that gives me some perspective into why the recent protest on August 19, which was directed against the government, targeted Assam vehicles, leading to a standoff at the border between the taxi drivers of Assam and Meghalaya. I was returning from Guwahati in a Sumo, which was filled with Khasi passengers, and the driver was also a Khasi. As we were leaving the city, our driver stopped the vehicle and asked us to pay the fare. He took the money and got down from the vehicle. He then ran to an Assam policeman standing on the pavement, handed something to him, and came back to the vehicle. There was sadness in his eyes, and when we asked him, he told us that the policeman had demanded a bribe and that unless he paid it, the vehicle would not be allowed to pass. I thought that this was something of the past and that things must have improved by now. But I was wrong, and it seemed that vehicles from Meghalaya are being specifically targeted for harassment.

In a recent interview, Antrolia B. Marak, president of the All Shillong Tourist Taxi Association (ASTTA), revealed that harassment by Assam against drivers from Meghalaya has become endemic. He stated that drivers from Assam have regularly told their counterparts from Meghalaya that they should not come down to Assam. Drivers from Meghalaya also do not get parking spaces inside the airport or outside the railway station and are thus deprived of earning from passengers who are looking to visit Meghalaya. Outside the airport or the railway station, when the vehicles are parked, whether it's in Guwahati or Khanapara, someone would take a picture of the number plate without their knowledge. Later, when the drivers go to the transport office to renew their papers, they are told that they have been served with a challan and have to pay a fine that can range from 20,000 rupees to 40,000 rupees. Antrolia reiterated that these are not mere allegations but facts. My own experience many years ago confirms the harassment drivers from Meghalaya faced in Assam. The harassment was specifically intended to compel drivers from Meghalaya to stop their operations and allow drivers from Assam to capture the entire business.

The Government of Meghalaya has promised strong action against those who committed acts of vandalism and violence during the August 19 rally. I completely

support this decision by the state government. Those involved in the violence must be arrested and prosecuted. However, it would be unfair and dishonest to portray the targeting of vehicles from Assam as simply a case of hatred against outsiders. Try putting yourself in the place of the Khasi taxi driver who was almost brought to tears. Worse still, what happened to him that day was not merely a one-off incident. The harassment has been continuous and is repeated every year. The violence, in many ways, stemmed from the hurt and anger caused by the mistreatment faced by members of the community whose only fault was that they were trying to make an honest living. One could counter this by claiming that the violence simply represents the ugly side of tribalism, and they would be right to do so. But to ignore the anger felt by members of a community over the injustice suffered by some of its members would be disingenuous.

The left has always tried to build solidarity on the basis of class consciousness,

other community – Antrolia B. Marak, the president of ASTTA is a Garo). To condemn the indefensible is essential but we should also have an honest discussion about the plight of our drivers and what they have to go through on a daily basis. And, in fact, the Assam drivers, as stated by Antrolia B. Marak, have already given the solution.

The right to earn a livelihood in Assam should belong to the Assamese, as they are the citizens of the state. Assam belongs to the Assamese, and there cannot be any debate about it. But it seems that there is a reluctance to accept that taxi drivers from Meghalaya also have a right to a livelihood in their own state. So, the standoff that happened along the border had actually given an opportunity to solve the problem. Drivers from Meghalaya will drive up to Khanapara and drop their passengers, who will then board an Assam vehicle for the rest of the journey. Drivers from Assam will also carry their passengers till Khanapara, from where the passengers

time they want.

HH Mohrmen, in his article 'Shillong Violence: It Takes Two to Tango', has suggested that the facilitation centre at Umling could also serve as an exchange point where tourist taxis from the two states can exchange passengers. The drivers want the centre to be in Khanapara. Either way, the centre will have to be expanded or newly built, for which the Government of Meghalaya can take responsibility. The construction itself would generate economic activity in the state. More importantly, increased business for drivers in Shillong could boost demand for vehicles, repairs, fuel, spare parts and other related services. Higher incomes among drivers could also increase their consumption of local goods and services, creating further economic activity. This increased economic activity could, in turn, broaden the state's tax and fee base. Taken together, these activities would increase value added within the state and could therefore contribute to higher state GDP. So, whichever way one looks at it, the state stands to benefit financially by agreeing to the Assamese drivers' demand to conduct business within their own state. Assam will always belong to the Assamese, and Meghalaya will belong to the people of Meghalaya.

Another solution, but it is up to the drivers' association to agree, is to institute a line system. At the airport, railway station, or homestay/hotel where tourists are staying, the first three trips to Meghalaya will be allocated to vehicles from Meghalaya, followed by one trip to an Assam vehicle, maintaining a 75:25 ratio. That way, Assam drivers can still earn some business from Meghalaya. It is not entirely fair, since Assamese drivers do not want drivers from Meghalaya taking away their business in Assam. However, in the interest of maintaining peace and for the greater good, this could be an acceptable arrangement.

What happened on August 19 was highly condemnable, but this incident, in an unfortunate way, has given us the opportunity to solve a long-festering problem. I hope the government will take this moment to bring justice and establish a long-term solution between the people of Meghalaya and Assam. There are many other issues that will still need to be tackled. So, let's start with this.

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

"He stated that drivers from Assam have regularly told their counterparts from Meghalaya that they should not come down to Assam. Drivers from Meghalaya also do not get parking spaces inside the airport or outside the railway station and are thus deprived of earning from passengers who are looking to visit Meghalaya."

where people, irrespective of their social identity, came together to fight for their rights as the working class. Any attack on the class interests of a few members is taken up as an attack on the entire class. This works the other way around as well, where the upper classes have always cooperated to keep the working class down by supporting each other. Women's liberation movements have tried to do the same thing in the name of women's empowerment, tied around the experiences of women across multiple identities. So, it is not unthinkable that the pain carried over decades by members of a community will not find some destructive release at some point in time. This is not to justify the violence, but there is a need to understand the hurt from the other side as well, that has been pent-up for so many years (the harassment against drivers from Meghalaya is not directed solely at Khasi drivers but at anyone from Meghalaya, whether Garo, Nepali, Bengali, or from any

will change vehicles and continue on their journey. This arrangement will only apply to tourist taxis and vans carrying passengers, and not to private vehicles, which can move between states without any restriction.

The arguments against this are mostly about the inconvenience of changing vehicles. Someone could be running late, and changing vehicles could delay them further. I find this argument very disingenuous. Once the arrangement is implemented, there will be vehicles standing nearby for the change-over. The whole process will take around 10-15 minutes. People wait at the airport, after security check-in, and at the railway station for more than an hour. I am sure they can instead wait for half an hour. Those who are overly concerned can leave a little early so that they can get their one-hour waiting period. But this will not be a problem for those looking to travel to Meghalaya, as they can reach their destination, a guest house or a hotel, at any

It's Time Meghalaya's Affairs Are Understood For What They Are: Not What is Perceived by a 'Stranger'

By Subornadeep Bhattacharjee

I have had the benefit of reading Arjun Sheoran's piece – A Case of Misdirected Aggression & Misplaced Sympathies" (August 18, 2026) on how the ongoing agitation against the incumbent Advocate General of the State is a case of 'misplaced aggression & misplaced sympathies.' As a Shillongite, this author intends to dispel the notion mounted by Sheoran whilst beginning with disclosures to establish this author's bona fides.

This author is a proud Shillongite, an ex-Edmundian, and currently practices before the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India and the Meghalaya High Court, whilst possessing the membership of bar associations of both the said courts. On the other hand, a cursory search, through Google's aid, reveals that Sheoran is principally practicing in Chandigarh, in India's north-west.

This author wonders what the basis is for the factual assertions Sheoran made. Lacking any credible basis, it comes across as full of surmises and conjectures.

Be that as it may, the office of the Advocate General is a high constitutional office under Article 165 of the Constitution of India. One must read the same with Article 177 – that apart from Ministers, the Advocate General of the State shall have the right to speak in, and otherwise to take part in proceedings of, the Legislative Assembly of the State; or to take part in the proceedings of any committee of the Legislature of which he has been named a member, but shall not be entitled to vote. Thus, one readily infers that the Advocate General has an onerous responsibility on their shoulders, and every word uttered carries a tremendous amount of weight.

Considering the same, the irresponsible submissions made by the incumbent Advocate General before the Hon'ble High Court during the course of the hearing, where he mechanically threw the entire Bar Associations under the bus for 'allegedly' shielding an advocate for a prior misdemeanour, is both grossly misplaced and irresponsible. Sheoran must accept an admitted fact crucial to understanding Meghalaya, if he is to understand the angst behind the crisis the incumbent Advocate General has generated: Meghalaya's principal tribes – Khasi, Garo and Jaintia – are matrilineal, where lineage, identity and property pass through the mother's line. Primogeniture does not operate in this part of India (property devolving to the eldest born, gener-

ally a son); postremogeniture does (property devolves to the youngest 'daughter'). These mothers, daughters, and sisters predominantly practice before our courts with pride, efficiency, and legal acumen.

When viewed in this light, the misplaced submissions of the incumbent Advocate General are not merely an affront to members of the Bar Associations, but to the women and the men who are flag bearers of this sui generis system of socio-economic and political realities of the State of Meghalaya. The absence of this understanding of how Meghalaya operates negates the very basis of Sheoran's piece. The anger against the incumbent Advocate General is for this reason, not for 'protecting the Bar Associations' reputation' as Sheoran claimed.

Article 19(1) (g) gives the incumbent Advocate General the right to profess this noble profession in any part of India. Read this fundamental right with Section 23(5) of the Advocates Act, 1961, which grants him the right to pre-audience over other advocates. As a senior advocate, the incumbent Advocate General is free to move back to New Delhi and resume his practice to cater to the needs of litigants, who would be best served by his representation in such causes before the Hon'ble Supreme Court and Hon'ble High Court at Delhi.

Regrettably, he has alienated the Bar Associations of the State of Meghalaya, and this breakdown is perceived to be irretrievable. Apropos history remembering the incumbent Advocate General, the discipline will record the brutal reality: the incumbent Advocate General failed to understand the pulsating beat of a sui generis State in India's north-east.

(The author is an advocate practicing in the Supreme Court of India. He is a graduate of NLUJA, Assam and holds an LL.M. (with Distinction) from SOAS, University of London. He was also a former law clerk at the High Court at Calcutta, India's oldest constitutional court.)

Editor's Remarks: This article was sent to the wrong email advt@theshillongtimes.com instead of letters@theshillongtimes.com which is the official email ID of The Shillong Times where all letters and articles are sent. The advertisement section overlooked this and only forwarded it to letters@theshillongtimes.com on August 26, 2026, hence the delay in publishing the riposte to Arjun Sheoran's article.

Letters to the Editor

Politicians Versus Nation

Editor,
There is a dangerous precedent in equating criticism of a politician with criticism of the nation. Politicians are not the nation; they are temporary custodians of power, elected to serve the people and accountable for their decisions and electoral promises. When they derail from their mandate, citizens have not only the right but the democratic duty to question them through peaceful protests. This distinguishing feature of protest without arms is encrypted safely within the Constitution under Article 19(1) (b) with reasonable restrictions related to public order and maintenance provided therein in Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).
India was born through civil disobedience, organised protest and dissent. To now portray every contemporary protest, as anti-national is historical hypocrisy.
If protesters breach public order, police may act proportionately and within the law. But the use of pellet guns against unarmed students raises a far more serious question of proportionality and human rights.

Pellets contain around 400-500 metallic pellets which can cause severe, potentially life-threatening injuries. Where such injuries disclose a cognizable offence, Lalita Kumari case stated about the mandatory registration of an FIR and then start investigation. Police should start a preliminary investigation in such a sensitive case. These were students, not criminals. The use of pellet guns therefore demands clear legal justification, including the existence of an applicable standing order authorising such force. The situation of students has become so bad that the Leader of the Opposition had to visit the Police Station and discuss with Police Officers to register an FIR and start the investigation process.

Further, the absence of a Parliamentary debate by the Home Minister reflects poorly on legislative oversight. The protest was going on peacefully, but on the 20th day, a strange violent incident was triggered. There is a need for a judicial probe into what triggered that violence.

And when the few intellectuals lazily recycle facile conspiracy theories about foreign funding or "free food," they insult citizens who protest and the commu-

nity of shared responsibility and solidarity cutting across religious divides.

Yours etc.,
Shahin Yusuf,
Guwahati

The 33% pass rule

Editor,
Almost all educational institutions (boards/universities) have fixed 33% as the minimum pass percentage in a paper or examination. In various entrance exams and competitive tests, this will reflect a horrible and unacceptable score. Yet in Bharat it remains a magical number. But why 33%? It is not a Bharatiya tradition. The answer lies in the British imperial rule to which we were subjected. The British wanted to impose an educational system that produced a limited number of clerks and lower-category administrators to support the colonial administrative machinery. They wanted a system that did not produce intellectuals and innovators. A low qualifying mark would support this goal. Getting one-third of the total marks represented minimum competence designed for colonial governance efficiency

rather than for educational expertise and excellence. The irony is that after independence, Bharat retained this imperial magic number. While the universities and boards changed along with the syllabus and books, this magic number largely did not budge.

A 33% passing mark means a student failed to answer two-thirds of a paper and still passed. Moreover, students achieving less than 33% are given grace marks to eventually pass. This elevation is merely on compassionate grounds. However, it creates contradictions. Once an educational system tells students that achieving one-third is fine, the psychology of education changes. Ironically, the United Kingdom does not follow this tradition. They rely on boundary grades that change year after year depending on exam difficulty. In the US, passing a paper or an exam often requires a 60% or more score. Globally, education is moving away from traditional pass/fail exams in favour of continuous, competency-based evaluation that prioritizes real-world skills like problem-solving, communication, and practical knowledge application. The question isn't where to set the pass mark, but whether nu-

merical scores are the wrong metric altogether.

Yours etc.,
Dr. HS Ranhotra,
Shillong

Recurring Violence Behind Protest Masks

Editor,
The violence during the recent Khasi Students' Union (KSU) bike rally in Shillong exposes a dangerous cycle of administrative inaction. Scores of non-tribal commuters were assaulted, a child was injured, and statues of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Swami Vivekananda were vandalised. Dismissing this as the work of infiltrated "miscreants" is untenable; it mirrors the exact pattern of the 2022 FKJGP rally, where an absence of convictions enabled future lawlessness.

Beyond the failures of Meghalaya Police and security forces, this lawlessness inflicts lasting reputational and economic damage. The desecration of revered national icons brings nationwide embarrassment, while transit bottlenecks at Jorabat

choke tourism and cut off vital supply lines. Most concerning, citizens requiring urgent medical care outside the state find themselves stranded—a grave cost of mob intimidation completely ignored by the perpetrators.

Living outside the state, I am constantly flooded with messages asking how Meghalaya could deteriorate to such hostility when social media portrays it as a peaceful, idyllic getaway. Friends from neighbouring states have pointedly questioned whether these pressure groups could ever build the critical medical infrastructure that our own patients must travel across borders to access—a self-sufficient Meghalaya is nowhere near achieving. For my family, this dread is deeply personal, with my mother still haunted by the terror of frantically trying to reach me during the 2022 rally until I finally made it home unharmed. Meghalaya's civil societies and educated citizens must actively mobilise to halt this recurring cycle of organised violence and mob intimidation before the state's identity of warmth and peace is permanently destroyed.

Yours etc.,
PBhattacharya,
Via email

Finding My Balance: A Father's Rhythms

Editor,
As an earning father with two children under five, my days are a beautiful, exhausting whirlwind. Between the demands of my job and the constant energy of two toddlers, it is easy to lose myself in the noise. I love my family, but I realized I could not pour from an empty cup. To be the patient, energetic dad my toddlers deserve, I had to find dedicated time for myself. My routine now relies on three lifelines: a morning jog, swimming, and reading. Once the chaotic morning routine of dressing, feeding, and packing bags is done, I head out for my morning jog right after dropping the children off at school. This run serves as my mental bridge between home life and work life. It burns off my morning anxiety, clears my head, and builds the physical stamina I need to face a long day.

During the weekends, I take advantage of the extra time to run long distances, pushing my limits and building deep endurance while the house is quiet. On days

when my body feels heavy from carrying kids and engaging in office duty, I swap the pavement for the pool. Swimming is a quiet sanctuary. Gliding through the water provides a gentle, full-body workout that heals my aching back and shoulders. It builds a different kind of strength—one that helps me lift my children without pain. Finally, I dedicate my quiet moments to reading. While running and swimming rebuild my body, turning the pages to read restores my mind. It slows my racing thoughts and gives me a moment of pure calm before I jump back into dad duty. Because I take time to run, swim, and read, I am fully present, healthy, and ready to welcome my family with a smile.

Taking time for yourself is a vital part of being a patient and active parent, and it is the greatest gift you can give to your children. When you protect your well-being, you build the physical and mental strength needed for young children.

Yours etc.,
S J Chyne,
Via email

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"The sensitive artist knows that a bitter wind is blowing."

— Herbert Read

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Engaging China

TOO much need not be read into the talks, or their outcome, between Special Representatives of India and China held in Beijing this week. The 25th round of powwows strived yet again to mend the somewhat strained ties between the two countries on several fronts. The meeting involving India's national security adviser Ajit Doval and China's foreign minister Wang Yi took place also in the context of a scheduled visit of China's president Xi Jinping to India for the BRICS summit. Xi kept off India for the past seven years after making two visits -- the highly publicized first one in a spirit of mutual bonhomie shortly after Narendra Modi took charge as Prime Minister. This tells its own story. In between, the Doklam stand-off took place on the Bhutanese soil in 2017, and the violent Galwan Valley confrontation in 2020 in which India lost some 20 soldiers and China an unspecified number. The strain in bilateral relations suffered majorly as a result of China's misadventure in which it obviously gained little.

The claim now is that the Special Representatives reached eight points of outcomes and consensus building, including the decision to hold a meeting of an expert-level mechanism on trans-border management. Consider the fact that this special representatives-framework came into being as early as in 2003 and this hardly made any significant headway. China apparently attempts to buy time rather than resolving issues between the two nations. In the interim of over two decades, China grew militarily and in economic terms, raising its strengths five times that of India. Notably, both were on equal terms at the turn of the century. Today, China gives every hint of being an economic and military super power, which is capable of taking on even the United States on its own strengths. The US economy still remains far superior to that of China, but a question is for how long this supremacy would last. While India prides itself to be the fastest-growing economy, its climb-down to the sixth slot in GDP terms meant we have miles to go to attain our stated goals to boast of a five-trillion economy. Without a strong economic growth, India cannot hope to face China in military terms.

The original idea of setting up the Special Representatives mechanism was to resolve the dispute over the 3,488-km India-China border. Not much headway could be made on this through the series of meetings. China would not part with an inch of the large swathes it annexed in the 1962 war -- some 38,000 square kilometers. Add to this the fact that there has been no clear demarcation of the boundary, which is often taken advantage of by China by way of its frequent intrusions into its neighbours' territories through the art of Salami Slicing, or covert, small-scale military operations. If China has been on the offensive, India's weak democratically elected governments are constantly on the defensive. The 1962 war was a sudden offensive from China that took the Jawaharlal Nehru-led government unaware. Later, Indira Gandhi established control over Arunachal Pradesh and gave a slap on China's face. What happens now is, perhaps a mere formality of talks for the sake of talks.

When Meghalaya was created in 1972 the political leaders then were too busy consolidating political resources. They did not consider the need to sit together and invite social thinkers, economists and political strategists to work out a road-map for the state and to envision where Meghalaya would want to be 50 years hence. At the time there was an urgent need to map out Meghalaya's resources -- coal, limestone, uranium, etc. -- and to decide how these were to be used. Leaders with vision should have foreseen that a class of tribal elite would emerge, whose only focus would be mineral extraction without considering the corresponding impact on the environment. Of course, at the time many of us perhaps did not even know the spelling of "environment," much less what costs the relentless mining would extract on the environment.

Our leaders then were so complacent and happy to assume the seat of power that they did not even care to settle the borders with Assam. This laissez-faire attitude is why we are paying the price today. People continue to lose their lives at the border; their lands are forcefully confiscated. Because these incidents happen some distance from Shillong the state capital, we forget those lives after a few days of outrage. I will never forget the visit to Mukroh in November 2022 after five men (mainly labourers) were shot to death by Assam Police on allegations that they were stealing timber from the Assam side of the border. The family members of those killed said the men had gone to bring home the harvested rice from the fields. When I went to Mukroh and surveyed the killing site, there were signs of blood that flowed right in the middle of the road. One person who after being shot probably wanted to jump to safety, cross a wall and his blood was splattered all over the street and the wall. These five men never saw justice.

Initially, both states set up separate, parallel judicial inquiries to investigate the November 2022 border clash. However, on September 30, 2023, both the chief ministers of Assam and Meghalaya held high-level border talks and officially decided to terminate both commissions. The reason for scrapping these inquiry commissions ostensibly was that officials and witnesses from the respective states were uncooperative or hesitant to cross borders to depose before the opposing state's

Meghalaya Must Reset it's Priorities

By Patricia Mukhim

panel. To maintain neutrality and prevent state officials from facing legal complications or jurisdictional bias, the case was handed over to the CBI for investigation. Now it's 2026, and we hear nothing about the case. The families of those 5 men who were shot in cold blood and came from the poorest families never saw justice. As a society we too have forgotten about this case, sitting as we do in our comfort zones. That's our grave sin of apathy and we cannot just fault politicians for everything.

As a society we have learnt to take every grievance to one pressure group or another and to sit back and watch as they take on the Government. We sit from the sidelines and clap. We have several issues that need to be resolved. How many times has civil society from across the board, with no political agenda except to seek redressal of governance issues, ever met at the Khasi National Dorbar Hall to discuss those issues and take our grievances/demands in a properly worded resolution to the Government of the day?

Without any roadmap for development we have been groping for 50 years. Add to this the grave consequences of governments that never lasted a full five-year term. While Meghalaya led the country in coalition politics, governments were short-lived, resulting in no serious planning for the state and huge governance deficits. Also, just seven years after statehood, before the state could come to grips with real governance, communal violence derailed governance in 1979. There were curfews, bandhs, and street fights. The city of Shillong was frequently under curfew, and prices of essential commodities sky-rocketed. But we bore it all without any civil society group condemning the violence on non-tribals and the burning alive of people in their straw huts essentially Biharis and also burning to death a person who was unfortunate to have arrived in Shillong (Mawlai) in the height of that communal conflict. There was one year when exams could not be held and all students were promoted.

Many non-tribal residents left Shillong and sold their homes at a pittance just to escape being beaten up or killed. Not a single person was convicted for these crimes. Karma has taken a long time to come but come

it will in some form or other. Not every non-tribal living in Meghalaya is an illegal immigrant "Bangladeshi." Yes there are illegal migrants and those must be found through measures like the MRSSA and deported. But to carry a relentless grouse against all non-tribals whose forefathers have been here for several decades -- some over a century -- is a kind of shadow boxing to hit the wrong targets. There is a tribal elite that is appropriating land and resources but we seem to have no grouse about that. We don't call out those and instead create battle-grounds of falsehoods and fantasies. I agree with Christopher Hitchens when he says, "Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it." I say this because not a single church body has mobilised peace meets and outreach to those who are victims of ethnic conflicts.

To those who constantly recall those turbulent years of conflict I would say that only with a balanced view of the past, conscientious but not obsessive can we shun victimhood, accept divergent narratives, embrace decency and move forward. The tragedy is that all of us -- people -- put politics at the centre of our psychological, emotional and even spiritual lives. This is asking too much of politics because once politics becomes our ethnic and moral identity it becomes impossible to compromise because compromise becomes dishonour.

At this point the Meghalaya Government should focus on some priorities. The urgent need is for railways to enter the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. If the Inner Line Permit is the only stumbling block then let's have it. But we must have railways. They will save us a lot of discomfiture of having to board the trains from Guwahati especially when there are inter-state conflicts for a number of reasons. No state should hold another to ransom but this has happened far too often in our case.

We also need to push the Central Government's Civil Aviation Ministry to speed up the completion of our airport. This has to be the topmost priority because we subject our people to great hardships, including missing important exams whenever there's a Meghalaya-Assam tourist taxi stand-off. This time some who had to take a flight from Guwahati and went via Mairang to arrive at Rani had to undergo so

much trauma from being asked to get off their taxis and get into auto rickshaws with bag and baggage and travel on a pot-holed road, not knowing if they would be able to catch their flights. The Government should hear these stories so it realises the problems of ordinary folks who don't have the comfort of riding with multiple escort vehicles. I suggest that ministers should sometimes travel incognito to understand the problems of the common person.

So yes... MDA Government your priorities should be the Railways and a fully functional Airport at the earliest. Why does Meghalaya have to be the only state without a functioning airport? Or a railway line? Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, distant Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura all have good airports and railway stations. Why are we the people of Meghalaya not getting together to demand these facilities? Why are we being subjected to coercion to resist these facilities by a few groups with vested interests?

I also have a suggestion for the MDA Government. Please dismantle the State Planning Board which produces nothing except paying salaries and perks to the Chairperson. Another institution that should be abolished or reimagined is the Meghalaya Economic Development Council and the Employment Generation Council. These entities are using resources without any contribution whatsoever. May we ask the Chief Minister what solutions the State Planning Board has proposed in the last eight years that the Government is implementing? Similarly what has the Meghalaya Economic Development Council proposed? Please make these proposals public? We have the right to know.

To end this thesis let me say that I am a newspaper woman who tries to understand, evoke and make vivid the present. But that's not possible without understanding the past. We are the sum of our lived moments. It is worth turning time's arrow backward. While some have not been born in 1979 those who lived through the trauma of the time and the 1980s and 90's can never forget those tumultuous days. So, let's not pretend it's all behind us. People have not forgotten. It takes a conscious effort for all of society to enable that inflection point for those who carry the scars to be able to come out of their agony and move forward.

Transcend ethnic barriers and build social bridges

By H. Srikanth

When I was offered a teaching position in NEHU, few people advised me not to go to Shillong. They narrated the stories of ethnic violence that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s to convince me that Shillong was an unsafe and unfriendly place. Ignoring their advice, I joined NEHU because I felt Shillong is the best place to learn more about the Northeast. I have spent 24 years of my life in Shillong and will be retiring next year. Having seen how the city of Shillong and the state of Meghalaya have changed for the better in these decades, incidents like what happened on 19th August disturb me. It takes several years to build a positive image of a person or place. But one incident or few minutes are enough to tarnish that image. While acknowledging the need to condemn violence and demand punishment for the perpetrators, I feel it is necessary to respond to those painting the entire state and all local people as communal and hostile to outsiders.

Even when I joined NEHU way back in 2002, there were tensions in the city. There were frequent bandhs and road blockades in Shillong. People were afraid to come out to celebrate Independence Day and Republic Day. Drunkards and anti-social elements roamed the streets in the evenings. Civilians were hesitant to walk on the streets after 6 pm. Several incidents of dacoities and car thefts were reported in the city. I was informed that many non-tribal doctors and business owners had left the city, unable to pay ransom to the militants and hooligans. There were fears and tensions during the days of the Puja. While locals talked about exploitation by non-local traders, non-locals complained about the discrimination they had experienced. Few tourists flocked to Shillong then, as the roads were narrow and touring the state was viewed as unsafe and unpleasant. Apart from tribal and non-tribal tensions, there were also tensions in the state between the Garos and the Khasi-Jaintias. Some felt that civil society was weak, and only a couple of ethnic organizations dominated the entire civic space in the state. But this situation did not continue in the same way for long.

Since 2005, I have seen many positive changes taking place in the city and the state. Insurgency has subsided. Violent bandhs and blockades became less frequent. The fear factor gradually disappeared. These days, people have been coming out and celebrating Independence Day and Republic Day. The dorbars, the women's organizations and the police have reigned in on the drunkards and anti-social elements. Shopping and walking on the streets have become more pleasant. In recent years, shops have been kept open in many parts of the city until 9-10 pm. Nightlife has begun, and one can reach home without fear after watching a second-show movie. Many locals have become self-reliant and confident shop owners, hoteliers, and business entrepreneurs. With the development of roads and infrastructure, tourism has picked up and is providing employment and livelihood to people.

As education expanded, people have become cosmopolitan in their outlook and started thinking beyond tribe, religion, and region. Access to higher education has enabled the new generation to realize that one cannot remain in cocoons. The educated youth have come to accept social diversity and the need for greater mobility. I have come across many elders who regret the ethnic riots that occurred in the past and truly aspire for unity and harmony. The communal situation has improved considerably, with leading politicians and intellectuals joining the Puja committees and Hindu religious celebrations. Tensions between the Khasis and Garos have also reduced over the period, and demands for separate states for the Garos and the Khasi-Jaintia are rarely heard these days. Civil society and the

media have played their part in keeping a check on the extremist and lumpen elements attacking ethnic and religious minorities in the state. The people at large realize that unabated violence and ethnic tensions are not in their interest. Unlike in the past, when attacks on minorities went unreported, one can see locals raising their voices against the criminals and hooligans who attack minorities for no reason. On their part, the administration and the police in the state have been fair in upholding law and order.

These positive developments should not, however, make one ignore the negative developments that took place in the state in recent decades. As market forces penetrated the state in a big way, there are growing concerns about land alienation, environmental destruction and corruption. The tribal society is getting divided into classes, and we see the rise of landless labourers. There are also growing concerns among educated youth about declining job opportunities. The economy is not growing at a pace to address the problems of poverty and unemployment. Under these circumstances, the organizations representing the interests of the locals have every right to express concerns and demand that the government address their problems. However, the movements they lead will remain productive only if they remain positive and peaceful, and not turn parochial. We have seen how in the rest of India, the genuine problems of the people are given a communal colour and majoritarian sentiments are whipped up, making religious minorities the scapegoats. Experience tells us that ethno-centric politics hides the structural roots of the problems of land alienation, unemployment and insecurity. They divert public anger against the minorities and against those whom we view as the other. Ethno-nationalism dims the rational spirit and promotes a narrow vision. Movements based solely on ethnic identities pit one community against another; they break the internal unity of the labouring masses, and weaken the people's movements. It is for these reasons that the organizations claiming to fight for upholding the people's rights should focus on structural issues and stop chasing imaginary enemies.

The globalized world in which we live is inherently multicultural. In the modern world, no community -- tribal or non-tribal -- can lead an isolated life. All our lives are inter-dependent and inter-related -- socially, politically, and economically. When different communities have to share a common space, all should learn to accept the differences and learn to coexist. Inter-community conflicts need to be resolved through negotiation, not through violence. The exclusivist attitude -- "my way is the highway" -- will not work in the present times. For, no one is without power. Everyone can checkmate the other. A particular community may have a majority in one region, but they end up being a minority in another region. When some people behave in an arrogant and anarchic manner, their actions affect not only the other communities but also their own community interests. In Shillong, one can find rational and reasonable people in all communities. But there is little dialogue across the communities. There are no visible common public platforms that bring together all people opposed to communal violence of every kind and seek peace and harmony in the state. The city and the state badly need civic forums that would create a conducive environment for positive interactions among citizens belonging to different communities. Our fears and ethnic prejudices disappear when people begin to understand and appreciate other communities. Let us hope we all introspect and find the ways and means to transcend ethnic barriers and build social bridges that ensure social harmony and peace in the region.

Letters to the Editor

Is KSU to be blamed?

Editor, The recent turmoil in Shillong has cast a dark shadow on the city's peaceful ambience, following the motor-bikers' rally organised by the KSU, a premier pressure group of Meghalaya. This massive motor-bike procession protested the State Government's studied silence on certain KSU demands. I, for one, do not subscribe to such avoidable violence resulting from this rally, which reportedly entailed destruction and attacks on unwary passers-by, public properties et al.

In the wake of this uncalculated-for violence, KSU was lock, stock and barrel pilloried by most people, including many in the Hyniewtep Community, especially by those who are stationed outside Meghalaya, fearing retribution.

Nonetheless, to ascertain the facts, in casual field interactions with many conscious citizens from different walks of life, a good number of discerning respondents opined that during the recent KSU rally, some hooligans, perhaps deliberately deployed by vested interests or so-called high levels, were used to leverage the critical juncture to resort to rowdiness to land the KSU in deep waters! This was done to nip in the

bud their five-point charter of demands, conspicuously including the scrapping of the controversial Shree Cements public hearing in East Jaintia Hills District.

When all is said and done, the authorities must conduct an intensive probe and zero in on the real culprits, whoever they may be, behind this Machiavellian misdeed!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong -2

Justice Delayed is Justice Denied

Editor, It is said that justice delayed is justice denied. In Shillong, that old warning has become a lived reality -- and the responsible institution owes the public an explanation. Credible sources have learnt that the Learnt Assistant District Judge hearing civil matters in this city is simultaneously burdened with the charge of Learnt Chief Judicial Magistrate -- a post that demands daily hearing of bail applications, recording of evidence in criminal trials, jail visits, and a stream of statutory duties that cannot be postponed even by a day. One officer. Two full-time judicial mandates. By the time the criminal side of the

docket is cleared each day, there is barely an hour left -- if that -- for civil litigants who have waited months, sometimes years, for their case to even be heard.

Let that sink in. Citizens who have done everything the law asks of them -- filed correctly, paid their court fees, briefed their counsel, shown up -- are being told, in effect, that their dispute will have to wait because the court itself does not have the time. Not because the law is unclear. Not because the facts are complicated. But because one human being has been asked to preside over two courts at once, and something, inevitably, has to give. What gives, every single time, is the civil litigant's right to be heard.

I ask the readers of this esteemed daily: how many families have watched a property dispute stretch on for years while the asset itself decays in value? How many small businesses have been unable to secure an urgent injunction in time to matter? How many litigants have simply given up -- not because they were wrong, but because the system made pursuing their case far too expensive in time and money?

This is not an abstract administrative inconvenience. It is a daily, compounding injustice being visited upon the people of this city, and it has gone on long enough. I want to be unambiguous

about where responsibility lies. This is not a failure of any individual officer, who is, by every account, stretched well beyond what one person can reasonably deliver across two demanding jurisdictions. This is a failure of institutional will -- a failure to allocate the judicial manpower that Shillong's litigants are constitutionally owed. Access to justice is not a privilege to be rationed by administrative convenience. It is a guarantee under Article 21, and every day this dual-charge arrangement continues, that guarantee is being quietly hollowed out in plain sight.

The solution is neither novel nor difficult. It requires no new legislation, no prolonged study, no committee spending months deliberating the obvious. It requires the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya, which holds administrative superintendence over the subordinate judiciary, and the State Government, which must provide the resources the High Court requires, to do what should have been done long ago: appoint a dedicated, independent judicial officer to preside solely over the Court of the Assistant District Judge, Shillong, so that civil justice is no longer the leftover of a criminal docket.

I say this not as an idle observer but as someone who believes the judiciary is the last recourse of a citizen who

has nowhere else to turn. When that recourse itself becomes structurally incapable of delivering timely justice, the damage is not confined to the litigants before it today -- it corrodes public faith in the institution itself, for a generation. The Hon'ble High Court has, in the past, taken suo moto cognisance of matters far less consequential to the everyday citizen than this one. I respectfully urge it to do so again, before the backlog and the erosion of public confidence become impossible to reverse.

The people of Shillong are not asking for charity. They are asking the State and the High Court to make good on a promise the Constitution has already made to them. I hope this letter, through the pages of your esteemed daily, reaches those with the power to act -- and that they act swiftly, and without waiting for the crisis to deepen further.

Yours etc.,
Phillip Oscar Pajat,
Shillong

State of Education in India in 2026!

Editor, Close on the heels of the recent report that over one lakh schools across India are single-teacher schools, the Rajasthan government

disclosed in the state Assembly that around 10% of the schools in the state have no buildings, over 2000 schools lack toilets and over 1000 lack drinking water facilities. All other indicators of education revolve around this severe infrastructure deficit. The Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) Campaigns laid bare deficiencies in the education sector. Fifteen years have passed since the Right to Education (RTE) law was implemented; however, several roadblocks remain in the path of educational progress.

The primary deficiency in school education is the lack of basic infrastructure. Poor quality of education and lack of good learning ability for children in government and aided private schools in India run alongside a lack of basic infrastructure in such schools. Only half of the schools have computer and internet facilities. The worst affected students are girls. A large number of girls and Dalit students do not enrol or drop out because of several factors. Only through sufficient investment in education and a visionary approach can we overcome this malaise.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS
Kollam

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"Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space."
— Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

The Shillong Times

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Need to Review MBOSE Text Books
FORMER Tourism Minister Paul Lyngdoh correctly pointed to the need for an Education Reforms panel/commission as Meghalaya's declining educational ranking is a matter of grave concern. Lyngdoh also questioned the declining preference for the state board and the desire of most students to shift to the NCERT syllabus even moving outside the state to gain entry into such schools. It has become imperative for Meghalaya to set up the Education Reforms Panel to see if the text books prescribed at the primary and high school levels connect with students' lived experiences—the reason learning outcomes are poor and many students who cannot cope silently drop out of school. In Meghalaya data on any area of concern is scarce. If a research project studied the reasons why students drop out, the state could be better informed on how to tackle the issue. A perusal of the textbooks prescribed by MBOSE proves that school textbooks have not sufficiently connected learning with the lived experiences, culture and environment of Meghalaya's children. In fact, the curriculum has historically been insufficiently localised. Normally education is best served when teaching connects students to their immediate environment, meaning moving from the known to the unknown.

There is actually an interesting contradiction in Meghalaya's present education policy. For a child in the village, agriculture, basketry, crafts-making, and weaving are things they learn from watching their parents and neighbours. On weekends or school holidays children help their parents in the farms or fields. They know agriculture by watching and engaging with it. That same student may not be able to answer questions related to city activities or may not be tech-savvy or fluent in English. So, what should determine that student's marks? Can there not be questions based on the child's lived experiences? Perhaps the State is now aware of shortcomings in learning resources. For a long time publishers have been pushing their books and MBOSE has prescribed such books without spending time to see if they meet student needs. The recently produced Resource Book stated that children's experiences are shaped by their geographical, cultural and social context and learning materials should therefore be contextualized for children growing up in Meghalaya. Unfortunately, only now has the Meghalaya State Curriculum Framework taken note that, particularly at the primary level, textbooks prescribed by MBOSE have mostly come from private publishers.

The point to note is that the authors should have known the culture and tradition of Meghalaya. More so, the authors should have known the distinctive features of the cultures of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garos. Imagine a complete stranger sitting in Delhi writing a text book that's more suited for children of North, South or Central India and expecting students from Meghalaya to imbibe those strange cultures which could be taught in the later stages of their lives. While learning about other states and their cultures is also needed, that learning can only happen once students are familiar with their own cultures first. The starting point should be Meghalaya, then the North east and then the whole country. In short, the textbook should know the students, hence the need for a localised school education.

Letters to the Editor

SC Ruling Seals Uranium Mining Debate

Editor,
Apropos of the news "State Assembly unanimously passes resolution against uranium mining" (ST August 27, 2026), the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly's resolution is a strong political and cultural statement. Uranium mining raises fears of radiation exposure, contamination of water sources, and long-term ecological damage. Meghalaya's fragile ecosystems and dependence on agriculture make these risks particularly alarming. Land in Meghalaya is deeply tied to tribal identity and community ownership. Mining projects are often seen as threats to traditional ways of life and self-determination. By unanimously opposing uranium mining, the Assembly is asserting state sovereignty against central government projects. It reflects a broader pattern of northeastern states resisting extractive industries imposed from outside. While uranium mining could bring revenue and jobs, the Assembly's stance shows that the perceived costs—environmental, social, and cultural—outweigh the benefits in the eyes of the people.

For Delhi the resolution pressures the central government and agencies like the Department of Atomic Energy to respect local opposition. Ignoring it could deepen mistrust between the state and the Union. For

Meghalaya it strengthens the narrative of protecting indigenous rights and environmental stewardship, but also raises questions about how the state will balance development needs without such projects. This move adds to India's ongoing debate about resource extraction versus ecological and social sustainability, especially in sensitive regions. In essence, the Assembly is saying: uranium mining may serve national energy goals, but it comes at too high a cost for Meghalaya's people, land, and future.

Meghalaya's uranium mining resolution fits into the wider Northeast resource extraction conflicts. Nagaland is rich in oil and coal, but community ownership of land under Article 371A means projects need local consent. Past attempts at oil exploration faced strong resistance from tribal councils, echoing Meghalaya's assertion of indigenous rights. In Arunachal Pradesh hydro-power projects have sparked protests over displacement, ecological damage, and lack of local benefit. Like Meghalaya's uranium issue, people fear "development" imposed from Delhi without adequate safeguards. Oil drilling in biodiversity rich areas (like Dibru-Saikhowa) in Assam has triggered environmental protests. The tension between national energy needs and local ecological concerns mirrors Meghalaya's uranium debate. In Manipur mining of chromite and limestone has been opposed by civil society groups citing environmental degradation and lack of transparency.

Similar to Meghalaya, resistance is framed as protecting land, culture, and community health.

There is a common thread: indigenous land rights, community ownership and customary law give local populations strong leverage to resist extractive projects. The Northeast's ecosystems are highly sensitive, making mining and large projects especially controversial. Central government projects are often seen as imposed, with little local benefit fueling opposition. Resolutions like Meghalaya's are part of a broader push for states to assert control over their resources. Meghalaya's uranium resolution is not an isolated act - it's part of a regional pattern of resistance where indigenous communities and state assemblies push back against extractive industries. Together, these movements highlight a clash between national resource strategies and local rights/environmental protection.

The Chief Minister's reference to the Supreme Court judgment of July 3, 2019 in the resolution is crucial because it anchors the Assembly's resolution in constitutional and judicial authority, not just political sentiment. The Supreme Court reaffirmed that land and resources in Sixth Schedule areas (like Meghalaya) are under the control of tribal councils and communities, not the central government alone. It emphasized the importance of consent and local autonomy in resource exploitation, especially in tribal states. By citing the judgment, the As-

sembly shows that opposition to uranium mining isn't just political — it is legally supported by India's highest court. It reinforces the idea that indigenous communities have the final say over their land and resources. The resolution gains weight as a constitutional assertion of Meghalaya's rights within India's federal structure.

If Delhi or the Department of Atomic Energy tries to push uranium mining, the state can point to the Supreme Court ruling as a protective shield. The resolution becomes harder for the Centre to dismiss, since it is tied to judicial precedent. It signals to other northeastern states that legal judgments can be leveraged to resist extractive projects. It deepens the narrative that resource decisions in tribal states must respect local consent and constitutional safeguards. Chief Minister's reference to the 2019 Supreme Court judgment transforms the resolution from a political protest into a constitutional stand — making Meghalaya's opposition to uranium mining far more robust and defensible.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Curtains on vexed uranium mining!

Editor,
The unanimous resolution adopted in the assembly against uranium mining brings the curtain down on this vexed issue plaguing our state for almost three

decades. Accolades to the Chief Minister who moved the resolution and all the legislators, cutting across party lines. I would dedicate the plausible closure of the issue to Late Kong Spility Lyngdoh of Domiasiat and credit the different NGOs and individuals who relentlessly sustained the opposition to uranium mining over the years with conviction.

My involvement with the issue dates back to the 13th National Symposium on Environment, held for three days between 5-7 June 2004, organized by the North Eastern Hills University (NEHU) and sponsored by the Board of Research in Nuclear Sciences & Department of Atomic Energy (UCIL). My opposition to uranium mining, initially, stemmed from the apprehension of large-scale environmental denigration, which, over time and with more knowledge on the subject, evolved into concern for other dangers, primarily grave health threats and collateral impact on the entire populace of the proposed mining areas.

The symposium was attended by senior officials of the AEC, BRAC, UCIL, NEHU etc., headed by Dr Anil Kakodkar, the then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, besides the pro- and anti-uranium groups. The tone and tenor of the meet were clear as far as the organisers were concerned. The approach was to establish that the dangers from uranium mining were a myth, including a focus on advanced technology introduced for mining, enrichment, tailings management,

whether we live three kilometres from Polo Bazar or three hours from the nearest paved road.

The fix here is neither complicated nor radical. Independent physical verification, even a sampled, rotating audit of a percentage of schools each year, conducted by officials who are not the ones being graded, would go a long way toward restoring credibility. The aforementioned Principal's suggestion of reviving the old practice of School Inspectors, CRCs, BMCs, DMCs and SDSEOs conducting genuine, unannounced visits is not a nostalgic throwback. It is the missing verification layer that any credible grading system needs.

At its core, the MSPGI reeks of a top-down approach wherein the Education department has passed down a format / criteria to be filled up by the schools without any value-added contribution by the CRCs, School Inspectors and DSEO through a hand-holding process. Sitting in the fragile castles, namely the offices, does not strengthen education in the school. Many schools have clearly stated that they have not seen the government official's from the Education department in years. This creates a deep sense of alienation while facing the demands of teaching, managing an institution, data collection, implementation of events and activities in the form of circulars sent by the department at the 11th hour. Why aren't visits of the education department regularised, monitored and reported? A third-party verification goes a long way in ensuring the veracity of the data submitted.

The MSPGI's own architects describe it as a diagnostic tool, not a scoreboard for boasting rights. That is the right instinct. But a diagnosis is only useful if the test itself is not compromised. Right now, we are asking 11,443 schools to grade their own exam paper and then presenting the results as objective truth. Meghalaya's young population, the very people whose education this index claims to protect, deserve a system that checks its homework before it hands out the grades.

References: Government of Meghalaya. (2026). Meghalaya School Performance Grading Index 2025-26 Enhanced (1).pdf. Education Department, Samagra Shiksha Meghalaya

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etc. Many apprehensions and questions from those opposed to the mining were either unconvincing or left unanswered. This and many other subsequent advocacy seminars dwelt on the economic benefits of uranium mining ranging from "Meghalaya becoming one of the richest states" to massive employment opportunities and prosperity for people inhabiting the mining areas like Domiasiat, Wakhaji, et al.

However, visits to actual mining areas like Jadugoda in Jharkhand presented a grim picture of endangered human life and suffering besides environmental denigration outside the "areas of conducted tours," which did not reflect the true picture.

Moreover, the rights of indigenous land owners under the 6th schedule, over surface and sub-soil including minerals, has been vested by the landmark judgement of Supreme Court in the case of All Dimas Students Union versus State of Meghalaya based on the argument forwarded by the state government in the year 2019. The looming and impending dangers of uranium mining in our state is hopefully laid to rest with a finality of the resolution against uranium mining, processing, enrichment et al.

Yours etc
Naba Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-4

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Democracy at Play: When Questions Were Met With Answers

By Banwan Lyngdoh

From the streets to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, it was democracy at play. Earlier this month, the Voice of the People Party (VPP) took to the streets near the Secretariat to make known its ten-point charter, ranging from Lum Pongdeng to the teachers' eligibility test. The charter deserved an answer, and it got one, on the floor of the House.

The VPP chief and Nongkrem legislator, Bah Ardent M. Basaiawmoit, led the charge through a Short Duration Discussion on 25 August in the ongoing Autumn Session of the Meghalaya Assembly, where he set out the ten points. As someone at the ringside, I expected a government on the back foot, answering a charge sheet with adjectives. But in his reply, the Chief Minister, Conrad K. Sangma, moved the House with aplomb. It wasn't just rhetoric. The reply was packed with facts, figures and a message of hope.

Start with Lum Pongdeng, which has generated more heat than the rest of the list combined. The island is out - all 36 acres withdrawn from the Umiam project after the Synjuk Ki Rangbah Shnong of Ri-Bhoi made its repre-

public hearing before the Deputy Commissioner, and a Cabinet decision at the end. Rather more daylight than the word backdrop implies. Then he pointed at the Khasi Hills' Autonomous District Council, run by the VPP, and asked it to stop excluding the Dorbar Shnong, Dorbar Raid and Dorbar Hima from its own land legislation. Practise what you preach, he said, and put the charter to the VPP's own council. This was a true measure of a politician - putting the ball back in the opponent's court. And it was based on facts, as per the KHADC bill.

The enforcement record is not thin either. Seventy-two illegal coke plants demolished across two drives; 44 in 2023 and 28 last year. Eleven cement plants in East Jaintia Hills are on online monitoring. Six of 12 disputed stretches of the Assam boundary settled in 2022, after 50 years in which nobody had moved an inch. Eighteen anti-infiltration check posts, task forces in every district, senior officers spending nights in border villages, and registrations under the Residents Safety and Security Act now at 966 localities and 5,042 tenants, up from 817 and 3,297 as

"The eligibility test is not this government's policy and never was. It flows from central law and from a Supreme Court judgment of 1 September 2025, which gives serving teachers of Classes 1 to 8 until 31 August 2028 and exempts those with fewer than five years of service left."

sentations, a decision taken on 20 April this year.

On teachers, I expected a dodge and got a straight answer instead. The eligibility test is not this government's policy and never was. It flows from central law and from a Supreme Court judgment of 1 September 2025, which gives serving teachers of Classes 1 to 8 until 31 August 2028 and exempts those with fewer than five years of service left.

No Chief Minister can strike down a Supreme Court ruling from the floor of a state Assembly, and this one did not insult teachers by pretending otherwise. He listed what was actually in his hands and has been used: the concerns carried personally to the Union Education Minister, a review petition filed by the state against retrospective application, the test to be held frequently so nobody's service is jeopardised by waiting, and a category-wise database built precisely so that a court order is not applied mechanically to a man three years from retirement. That is what standing by your teachers looks like when you are bound by a judgment.

District recruitment, where ordinary families actually meet the state, is being brought under a single procedure for the first time since 1982. Interview marks are capped at 12.5 per cent of the total, the single most effective device ever invented for taking favouritism out of a selection.

The rest of the package: a mandatory local language qualifying paper, so that jobs in our districts go to people of our districts; interviews abolished for Group D posts; time-bound results at every stage. At the Public Service Commission, reforms designed by a committee under Professor David Syiemlieh, a former Chairman of the UPSC: pre-declared syllabus, OMR examinations, answer keys open to challenge for seven days, and every candidate's marks published online.

On land, the Chief Minister did something the charter clearly had not anticipated: he turned it around. Acquisition here means an open call to willing sellers who quote their own price, a headman's no-objection, a

recently as February.

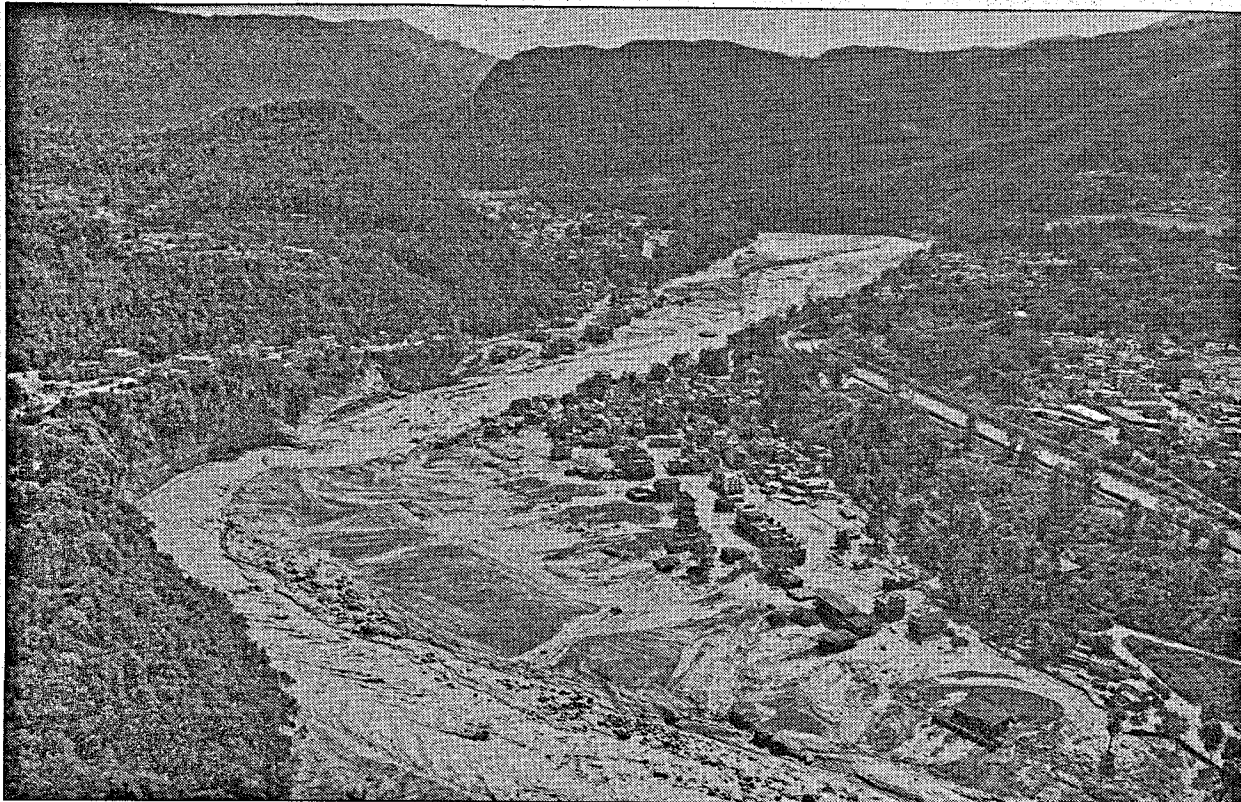
On coal, it is worth remembering who won the right everyone now takes for granted. It was this government that fought the 2019 case in the Supreme Court and secured the finding that our tribal landowners, private and community alike, own not merely the surface of their land but the minerals beneath it. That judgment is the foundation of every legal mine in Meghalaya today. The reason there are not more of them is a central Standard Operating Procedure demanding a minimum of 100 hectares, a threshold that fits nothing about these hills, where seams are thin and land is held in family and clan parcels. The state has not shrugged at it. It has asked Delhi to cut the threshold and to delegate approval powers here under Section 26 of the MMDR Act, powers the Coal Ministry agreed to in principle as far back as 2015. The Chief Minister met the Union Minister in July and came back saying he expects the 100 hectares to fall drastically, allowing the state's small miners to work the black diamond legally.

On stone, there is no blanket ban at all. Lawful quarrying is permitted with a lease, environmental clearance and pollution compliance. The bind is narrower and more stubborn: the rules make no provision for traditional small-scale working, and the Environment Ministry requires clearance for minor minerals regardless of how small the lease is. Whatever one thinks of that, it is not a Shillong decision.

Look closely at the demands and at the Chief Minister's reply, and it becomes clear that the obstacle is not an absence of will in Shillong but a rule written in Delhi or an order issued by a court, and on each of those, the government is arguing the same side as the protesters.

Ten demands went before the House. Ten answers came back, most with a date attached and a decision already on file. Disagree with the government by all means; that is what an Assembly is for. But no one can blame it for not listening, or for not acting on the demands.

Nepal Floods: Why Early Warnings Failed



Damaged houses stand precariously near the swollen, debris-choked banks of the Trishuli River after flash floods in Nepal's Nuwakot district on Wednesday. (PTI)

A flash flood can transform a river within minutes. This is what communities near the Nepal-Tibet border witnessed on Wednesday, August 26.

A massive flash flood ripped through villages along the Bhote Koshi-Trishuli river system carrying mud, debris and fast-flowing water. It has claimed the lives of at least 469 people and left hundreds more missing, including 39 Australians. Preliminary investigations suggest the flood was caused by a major collapse of ice and rock high in the Himalayas.

During such disasters, every extra minute is valuable time to reach higher ground. So how can we ensure communities are prepared in the face of such rapidly developing hazards?

A research suggests early warning systems may help.

How do early warning systems work?

Early warning systems use various tools, data and communication channels to detect natural disasters before they strike.

These systems do much more than send a text message after a flood or fire has started. They are designed to identify a potential hazard early, track it as it develops, and forecast where it may go. The most effective early warning systems communicate this information quickly, enabling the public and emergency responders to act.

These systems have saved lives. In the Swiss village of

Blatten, monitoring enabled authorities to evacuate residents before a massive rock-ice avalanche swept through the region in 2025. In Iceland, monitoring and established emergency procedures allowed more than 800 people to escape sudden glacial floods during the 2010 Eyjafjallajökull eruption.

Tracking where a disaster travels and how it develops is crucial. In the case of floods, river-monitoring stations at strategic intervals can measure water level and discharge. Cameras and other sensors can provide information about flow velocity and debris.

Combined with real-time flood modelling, these observations can indicate when a flood may reach downstream communities, how severe it could be, and which areas may be inundated.

This information also helps emergency responders. If authorities know one settlement may have 20 minutes before a flood arrives while another has 50 minutes, they can prioritise evacuations, position rescue teams, and identify roads and bridges that may soon become inaccessible.

When warnings aren't enough

In Nepal, emergency warnings were sent out but were not enough to save local villages.

The cascading disaster was triggered by the collapse of a massive glacier in Nepal's Langtang national park at about 8:40am. Nepal's Flood Forecasting Division soon received information that a major flood had entered the Bhote Koshi

river system from Tibet.

Within minutes, more than 600,000 mobile warning messages were sent to the public. By then, the Syabrubesi monitoring station in northern Nepal had already stopped transmitting. As the flood moved downstream, authorities continued to track it and issue warnings.

Nepalese authorities have known about the risk of such a disaster occurring for years. A 2020 assessment by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development and the United Nations Development Programme identified 47 potentially dangerous glacial lakes across the region's main river basins. This was based on data from satellite images and other remote-sensing technologies used to monitor glacier activity. High-risk areas can then be monitored using cameras, lake-level gauges, weather stations, and sensors measuring ground or ice movement.

The Nepali government has rolled out similar technology at Imja Lake, a fast-growing glacial lake in the Himalayas. Authorities installed sensors and automated sirens in 2016, but these have since fallen into disrepair.

Not foolproof

The catastrophic Nepal flood reveals the limitations of early warning systems.

For communities close to the source, flood warnings simply came too late. This is why warning systems should be automated wherever possible. When sensors detect dangerous conditions, information should immediately reach forecasting and emergency authorities. Location-based mobile alerts

must then be sent to people in threatened areas.

But mobile networks and electricity can fail, so phones cannot be the only solution. Sirens, radio and trained local task forces provide essential backup and ensure people know where to go and which evacuation routes to follow.

The monitoring network itself must be resilient. In Nepal, several weather stations stopped transmitting or were swept away during the recent floods. Monitoring infrastructure must be designed to keep functioning even if some instruments fail. This may involve establishing more strategically spaced weather stations, communication pathways, and backup power systems.

More work needed

Early warning systems cannot prevent natural disasters or fully protect vulnerable communities. They must be used alongside hazard mapping, which identifies areas that are more vulnerable to a particular disaster. Resilient infrastructure and established evacuation routes are also vital to prepare for natural disasters.

Research must focus on what interventions are most effective and in what regions. In the wake of the recent Nepal floods, several important questions remain, including how closely river-monitoring stations should be spaced, and how much warning time different communities need to evacuate safely.

Communities may have only minutes before a disaster strikes. An effective early warning system is about making every one of those minutes count. (The Conversation)



Rescuers use an earthmover to carry a victim of flash flooding to safety along the Trishuli River in Nepal's Nuwakot district, on Wednesday. (PTI)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, AUGUST 30, 2026

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Sun on your solar return chart thus promising to be a very excellent period ahead. You would have a lot of energy and passion to get things right. You will have the killer instinct to hit the bull's eye. New opportunities would knock on your door, and you will grab them with both hands. Your ability to focus on matters of importance will bring praise from colleagues. You will be given some big responsibility in your job. Your stock will suddenly rise. People will take note of you. Your standing in professional circle will increase. You will plan to invest in movable and immovable assets. You may also receive some property as a gift from your relatives. Your partner will be a source of strength and happiness for you. You will be able to find some time for relaxation with family amidst hectic work schedules. You could undertake short trips with family.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a happy and peaceful week. You will be spending quality time with your family and will also plan to go on a picnic or sightseeing trip. You would also like to spend some time being left alone and offering your prayers to God. You will get astonishing results in your work. Your bosses will be impressed with you and your never say die attitude. You will have monetary gains. There will be amicability in relationships. Chances of gains in partnership business will double. You will look after your elders well. It will be easy to get along and work with even those who oppose you. You will do every work in a well-organized and proper manner that will make things easier.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) It is time to re-assess your potential and carry out your tasks efficiently. You will get enormous success on the strength of your efforts and will be well organized. You will get happiness and the main thing is that you will be satisfied. The government work that was struck will gather momentum. A court verdict will come in your favor. You will also get to meet an influential personality. You will also get old diseases. There will be progress in your business. You will become popular by bringing about a change in your working style and personality. There will be increase in your popularity and influence. You will also have good understanding with your spouse/partner. You will be involved in social service, charity and noble deeds. You will create a good impression that will give happiness to your family.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) It will be auspicious week. You will get happiness and the main thing is that your work will get done with ease. All decisions taken by you will prove to be correct. You will also get back your money given to a third person. Confusion will be created at your workplace, but you will solve it with intelligence. You will also try and work according to your wishes, and all your work plans will be successful. Opportunities to earn money will rise. You will make progress in your work and personal relationships. You will also pay attention to domestic work and help to the best of your ability.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) You will get lot of success, name and fame this week. To match the fast pace of life you will have to double your efforts. And in the process, you will be successful in achieving your objectives. You will get lot of mental satisfaction. The husband and wife will have good understanding. You will also remain active and take part in community activities and share your emotions which will help you in making useful contacts. You will also meet your friends and relatives. Travel will be beneficial for you. You need to adapt yourself to the needs of time. Change is the need of the hour. If you keep your behavior adoptable, time will favor you. You will also meet your friends and relatives.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) The situation at workplace will be in your favor. You will touch the heights of success. You will also prove your mental capability. You will be promoted in your job. You will also plan a major expansion in your business. You will give equal importance to your work and home. The time is in the fast forward mode, and you will take full advantage of it. Financial matters will take center stage. Your thoughts will be vast. You will also help your friends and other people. You will give lot of importance to your emotions. You will also have faith in your capability that will give you satisfaction. Your friends and colleagues will help you. And your old problems will get eliminated. The time is good from every angle. You will have profits, energy and happiness. Pensioners will benefit. And incomplete work will be completed. There will be progress in all aspects of life.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) The time will pass happily. At this time your outlook, values and behavior will undergo a change. You will rise in your profession. It will also bring about an increase in your respect, name and fame. Your prestige will grow. You will

go on a business journey. The results will be good. You will pay equal importance to your domestic and household matters. You will also do religious and charitable work. Your life partner will prove to be a great advisor and helper. Materialism will attract you, but you will keep things balanced. You need not postpone your work and keep control in your job. You will get the blessings of all. Your financial position will remain strong.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) Your efforts put into the past will pay off well. You will get peace and cooperation on the domestic and work front. Your problems at work will get solved. There will be some trickery in money related matters. You will spend lavishly. But don't get entangled in other people's work or you may face losses. You will realize that tension can harm you and your dear ones. That is why you will take out time for entertainment. You will feel mental peace. You will also get good news from some relatives. You will come closer to your spouse/partner. Your contacts and associates will help you a lot and you will receive a very big contract or order. You will do your office work with great enthusiasm and your efficiency will improve.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) A success granting awaits you. The pace of time is also in your favor. You will feel yourself to be full of energy and vigour. You will be fully active too. You will be busy with your work, business, entertainment, travel, shopping etc. You are accepting what life is giving on a platter to you. You will also be able to succeed in establishing a dialogue with people. The time will be favorable for you. You will get to know about your financial and personal gains. You need to be careful in financial dealings. Don't trust anyone blindly, not even your family members. You may become a victim of disloyalty. Otherwise, time will pass happily. At this time your outlook, values and behavior will undergo a change. It will bring about an increase in your respect and prestige.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) It will be a special week for you. You will do something new and will be full of enthusiasm and zeal. You will complete your work with cooperation from colleagues. You will have interest towards spiritualism. These will be auspicious and wealth giving time. Your prestige will increase. You will be artistic and imaginative. You will also receive a cheque or draft and will also sign some new contracts in your business. There will be improvements in your business. You will do every work carefully with a lot of deliberation and on someone's advice. Newlyweds will understand each other properly and take care of each other.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) Your self-confidence will be high. And you will not deviate from your goals. You will keep doing your work and will impress one and all. Your bosses and seniors will be happy with your performance. You will also work under the guidance of an influential person. You will be busy preparing for some festival or function. You will be ostentatious, but people will praise you. You will be successful in competitive examinations. Your time will be great. This is an auspicious time for you. There will be an increase in your income. You will work hard to bring yourself and your family back on track. You will establish a dialogue with everyone.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) You will be mentally relaxed. You will also take your work seriously. Your image will also improve. At the office or at work you will work with team spirit. Your contributions will be acknowledged by your bosses. You will also give some gift to your friends as a gesture of thanks. Your efforts will bring in money. You will plan to buy a property or house. The balance between buying and selling will be static. You will also not compromise in money-related matters. You will also not rest till you do something. You will have respect for your in-laws. Do not trust anyone in money matters. Works that have been pending with the government will be completed. Work related to pension, insurance, passport etc. will be completed.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) You will enter an excellent phase. Held up money will be realized. Your investments in some venture may give you a fabulous return to strengthen your financial position. You will have your work duly stabilized. All endeavour to earn money will be successful. Your influence may swell and you may get promotion, or may get entangled with your relatives in some cases. Students will get positive results. Those in service must adopt an adjustable attitude with their seniors and colleagues to get maximum output in their work field. Family members affectionate nature will make you quite courageous. The time will be favorable but avoid having any tussle with colleagues.

A century ago: How 7,044 deaths changed Delhi's health laws

An ailing European who arrived in Delhi from Shimla was among the first cases recorded as influenza began spreading in the city in 1918. Within months, the disease had claimed 7,044 lives in Delhi city, according to archival records.

Two years later, in September 1920, the British India administration formally declared ordinary influenza an infectious disease in Delhi, according to documents accessed by PTI from the Delhi Archives.

The notification brought influenza under the infectious-disease provisions of the Punjab Municipal Act, which governed municipal administration in Delhi at the time, and gave the Delhi Municipality powers to control its spread.

Today, H1N1 is covered under Delhi's infection-control guidelines as a reportable infection, but not every seasonal influenza case is individually reportable, said Dr Sanchayan Roy, Senior Consultant, Internal Medicine, Apollo Spectra Hospital, Delhi.

A medical report preserved in the Delhi Archives from 1918 said the first case to come to the immediate notice of the province's chief medical officer was a European who had recently arrived from Simla (now Shimla), where members of his family were suffering from the same illness.

A week later, another European living in the same house was "evidently infected from the first case".

Through September, there was little to cause "anxiety or alarm", the report said. Patients suffered from fever, sore throat and cough. But by October, cases had become more frequent, severe and fatal.

At Delhi's Civil Hospital, cases rose from ones and twos in the first week of October to more than 100 a day by the third week. On October 14 alone, 181 influenza cases were recorded, the report said.

Severe cases developed pneumonia, bronchitis, pleurisy and empyema, while some patients suffered violent delirium and others died suddenly from heart failure. Doctors across the province worked "almost to a standstill", the report said.

An official communication from the Chief Medical Officer, Delhi, in 1918 recorded 23,175 influenza deaths across Delhi Province in October and November. Of these, 7,044 were reported in Delhi city and 16,131 in rural areas, according to documents accessed by PTI from the Delhi Archives.

The 1918-19 influenza pandemic was one of the worst public-health disasters in India's modern history.

The first outbreak in June 1918 was mild, but the disease spread rapidly across the country through the railway network before a much deadlier second wave emerged in September.

Patients developed acute fever, weakness, pain in the body and limbs, headache, soreness of the eyes, cough and bronchitis, while severe cases developed pneumonia within days, said Dr Arvind Aggarwal, Director, Internal Medicine, Sri Balaji Action Medical Institute, Delhi.

Roy further added that this influenza virus was called the Bombay influenza virus. It couldn't be differentiated further. Possibly, it was H1N1, but could have been a mix of Influenza A and B also.

The scale of the epidemic prompted Delhi officials to consider whether influenza should be brought under the city's infectious-disease law.

A July 1920 file from the Delhi Archives shows the Sanitation Sub-committee considering whether influenza, influenza pneumonia or acute pneumonia should be included among



infectious diseases under the Punjab Municipal Act.

The committee examined arrangements in Bombay, Madras and England, where different forms of influenza and pneumonia were already subject to notification.

Delhi officials recommended that ordinary influenza should also be notified, saying it would help detect influenza and influenza pneumonia, protect the public and give the municipality powers to control the disease.

"Although the difficulties of diagnosing ordinary Influenza are considerable," the committee said notification was "on the whole desirable". It also noted there would be "no inconvenience to the general public and no considerable additional work to the medical practitioner".

The Delhi Municipality then sought a draft notification for publication in the Gazette, following which the Chief Commissioner issued the final notification in September 1920, formally declaring ordinary influenza an infectious disease.

The 1921 Census estimated 8.5 million deaths in India from the pandemic in 1918 and 1919, while historical research has put the figure at 12 million or more, Aggarwal said.

More than a century later, the reporting system makes a sharper distinction between different influenza infections.

"The reportable nature of swine flu or Influenza A (H1N1) disease is already included in the infection control guidelines formulated officially by the state of Delhi," Roy said.

He said suspected or confirmed reportable infections have to be reported through appropriate public-health and hospital surveillance mechanisms. However, this does not mean all patients suffering from seasonal flu have to be individually reported.

"Influenza A includes H1N1 and H3N2, while Influenza B also circulates," Roy said.

H1N1 receives specific public-health attention, while H3N2, Influenza B and other influenza infections are monitored through laboratory reporting and the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme.

"National Centre for Disease Control laboratory reporting formats contain Influenza A, pandemic H1N1, H3N2, Influenza B and others among their laboratory tests," he said.

Roy also said testing is not required for every patient. Those in mild Category A and many Category B patients may not be tested for H1N1 under national guidelines, while Category C patients require testing, hospitalisation and treatment.

"Public health reporting in this case will be done through clinical surveillance for suspected infection and laboratory testing where appropriate, as opposed to laboratory confirmation only," Roy said. (PTI)