

Chronic stress may contribute to cognitive decline, dementia risk

The probability of any American having dementia in their lifetime may be far greater than previously thought.

For instance, a 2025 study that tracked a large sample of American adults across more than three decades found that their average likelihood of developing dementia between ages 55 to 95 was 42 per cent, and that figure was even higher among women, Black adults and those with genetic risk.

Now, a great deal of attention is being paid to how to stave off cognitive decline in the aging American population. But what is often missing from this conversation is the role that chronic stress can play in how well people age from a cognitive standpoint, as well as everybody's risk for dementia.

We are professors at Penn State in the Center for Healthy Aging, with expertise in health psychology and neuropsychology. We study the pathways by which chronic psychological stress influences the risk of dementia and how it influences the ability to stay healthy as people age.

Recent research shows that Americans who are currently middle-aged or older report experiencing more frequent stressful events than previous generations.

A key driver behind this increase appears to be rising economic and job insecurity, especially in the wake of the 2007-2009 Great Recession and ongoing shifts in the labour market.

Many people stay in the workforce longer due to financial necessity, as Americans are living longer and face greater challenges covering basic expenses in later life.

Therefore, it may be more important than ever to understand the pathways by which stress influences cognitive aging.

Social isolation & stress

Although everyone experiences some stress in daily life, some people experience stress that is more intense, persistent or prolonged. It is this relatively chronic stress that is most consistently linked with poorer health.

In a recent review paper, our team summarised how chronic stress is a

hidden but powerful factor underlying cognitive aging, or the speed at which your cognitive performance slows down with age.

It is hard to overstate the impact of stress on your cognitive health as you age. This is in part because your psychological, behavioral and biological responses to everyday stressful events are closely intertwined, and each can amplify and interact with the other.

For instance, living alone can be stressful - particularly for older adults - and being isolated makes it more difficult to live a healthy lifestyle, as well as to detect and get help for signs of cognitive decline.

Moreover, stressful experiences - and your reactions to them - can make it harder to sleep well and to engage in other healthy behaviours, like getting enough exercise and maintaining a healthy diet. In turn, insufficient sleep and a lack of physical activity can make it harder to cope with stressful experiences.

Stress is often missing from dementia prevention efforts. A robust body of research highlights the importance of at least 14 different factors that relate to your risk of Alzheimer's disease, a common and devastating form of dementia and other forms of dementia. Although some of these factors may be outside of your control, such as diabetes or depression, many of these factors involve things that people do, such as physical activity, healthy eating and social engagement.

What is less well-recognised is that chronic stress is intimately intertwined with all of these factors that relate to dementia risk.

Our work and research by others that we reviewed in our recent paper demonstrate that chronic stress can

affect brain function and physiology, influence mood and make it harder to maintain healthy habits. Yet, dementia prevention efforts rarely address stress.

Avoiding stressful events and difficult life circumstances is typically not an option.



Where and how you live and work plays a major role in how much stress you experience. For example, people with lower incomes, less education or those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods often face more frequent stress and have fewer forms of support - such as nearby clinics, access to healthy food, reliable transportation or safe places to exercise or socialise - to help them manage the challenges of aging.

As shown in recent work on brain health in rural and underserved communities, these conditions can shape whether people have the chance to stay healthy as they age.

Over time, the effects of stress tend to build up, wearing down the body's systems and shaping long-term emotional and social habits.

Lifestyle changes to manage stress and lessen dementia risk. The good news is that there are multiple things that can be done to slow or prevent dementia, and our review suggests that these can be enhanced if the role of stress is better understood.

Whether you are a young, midlife or an older adult, it is not too early or too late to address the implications of stress on brain health and aging. Here are a few ways you can take direct actions to help manage your level of stress:

1) Follow lifestyle behaviours that can improve healthy aging. These include: following a healthy diet, engaging in physical activity and getting enough sleep. Even small

changes in these domains can make a big difference.

2) Prioritise your mental health and well-being to the extent you can. Things as simple as talking about your worries, asking for support from friends and family and going outside regularly can be immensely valuable.

3) If your doctor says that you or someone you care about should follow a new health care regimen, or suggests there are signs of cognitive impairment, ask them what support or advice they have for managing related stress.

4) If you or a loved one feel socially isolated, consider how small shifts could make a difference. For instance, research suggests that adding just one extra interaction a day - even if it's a text message or a brief phone call - can be helpful, and that even interactions with people you don't know well, such as at a coffee shop or doctor's office, can have meaningful benefits.

Walkable neighbourhoods, lifelong learning. A 2025 study identified stress as one of 17 overlapping factors that affect the odds of developing any brain disease, including stroke, late-life depression and dementia. This work suggests that addressing stress and overlapping issues such as loneliness may have additional health benefits as well. However, not all individuals or families are able to make big changes on their own. Research suggests that community-level and workplace interventions can reduce the risk of dementia. For example, safe and walkable neighbourhoods and opportunities for social connection and lifelong learning - such as through community classes and events - have the potential to reduce stress and promote brain health.

Importantly, researchers have estimated that even a modest delay in disease onset of Alzheimer's would save hundreds of thousands of dollars for every American affected. Thus, providing incentives to companies who offer stress management resources could ultimately save money as well as help people age more healthfully. (The Conversation)

Lab-produced sperm could change fertility treatment in future

Imagine a future where a diagnosis of untreatable male infertility is no longer the end of the road - because science has found a way to produce human sperm from lab-engineered testicular tissue.

This might sound like science fiction, but I'm leading a team of researchers at the University of Limerick (UL) to work on making the production of human sperm from lab-engineered testicular tissue a reality. If successful, this could redefine fertility treatment and bring hope to the millions of people around the world affected by male infertility.

Why now? Because male reproductive health is in decline - and the numbers are too stark to ignore.

Over the past seven decades, sperm counts have decreased dramatically while conditions like testicular cancer, hormone imbalances and genital malformations - which can all have an effect on sperm counts - are on the rise.

The precise causes of declining male reproductive health are still being debated. While genetics may play a role, no single genetic factor has been shown to affect male fertility at a population level. Instead, much of the focus has turned to the environment, particularly endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

These chemicals, which can interfere with hormone function, are found in common items such as plastics, pesticides, cosmetics and even painkillers. There is growing evidence that exposure to these substances in the womb can increase the risk of testicular cancer, reduce sperm quality, and lead to male infertility later in life.

For some men, fertility issues are treatable - lifestyle changes, hormone therapy, or surgery to correct blockages in the reproductive tract can help. But for a large proportion, there is no identifiable cause.

This type of unexplained infertility, known as idiopathic infertility, currently leaves patients with only one option: surgical sperm retrieval (SSR).

SSR involves surgically opening the testicles to search for viable sperm

for use in assisted reproductive technologies like IVF. However, success is far from guaranteed. In some cases, the chance of finding even a single usable sperm cell is as low as 40%.

In addition to its physical and emotional toll, SSR places the burden of fertility treatment on the female partner's reproductive system, meaning women's bodies are often the target of fertility medications and procedures. It does little to address the underlying health risks associated with male infertility, including higher rates of illness and early mortality. And if SSR fails, the only option left is to use donor sperm - a difficult and emotional decision for many people.

Root of the problem

To address male infertility, scientists need to get to the root of the problem and develop solutions that restore natural fertility.

So, given the ethical and biological limits on experimenting directly with humans, researchers have turned to preclinical models to study the human testes. These include *ex vivo* tissue (human or animal tissue studied outside the body), *in vitro* cell cultures (human testicular cells grown on lab plates), and animal models (typically rodents or primates).

However, human sperm production is vastly different - and much less efficient - than in other mammals, making animal models unreliable. To move forward, researchers need preclinical models that closely mimic human testes and their ability to produce sperm.

This remains one of the biggest scientific hurdles in the field. While researchers have successfully produced sperm in the lab from mouse testicular tissue, the same has never been achieved in humans.

Our research is attempting to overcome this challenge by combining biology with mechanical engineering and materials science. We started by analysing human testicular tissue samples from a range of donors, building a detailed understanding of how the tissue functions. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 1, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give amazing results for the whole year ahead. You will get your government related work done easily and will also come in contact with influential persons and high ranking government officials. New job/business offers will keep coming. Those who were preparing for competitive exams/interviews will get success. You will also get work orders from abroad. Even your financial condition will keep getting better. You will also get new investment opportunities. You will also get relief from chronic diseases. This is a year where you will enter into new romantic ties leading to marriage. You will also share good bonding with your mate. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. Children will perform well.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced by the planetary combination. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Reliability and creativity will take you places now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would brilliantly and effectively handle difficult projects at work. Business associates bring good news and lucrative terms and opportunities.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Friendship, love, romance and children are highlighted. You would have new attitudes towards family, finances, and social relationships. Home and family matters capture your attention and are a strong source of pride. It is a time when worldly matters are not as important to you. Use this energy to find ways to improve your interpersonal relations and your home and work environment. You might be a bit of a showman at this time. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and for joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) With communication, creativity and judgment you gain money and influence in business ventures. Success brings status and respect as you dominate the professional scene. This is the right time to participate in community events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. This phase brings rewards and recognition in your professional life. You would also work hard with an inclination towards more detailed work, and it can get to you at times. Personal projects are on an upswing. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Income from foreign sources could also figure this time. You feel on top of things and replete with good health and energy.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) A period of hard work and effort is in your forecast. You would be taking on new responsibilities and will enjoy the challenges. A new set-up in an existing home or a new home altogether may be part of the picture in the coming weeks. There will also be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your domestic routines, comfort, and feeling of security. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your need for a solid foundation—a place to return to when the rest of the world gets to you. Do not isolate yourself when you are feeling down. Friends and loved ones will support you and listen to you when you air your feelings.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routine tend to speed up now. You are required to do a balancing act, and something big is in the pipeline. There may be some confusion about your dreams and ideas regarding your career. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Increased energy for health routines and work is with you.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) There may be debates and discussions in family and you may face some opposition. You are likely to exert your energy and initiative into actively pursuing a rewarding love life, social amusement, and pleasure in general. You have a likeable

and competitive temperament. There is a stronger desire for creative endeavors, athletics and risk-taking pursuits. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner and a few conflicts are possible. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others on a mental level. You have a stronger need than usual for intellectual stimulation.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings good luck for love and romance. Ego confrontations with family members are possible now, but the best way to handle this is to do your best to strengthen your relationship with your family and your home base. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself, so that regardless of what you meet in the outside world over the next weeks, you have a secure place to return to. Besides spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and nourishing your inner foundation that support you and your growth.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Associates at work might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you status. You can improve your love life by bringing more understanding and sharing views with each other. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people and of your immediate environment. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is your best bet now. If health is affected, fevers or infections are more likely.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This period brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. You explore and search, make new connections, and pay attention to your immediate environment. Give other people a little extra time and attention, notice their efforts on your behalf, and strengthen your connections. You are more curious and alert than usual, and you could be quite busy with work. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment. Siblings, neighbours, close relatives, friends, and co-workers may play a more important role than usual in your life. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration promotes your luck in work related areas. You would be especially fond of home and family life. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental now. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. There would be a bright opportunity to travel, learning or the publishing of a project. Getting your finances on track will be necessary at this time. Do your best to avoid letting emotions rule over good judgment when it comes to expenses and other financial matters. Share your thoughts and feelings with others and you may be surprised at the support you receive from close friends and loved ones.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Pay close attention to performance, it will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You will have the ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and can expect good returns from overseas business. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more-spiritual or idealistic pursuits. A sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself is something that is entering your life now. There may be a development of romance at your work place. You turn your attention on fitness and diet programs.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) There would be happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening of your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background. Your dreams and ideas about intimacy come into focus, but could also bring the flaws in this area of your life to light. An income boost is likely in this period. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the physical world of the senses, and this is a time to start fresh in terms of how you arrange your life in order to feel a sense of value and worthiness. It is also a wonderful time for taking moments to please yourself through earthy, tactile, and comforting endeavours.

Birth control increases stroke risk

For millions of women, combined hormonal contraceptives are a part of their daily life - providing a convenient and effective option for preventing pregnancy and managing their menstrual cycle.

But new findings are sounding the alarm on a serious, and often overlooked, risk: stroke.

According to recent findings presented at the European Stroke Organisation Conference, combined oral hormonal contraceptives (which contain both oestrogen and progestogen) may significantly increase the chance of women experiencing a cryptogenic stroke. This is a sudden and serious type of stroke that occurs with no obvious cause.

Surprisingly, in younger adults - particularly women - cryptogenic strokes make up approximately 40 per cent of all strokes.

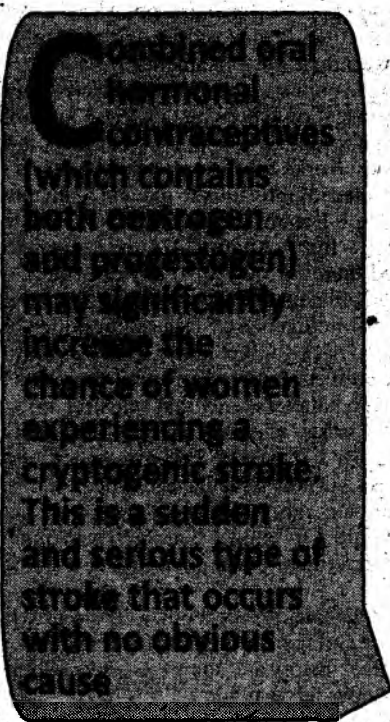
This suggests there may be sex-specific factors which contribute to this risk - such as hormonal contraception use. These recently-presented findings lend themselves to this theory.

At this year's conference, researchers presented findings from the Secreto study. This is an international investigation that has been conducted into the causes of unexplained strokes in young people aged 18 to 49. The study enrolled 608 patients with cryptogenic ischaemic stroke from 13 different European countries. One of their most striking discoveries was that women who used combined oral contraceptives were three times more likely to experience a cryptogenic stroke compared to non-users. These results stood, even after researchers adjusted for other factors which may have contributed to stroke risk (such as obesity and history of migraines).

It's well-documented that hormonal contraceptives, which contain both oestrogen and progestin, come with a small, increased risk of experiencing serious health events, including stroke - particularly ischaemic stroke, which occurs when blood flow to part of the brain is blocked.

But a study published earlier this year, which tracked over two million women, found that combined hormonal contraceptives - including the pill, intrauterine devices (IUD), patches and vaginal rings, which all contain both synthetic oestrogen and progestogen - were linked to higher risks of both stroke and heart attack.

The vaginal ring increased stroke risk by 2.4 times and 3.8 times for heart attack. The contraceptive patch was found to increase stroke risk by



smoke, experience migraines or have a genetic tendency to clot.

If a clot forms in an artery that supplies the brain or breaks off and travels through the bloodstream to the brain, this can block blood flow - causing what's known as an ischaemic stroke. This is the most common type of stroke. Clots can also form in deep veins (such as those in the legs or around your organs).

In addition to clotting, oestrogen may also slightly raise blood pressure and affect how blood vessels behave over time, which can further increase stroke risk.

The effects of oestrogen on clotting may partly explain why the recent conference findings showed a link between combined contraceptive use and cryptogenic stroke risk.

Cryptogenic stroke has no obvious cause, but is increasingly being linked to subtle, hidden risk factors - such as hormone-driven clotting.

Understanding risk

These numbers can sound alarming at first, but it's important to keep them in perspective. The absolute risk - meaning the actual number of people affected - is still low.

For instance, researchers estimate that there may be one additional stroke per year for every 4,700 women using the combined pill. That sounds rare, and for most users, it is. But when you consider that millions of women use these contraceptives globally, even a small increase in risk can translate into a significant number of strokes at the population level. Which is relative to what is seen with the high number of cryptogenic strokes in young women.

Despite the risks associated with combined hormonal contraceptives, many women continue to use them - either because they aren't fully informed of the risks or because the alternatives are either less effective, less accessible or come with their own burdens. Part of the reason this trade-off has become so normalised is the persistent under-funding and under-prioritisation of women's health research. Historically, medical research has focused disproportionately on men - with women either excluded from studies or treated as an afterthought.

This has led to a limited understanding of how hormonal contraceptives affect female physiology beyond fertility control. As a result, the side-effects remain poorly understood, under-communicated and under-addressed. (The Conversation)

"Exercise should be regarded as tribute to the heart."

—Gene Tunney

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Claims, counter-claims

IMPORTANT actions related to Operation Sindoor are still in the realm of conjecture as both India and Pakistan have only selectively leaked information, some of which are questionable or require elaboration. Governments on both sides cannot be faulted for the veil of secrecy they maintain even as these are democratically elected dispensations. That has been the way it is in respect of most wars. Yet, information is trickling down in bits and pieces. For instance, India's Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan stated in Singapore that India lost fighter jets though he avoided spelling out the exact numbers. That India lost at least one jet was a general understanding. What he would now assert is that the "Pakistani claim that it downed six IAF aircraft was a lie." His failure to give the exact number tells its own story and only adds to the existing confusion. A question could also arise as to why he went all the way there to state this, rather than saying this out here for the domestic audience. It however is the brief of the government to clear the air of uncertainty. The military chief is not duty-bound to make a public statement.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is going to different states, addressing meetings, and warning Pakistan that he would send missiles if they dared to fire more bullets from there. If Pakistan has got this message there is no need for such threats anymore. Pakistan's army chief, General Asim Munir, however thinks Pakistan fought back brilliantly. Hence his claim that the Field Marshal post that the Pakistan government accorded him now was thanks not to Allah, but to Modi. In other words, both sides are showing the courage for grandstanding. For others, however, it's difficult now to differentiate between chaff and wheat. Therein lies the rub.

Yet, it must be admitted that Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif has not minced words when he admitted that the Pakistani establishment was taken unawares by the swiftness of the Indian attack on the first day, though India gave them an advance warning. He admitted that Pakistan's air defence systems were pulverized by the Indian missile attacks. He listed the losses. This candour on his part must, certainly, be appreciated. He wanted to boldly admit the truth and showed a readiness to face public retribution, if that was forthcoming. It would be appreciable if India too showed a frankness to explain matters. At the same time, note also the point why Pakistan has no proof to show -- of the fighter jets it claimed to have shot down. A fair analysis as to who won and who lost is possible only when we have facts on the ground. Even a parliament session, where many questions are bound to be asked, will not clear the haze as the government can always take refuge under the secrecy clause.

Learning from the lives of visually-impaired people

By H H Mohrmen

Living in a world of darkness is not fun. That is what one might assume about the lives of visually impaired people. What kind of life does one live when one cannot see anything? Their lives must be dark and dull one would think, but is it really so?

I consider myself lucky to have received the love and gained the trust of my visually impaired friends. It is truly a privilege to be welcomed into their lives. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to be part of their difficult journeys.

The first thing we realise when we engage with them is that they all want to be independent. They don't want to depend on their parents for their needs. In fact, despite the challenges they face, they strive to earn a living on their own. To support what they had already started, we from the Society for Urban and Rural Employment (SURE) decided to provide them with some skill training. After due consultation, we conducted two training sessions on making brooms from natural broom grass. The first training was held at Moosakhia in November 2023.

They Are Vulnerable

During my visit to the centre on November 23, I approached the place silently, without speaking to anyone. We had engaged two helpers to assist them, but they were busy in the kitchen. At that moment, the entire space was occupied by the visually impaired trainees, and even Kelvin Suting the trainer we engaged is visually impaired. While everyone was busy with the training, two trainees were sitting outside.

It was winter, so Krishna Phawa and Riangmon Myrchiang were sitting outside, basking in the sun. When they heard footsteps, Riang turned his head towards Krishna and murmured, "I heard footsteps. Somebody is coming. Who could it be?" While I silently observed the scene, Krishna replied in a softer voice, "I don't know, I heard it too."

I stood there for some time and, without talking to anyone, I moved towards the centre where the others were busy making broomsticks. I stood at the door watching them work, saying nothing. Everyone sensed that someone was standing at the door, but they couldn't see and

didn't know who it was. They were suspicious. In their minds, they were probably wondering whether it was someone dangerous or someone familiar playing a trick on them.

Then Kelvin Suting, the trainer—who is also visually impaired—returned from the kitchen and walked into the room. He bumped into me as I continued to stay silent. When I didn't speak, he became suspicious and started touching me to identify who I was. He felt my clothes, then my hands, my watch, and finally touched my fingers, where I was holding my diary. He exclaimed, "It's Pastor, isn't it?"

I burst out laughing, and they all laughed too. The tense moment instantly dissolved, and laughter filled the room. It was a memorable experience that also made me realise how vulnerable they are because of their condition.

They Enjoy Humour Too

Another interesting incident occurred during one of my visits when they were busy with the training. While Kelvin was teaching Iba a new design for tying a broomstick, Durka, who was sitting next to him, was also working diligently. While she was focused on her task, the tip of her broomstick nearly pierced Kelvin's eye. Sensing it, Kelvin said jokingly, "Please mind your broom, or it might poke my eyes and make me lose my sight." They all burst out laughing. Not to be outdone, Durka replied, "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it. But imagine what will happen to us if our teacher becomes blind!" And they laughed even harder.

Later, while Iba was working, broom dust flew into her already vulnerable eyes. She cried out, "Aw, it hurts! This will make me blind!" To which I quickly responded, "If all of you become blind, then what will happen to the training?" Everyone laughed—because they were all already blind.

Another small anecdote happened when Mary, who was struggling with her broom, called out to Kelvin, the master trainer, "Sir, can you look at my broom and tell me if the design is right?" Kelvin responded, "Well, I'm sorry, I cannot see; I can only feel and touch."

A Life-Changing and Life-Fulfilling Experience

A few days before the training ended, the visually impaired master trainer asked if we could arrange a picnic or outing to Loomkyntoor Resort. Although no funds were allocated under the scheme for such an excursion, we decided to give them the opportunity using our own resources.

But the question is: What does an outing mean for a group of visually impaired people? What does a trip mean when one cannot see?

The organisation's staff never imagined that the outing would make them happier than it made the visually impaired participants. It is said that there is no greater reward than seeing happiness in the lives of those you care for. For them, going on a picnic was just an event. But for us, it was a life-changing and life-fulfilling experience.

Another lesson I learned is that visually impaired people work best when they are in a group. The picnic was an opportunity to go together as a team, and the experience was truly indescribable. One could feel the camaraderie they had built among themselves.

It was a joy to see them happy, to help describe the surroundings to them. For some, it was their first time eating out or visiting a restaurant.

Visually Impaired and Photography

Now, most of the visually impaired persons we engage with, own smartphones. These devices are extremely useful to them, especially for social media. They use their phones to make calls, send and read texts, and even take photographs.

Thanks to technological advancements, smartphones have become great aids. There are apps that help them read and write messages. But for a visually impaired person, photography is a different ball game altogether.

One might wonder: Why would they want to take a photograph when they cannot see? How would they even take one? And what would they do with the photos? While there are apps to assist them in taking pictures, they still need help to capture good ones. Once a photo is taken, they immediately upload it to

their social media status.

Even though they are blind, the voice-assisted features on the phone help them take photos and share them on various platforms. These apps inform them if the photo is framed correctly and guide them to move in the right direction for a perfect shot.

You can see the joy on their faces when they upload a status on WhatsApp. Thanks to smartphones, they are making the best use of technology. In many ways, smartphones have become an extension of their being, giving them access to services that would otherwise be difficult to reach.

Taking the Bull by the Horns

On one occasion, I accompanied a group of our visually impaired friends to the DC's office to meet the Additional Deputy Commissioner, seeking redress for some of their grievances. One of their demands was the right to a special job card under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which they had been denied.

During the discussion, the officer unknowingly used the Khasi words matlah (blind) and don jingduna (disabled) while referring to them. Krishna immediately responded, telling him bluntly that they do not like being called such terms. Iba supported him, and the officer had to apologise and correct himself. Government officials also need to be educated on the proper, respectful terminology when referring to differently-abled people. These may seem like minor issues, but only the one who wears the shloes knows where it pinches.

The extension of wtheir white cane

Their eyes may be closed, but their hearts are open. They long for the independence to live the lives they choose for themselves, yet that's often not possible. The white cane they carry with them everywhere they go is not just a symbol which represents the visually impair people, but more importantly they consider it to be their best friend. Having a white cane is handy, but there is nothing like having a human friend to support and help them. So please reach out to them whenever you see them venturing out of their homes. It means a lot to them.

Plastic Pollution: A Great Environmental Health Hazard

By Debaprasad Misra

World Environment Day is celebrated annually on June 5 which to encourage awareness and action for the protection of the environment. First held in 1972 it has been a platform for raising awareness on environmental issues such as over population, global warming, sustainable development, wildlife crime, land pollution, water pollution, air pollution, marine pollution and noise pollution etc. The day was established in 1972 by the United Nations at the Stockholm Conference on the human environment that had resulted from discussions on the integration of human interactions and the environment. Two Years later, in 1974, the first world Environment Day was held with the theme 'Only One Earth'.

We are observing the 53rd World Environment Day this year on this very day focusing on the critical issue of ending plastic pollution. Environmental pollution is the biggest problem that the world is facing today. Owing to the rapid increase in population and the development in the field of Science and Technology, the problem of environmental pollution and degradation has crossed its limit. Environmental Pollution can be defined by any undesirable change in the physical, chemical or biological characteristics of any component of the environment which can cause harmful effects on various forms of life or property. On the other hand, for normal and healthy living, a conducive environment is required by all leaving beings including humans, life stock, plants, microorganisms and the wild life. This year's theme "Ending plastic Pollution" aims to raise awareness about the global plastic crisis. Plastic pollution is the accumulation of plastic in the environment, causing harm to wild life habitats and human populations. It is a Global issue with a wide range of impacts, from entanglement and ingestion by marine animals to the introductions of micro plastics into the food chains. Most of the pollution that threatens our planet today is caused by human activities.

In short, pollution is a threat to our existence. The major causes of plastic pollution are: land based sources, single used plastics, inefficient waste management, wild life impacts, environmental impacts, economic impacts etc. Plastic pollution indeed permeates every corner of the Planet— even in our bodies in the form of micro plastics. This type of pollution is one of the most pressing environmental challenges facing the planet today. The majority of plastic pollution comes from single use plastics like bags, bottles, packaging and straws. These items often escape waste management systems and accumulate in natural environments. Plastic Pollution disrupts marine life, chokes animals, pollutes water and contributes to climate change through the production and degradation of plastic. It can take hundreds of years for plastic to decompose, leading to long-lasting environmental damage. Plastic pollution is not just an environmental issue, but a social and economic issue as well. Though useful, plastic damages the environment. There are three major forms of plastic pollution: Micro, Macro, and Mega plastics. Both mega and macro plastics are found in packaging, footwear and other domestic items that have been washed off or discarded in landfills.

Plastic is indeed a general term for a wide range of synthetic materials that are solid objects of diverse shapes. Developed in the 1860s, plastic is one of the most important materials in modern society. Toys, athletic goods and durable household goods are heavy users of plastic. The soft-drinks, personal products and Pharmaceutical sectors are among the most intensive users of plastic packaging. It is the non-biodegradable nature of Plastic which is mainly responsible for causing a massive environmental problem. Chemical additives used in plastic goods are hazardous to human health. Disposing of plastic by burning only creates more toxic fumes. The Plastic carry bag has become a common item all over the World. Certain plastics can be recycled. Many household articles like water containers and buckets are made of recycled plastics. Non reusable items include carry bags, cups, plates and magazine wrappers. Even in these cases, eco-friendly plastics are available as options. The plastic industry cites the advantages of convenience— low cost, employment potential, recycling possibilities etc.

Ending plastic pollution is a great challenge. However, it may be possible through individual, co-ordinated global efforts. Plastic Production should be reduced and use of plastic bags, straws, cutlery etc. Instead, alternatives like biodegradable, compostable or reusable materials like glass, paper, bamboo etc, should be encouraged. Designing sustainability by creating products that are reusable, durable and recyclable is of urgent necessity today. It is our duty to develop biodegradable plastics and better recycling technologies. It is our prime duty to carry reusable bags, bottles and containers. National campaign like Swachh Bharat should integrate anti-plastic messaging.

World Environment Day is a call to action for individuals, communities and organizations to make a positive impact on the Environment. We should adapt sustainable practices in our day-to-day life by embracing the mantra of "reduce, reuse, and recycle". It is our duty to join hands with local Government initiatives, clean-up campaigns, tree-planting drives or educational seminars. Environmental Conservation is not a one-day event, but a lifelong commitment. Let this day be a starting point for adopting sustainable practices and encouraging others to join the cause. Together we can create a greener, healthier and more sustainable future for generations to come. Let us embrace the principles of sustainability, stewardship and harmony with nature on World Environment Day. Environment belongs to all, influences all and is important to all. It is one subject that is actually global as well as local in nature. It is undoubtedly true that we are surrounded by plastics. Considering its ecological and environmental hazard, we should lay greater emphasis on pollution prevention than pollution control. The role of every individual in preventing pollution is of paramount importance today. Though our country has banned the use of carry bags made of plastic films of thickness this rule is not being implemented seriously. Concerted and collective efforts should be made by all concerned to make an end of the rapid use of plastics as it is hazardous to us.

(The writer is Registrar, NERIM Group of Institutions)

Letters to the Editor

Irresponsible journalism and sensationalist media are deadlier than a venomous serpent

The recent story published in 'The Times Of India' about the Indore couple who went missing in Sohra, Meghalaya, reeks of false narratives and has sparked outrage among the locals. The report's assertion that the location where the couple's belongings were discovered is a "crime-prone hill" is recklessly sensationalist and factually false.

As a resident of Sohra, I can confirm that our area is visited by innumerable travellers, both men and women, who safely traverse our place on foot or by local transportation. Although accidents do occasionally happen because of the steep and slick terrain, calling Sohra "crime-prone" is untrue and demeaning to our community. There is no history of widespread crime against tourists, and locals are very helpful and friendly with all visitors.

It is disgraceful for a reputed publication like The Times of India to publish unverified, fear-mongering claims without proper investigation. Rather than publishing unverified and sensationalized news, The Times of India should have conducted thorough research and investigation. Before

labeling the area "Crime-Prone," they should have examined the region's crime rates and history. Most of their published statements about the missing couple from Indore are factually incorrect, making me wonder if their staff even visited the area or simply made assumptions from their office. Such reporting tarnishes the reputation of our home and fuels unnecessary panic.

Indeed, I'm saddened to learn about the incident and wish for the couple's safe return soon. I urge everyone to refrain from relying on media outlets like 'The Times of India' that spread misinformation and instead seek accurate information from regional and credible sources. Let's also avoid jumping to conclusions, as the police are working tirelessly alongside local residents to trace the missing couple.

I'd also like to clarify that there's no such "Crime-Prone Hill" in Sohra, contrary to claims made by irresponsible and unprofessional journalists, such as those at 'The Times of India', and some YouTubers from the mainland. Sohra is a safe destination for everyone to explore, and the locals are indeed helpful and friendly. I advise readers to avoid drawing conclusions based on careless journalism and instead look for information from reliable local sources. Sohra is still a friendly and safe place for everyone to visit. Our truth will not be

overshadowed by sensationalism.

Yours etc.,
Carmel Fredrick Mahngiang
Resident of Sohra, East Khasi Hills District.

Via email

Power cuts and billing Issues in Border Areas

I am writing to formally express my serious concern about the recurring power outages affecting West Jaintia Hills border regions, despite the Power Minister's assertion that Meghalaya has surplus power and is self-reliant. The stark contrast between the statement and ground reality is alarming. Residents of these areas face daily power cuts throughout the year regardless of weather conditions thereby disrupting daily life and economic activities. Residents, businesses and offices utilise generators, inverters and solar power extensively for backup power. Moreover, the electricity bills are exorbitant and inconsistent, adding to the frustration. Power outages create cascading effects, including cellular network disruptions, which significantly compound communication and payment processing difficulties particularly in the current digital landscape, where the preponderance of transactions are conducted online. I sincerely urge the

authorities to:

1. Investigate the root causes of power cuts and take corrective measures.
2. Ensure reliable power supply to border areas.
3. Review and revise billing practices to reflect actual consumption.

I hope the concerned authorities will take immediate action to address this issue.

Yours etc
Chanmiki Lamin
Via email

Struggles of local entrepreneurs & local businesses

Through this column, I wish to draw the attention of the concerned stakeholders to the problems faced by local entrepreneurs and local businesses in Meghalaya, where manufacturing and production industries are limited. PRIME or CM conclave are only reaching out to a handful. Government jobs are saturated, leaving the right to earn a decent living to local entrepreneurs and local businesses.

Firstly, both the private and official promotions for local products are insignificant within the state and outside it. Due to lack of promotional attempts, products don't find a market. This is the era of booming social media promos but entrepreneurs and small businesses cannot afford to pay advertising fees. Hence Meghalaya's

business entities are in a state of obscurity. Such lack of promotion has limited the reach of our products to the end consumers, thereby making it hard for entrepreneurs to make a living out of their creativity.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier in the absence of production and manufacturing industries in the state, the scope of employment and survival through livelihoods is limited, thereby severely affecting the local economy and self-reliance. In turn this has affected the livelihoods of people here.

Thirdly, the local entrepreneurs and business establishments not only generate profit for their individual businesses but can also create employment opportunities for others and enable them to be financially stable. This also means an increase in state revenue. Finally, locals businesses matter more than commercial chains, importing all products— from eggs to rice, fish to vegetables from outside the state. It only exposes our incapacity to produce and manufacture within the state. Even the local agricultural businesses, especially farmers face a lot of hardships and losses from time to time as the Government fails to supply high yielding variety of seeds and other necessities at the right time, apart from also failing to market the produce of farmers and also to provide cold storage facilities to prevent a glut of the same crops

in the market at a time.

Hence many farmers have small fragmented land parcels, making it difficult to achieve economies of scale and improvement. This is the main factor with farmers struggling in local business.

Access to reliable transportation and communication is also another factor as it costs more when farmers hire transportation to carry farm products. This can be prevented through the help of government by providing more opportunities and reducing tax on local entrepreneurs and local businesses as a support system. Also by introducing a single window system for young local entrepreneurs and local businesses to kick-start their businesses by reducing paper work it would help a lot in facilitating small businesses.

Government should help to promote products of local entrepreneurs through advertisements in local news channels or the newly introduced LED Boards spread across the localities even while the farmers get their requirements on time for their farming to be successful. Entrepreneurs and businesses would deeply appreciate the Government's immediate action on this critical matter as we strive for a stable economy.

Yours etc.,
Christie Shaiza,
Via email

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"Power without a nation's confidence is nothing."
— Catherine the Great

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UDP in a quandary

THE resignation of Jemino Mawthoh from the United Democratic Party (UDP) may not have raised a storm but it has far reaching implications for the party. In any case party ideology has never been a strong point in regional parties. What has been the ideological mooring of the UDP since its birth? Only during elections does the Party spell out its agenda and that is to safeguard the interests of the Khasi-Jaintia-Garo people. There has never been a single dedicated agenda that the UDP has promoted in the interests of the people of Meghalaya. Once elections are over, the UDP has always offered itself to the national parties, thereby reducing itself to a weaker coalition partner. It did that during the several decades of Congress rule and when the National Peoples' Party (NPP) needed the numbers the UDP was quick to join the ruling Party. Of the 12 MLAs that won the last elections in 2023 from the UDP, two are in the government – Kyrmen Shylla and Paul Lyngdoh and both have got good portfolios. It must be said to the credit of both that they are performing creditably. As Tourism and Social Welfare Minister, Paul Lyngdoh has put his Departments in the limelight but that credit goes to him and not to the UDP. As the youngest member of the cabinet, Kyrmen Shylla too has managed to stay the course. But both Paul Lyngdoh and Kyrmen Shylla don't really need the UDP's backing to win elections. In fact, other than the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) candidates who have capitalised from their party's commitment to cleanse the governance system of Meghalaya, all other candidates won on the strength of their personalities.

The question now is why an old guard of the UDP, Jemino Mawthoh who has been a great advocate of the Party and has engaged extensively with members of the public to seek their views on how the UDP could improve its position in the public eye, should choose to resign. What has changed between then and now? Will Mawthoh return to academics and say goodbye to politics? That's unlikely! So what is Mawthoh's way ahead? His toughest competitor from Nongthymmai Constituency is Charles Pyngrope who last won from the Trinamool Congress. In fact he is the only TMC candidate to win from the Khasi and Jaintia region. This also means that people did not vote for the TMC; they voted for Charles Pyngrope. Perhaps Mawthoh feels he could do better in a national party like the NPP or the BJP. The Congress in Meghalaya is reduced to one MLA in the Assembly and that's not a party that a wise politician would choose. So it's either the BJP or the NPP for Mr Mawthoh. He has been rather quiet after tendering his resignation and has not spelt out his future moves. Will Mawthoh's exit trigger similar action from other UDP MLAs and non-MLAs too? Only time will tell!

Letters to the Editor

CDS Chauhan's Singapore statement unwarranted

Editor,
Chief of Defence Staff,
Anil Chauhan's admission that India lost combat jets because of a "tactical mistake," during Operation Sindoor has led retired generals and the Opposition parties to ask why the revelation was made on foreign soil. They describe the development as "embarrassing" even while several security experts asserted that the disclosure being made in Singapore was "poor public diplomacy," and had handed Pakistan a propaganda victory. The Congress said the disclosure should have come at an all-party meeting in India and accused the government of misleading the nation on the conflict and demanded a review of the country's defence preparedness by independent experts as had been done in case of the Kargil War. The government had needlessly sent the CDS to Singapore. A security expert said in a post on X, "Such admissions should have been made from

Indian soil, accompanied by India's own estimates of the damage inflicted on Pakistan in the brief war." That Pakistan's chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, too, attended the Singapore event - the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, an inter-governmental security conference had served to further hyphenate India with Pakistan, many said.

A former major general said it is "embarrassing" for the CDS to choose a foreign country to admit losses, that too a full three weeks after the operation. "The government and the armed forces should have made a detailed statement before the domestic media. I don't understand who briefed him and whether he was briefed at all," the retired general said.

"Frankly, I do not understand the need to be so coy about this. A mature military should be able to acknowledge losses, learn from them and move on," remarked commentator Praveen Swami. The reluctance to admit the loss of aircraft and the number of such aircraft has given rise to needless speculation that India's losses were more severe than the government or the armed forces are willing to admit

The most interesting and fascinating aspect of the 21st Century is of a world driven by technology. Information Technology (IT) at the press of a computer keyboard button, creates and stores data. Today we have progressed to Artificial Intelligence (AI) where machines end up making up our minds for us. We today find ourselves trying to keep up with a knowledge system that is galloping almost at lightning speed. This brings in a very interesting question. As indigenous people from the three major tribes of Meghalaya, how did our forefathers, who inhabited these hills thousands of years ago, uphold and maintain their knowledge system; pass it on to us and which we still revere to this day? I believe they did it through a very simple process - through the art of storytelling! Families of yore gathered round the hearth where elders imparted knowledge and passed on wisdom through folklore or skillful allegories to listening youngsters who did the same when their turn as elders arrived. Stories imbibed in the listeners the skills of agriculture, hunting, the importance of maintaining a good relationship with nature and of the human value systems that shaped behaviour towards one another.

It was purely an informal and rudimentary education system but it coped and got along with the crucial act of handing down learning on which survival depended upon. Today learning, or education as we call it, is carried out in a different platform called a classroom. Question is has the classroom delivered the service it is supposed to provide? The focus of this article will be on this modern aspect of learning within the context of today's classrooms and with especial attention towards an efficacious Education Policy for Meghalaya.

India attained Independence in 1947 with a literacy rate of only 18% and that too only with the urban elite. The rest 82% comprising mostly agriculturalists and women were classed as illiterate. Clearly something fast had to be done to make education the cornerstone of social and economic development for the country and towards this end India got its 1st National Policy on Education of 1968. The second attempt to further improve our education system was the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 followed again in 2020 by the National Education Policy (NEP), the current policy under discussion. It must be made clear from the onset that the NEP, now 4 years in implementation, has come under severe scrutiny and criticism and has been found wanting in many critical aspects.

First and foremost, the NEP, a crucial Policy, on which the future lives of

in public.

The Indian government has also not denied reports that a French audit team from Dassault Aviation, keen to physically inspect the damage, if any, to the Rafale fighter planes it supplied to the IAF, was not given permission to visit IAF bases.

The CDS has also come in for criticism from strategic and defence experts. An expert has weighed in to say, "What Anil Chauhan is saying is that for two days IAF fleet was grounded. This is enough reason for him to resign - making light of a serious matter. When for two days out of four, the IAF (which will be the key determinant of war outcome) is not in the air, it needs some guts to say that India did well in Operation Sindoor."

Experts, also battled for an IAF officer as the CDS since in future wars, the Air Force will have to play the key role. In a veiled reference to the post-Op-Sindoor narrative by PM Modi and its politicisation, he commented, "India needs a government which understands military power in the changing global geopolitics and does not fool around with it."

In the final analyses we

our children will depend on, was passed simply by a mere Cabinet decision! IT DID NOT EVEN GO TO PARLIAMENT where it should have been debated by elected representatives of the people. Secondly, Education as a subject falls under the Concurrent List but states were never consulted in the making of this all important National Policy. As a consequence, the hasty implementation of NEP 2020 is already becoming apparent and advanced states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Kerala are resisting its obvious fault lines. Other stakeholders of Education ranging from educationists, teachers associations, parent bodies and ordinary citizens who value education, have also come together under the umbrella of the All India Save Education Committee (AISEC) and on May 22, 2025 released the draft People's Education Policy (PEP): An Alternative to the NEP 2020. It's an attempt to come up with a bottom-up, stakeholder driven approach to an Education Policy best suited for our needs, rather than a top down Policy decided by a few Hindutva ideology driven individuals that seek to centralise and communalise education. So let's see what the Meghalaya Chapter of PEP has to offer us and our children that is different from the NEP.

What is obvious is that the NEP is an attempt to reframe Indian Education in the contours of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) that is rooted in ancient Vedic perceptions. Nothing wrong in this as long as it doesn't undermine the foundational principles of universal, democratic, secular and scientific modern education which is the norm of the day. Sadly the NEP has chosen to ignore this. Sadly it attempts to append modern 21st century India with one particular dominant religion and culture which seeks to introduce unscientific ideas and papers in the curriculum. It also singularly tends to discount history by ignoring the contributions of the Muslims and the British to the composite nature of today's India. It is this communal profile of the NEP that makes it so hazardous and incompatible with emerging educational needs.

The PEP 2025 on the other hand takes a rational and objective view of the contributions of our ancient scholars, rulers, and religious leaders while also recognizing the immense benefit of modern scholars, especially in the sphere of science, architecture, the arts, technology and in the introduction of an educational system designed to deliver. It also takes into consideration the knowledge systems of the marginalized communi-

ties whose contributions were never recognized by the Brahminical knowledge system. PEP demands that education should be separated from religion, and all efforts by the government to communalize the curricula and syllabi should end. Taken from this perspective, the PEP is a serious draft proposal that should attract the attention of all those who desire the well-being and growth of an inclusive Education Policy for 21st Century Meghalaya.

It shall not be possible within the short parameters of this essay to list out all the shortcomings of the NEP nor the alternatives as offered in the PEP. Because of space constraint we shall leave out Higher and Technical Education but try to highlight issues that pertain to School Education, as it exists in Meghalaya. First there is this crying need for quality education right from pre-school where learning impacts most on an impressionable age of a student. It is shocking therefore to note that the NEP proposes that Aganwadis, with a mere 6 months training, be made wholly responsible for providing knowledge in pre-schools for rural areas! Are our rural toddlers cattle or sheep to be treated this way? The PEP totally rejects this absurd approach and demands instead that the government should take the responsibility of establishing pre-schools with educated and trained teachers and should regulate the fee structure in the private pre-school ventures operating in the urban areas.

Secondly there should be no compromise in imparting quality education to our school children and for this to happen the need for trained and qualified teachers, at all levels of schooling, cannot be overemphasized. In developing countries like India, which are socially and culturally so diverse, teachers have to play multiple roles and hence become a role model to all. PEP 2025 feels that, in India, which suffers from poverty and different kinds of social discrimination, it is not enough to opt for only one type of pedagogy. The teachers should be conversant with multiple types of pedagogy and use appropriate pedagogy to meet the particular requirements of the students. No one should be appointed as a teacher at any level without the required qualifications and training in the art and science of teaching. It is required of teachers to inculcate democratic, secular and scientific temper among the students. This is a requirement that Meghalaya education must seriously wrestle with.

In conclusion it must be accepted that education is a lifelong exercise where students continue to learn and absorb knowledge that helps them get along with a better life. At the school level understanding of what is being taught therefore assumes critical import. The need to simplify the medium of teaching (language) here assumes a decisive position. In this context the role of one's Mother tongue as the medium of instruction should receive, 'Across the Board' consensus. The PEP believes that learning in one's Mother tongue allows students to grasp concepts more easily, express their thoughts more clearly and encourage them to think critically. In this connection, especially for our rural Tribal students at the primary and school level, can we turn back to storytelling as a means to teach? Can trained teachers, especially of Science and Maths (considered as thorny and dull by many students) be made to introduce and teach their subjects based perhaps on stories of scientists and their achievements; of famous mathematicians and how they contributed to the advancement of civilization? Stories linked to the subject being taught that can kindle excitement; the spirit of curiosity, enquiry and critical thinking in our students? Teaching that pushes the student into asking questions?

We need to imbibe in our teachers the need to foster the spirit of questioning not the reverse as what is happening today. Secondly, English still plays a vital role as a link language, both nationally and internationally. Historically, English has been widely accepted and has become integral to Meghalaya's educational and professional landscape. It provides access to global knowledge, serves as a medium for intellectual exchange, and facilitates international communication. It has helped countless numbers of our educated youngsters find jobs and livelihoods in or outside the country. Therefore, English should continue to be taught from the early stages of education to enable students to engage with global developments in science, technology, and the emerging challenges of Artificial Intelligence.

Having said this and whatever else mentioned above, the request is made here for those who subscribe to the ideals of universal, democratic, scientific and secular education, to please join us and become part of the AISEC Meghalaya Chapter. We also invite such people to contribute their thoughts, opinions and suggestions on how to make this Meghalaya Chapter more aggressive and relevant to what we teach and inculcate. Feel free to send your contributions to the press or through the media. Alternately you can directly communicate with us on our mail ID which is - aisec-megh2025@gmail.com

return from classes. It is also the stretch leading to adjoining localities like Lum Sait Sngi, Law Sohtun. The absence of proper lighting and road maintenance makes it extremely difficult and dangerous, especially during the evening hours. We, the residents, earnestly request the concerned authorities to install sufficient street lights and undertake immediate repair and blacktopping of the road to ensure the safety and convenience of all road users.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Urgent road repair and street lighting needed

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the poor condition of the road from Riblong Junction to Kench's Trace Beat House and the lack of street lighting on that stretch.

This road remains very dark at night, making it unsafe for residents and daily commuters who travel back home after work or business. Moreover, the blacktopping of the road is severely damaged, leading to numerous potholes, which pose a serious risk of accidents. This stretch is also the main thoroughfare for tuition-going students, who frequently use this road to attend and

Yours etc.,
Puhil Nath
Shillong-4

Interesting facets of an author's journey

Editor,
Apropos of Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "Education is serious business but not a business" (ST May 27, 2025) was very interesting and also amusing. The narration of anecdotes like reading books stealthily under the cover of a blanket made me smile and amused as it was not only the single instance in that beautiful past but a ploy to avoid detection

and absorb knowledge that helps them get along with a better life. At the school level understanding of what is being taught therefore assumes critical import. The need to simplify the medium of teaching (language) here assumes a decisive position. In this context the role of one's Mother tongue as the medium of instruction should receive, 'Across the Board' consensus. The PEP believes that learning in one's Mother tongue allows students to grasp concepts more easily, express their thoughts more clearly and encourage them to think critically. In this connection, especially for our rural Tribal students at the primary and school level, can we turn back to storytelling as a means to teach? Can trained teachers, especially of Science and Maths (considered as thorny and dull by many students) be made to introduce and teach their subjects based perhaps on stories of scientists and their achievements; of famous mathematicians and how they contributed to the advancement of civilization? Stories linked to the subject being taught that can kindle excitement; the spirit of curiosity, enquiry and critical thinking in our students? Teaching that pushes the student into asking questions?

The shift to surplus status, as the Minister himself noted, is a delicate balance, heavily reliant on favourable weather conditions and the uninterrupted operation of power-generating units. With 85% of its energy coming from hydropower, Meghalaya is at the mercy of unpredictable rainfall, made worse by climate change. The Minister was therefore right in pointing out the uncertain nature of this surplus; a dry season or problems with old power plants could quickly change things. But it is not very clear how the Minister intends to immunize the state from such shocks. Without robust contingency plans or investments in alternative energy sources, this 'surplus' could be highly slippery. In 2023, Northeast India experienced a 15% drop in hydropower due to erratic weather, and the nagging worries about low water levels in the Umiam reservoir keep raising flags once in a while, about long-term reliability. So, the risks are real, just as the cash is.

Now, let us examine how selling power through the IEX is promising, with all its uncertainties. Prices fluctuated between Rs 3 and Rs 10 per unit in 2024, and high interstate transmission costs can eat into profits, as seen in the case of Arunachal Pradesh. While revenue from sales is beneficial, focussing too much on outside markets might neglect local needs. The power sector has had its ups and downs. In the 1980s, Meghalaya had a surplus, but crises in the 2000s hit due to some management issues at the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MePDCL), which still faces a huge debt. While the current surplus is good news, prioritizing IEX sales could lead to repeating past mistakes by putting short-term gains over long-term stability. Market dynamics bring additional challenges. The IEX dominates India's power exchange market, but there's concern that future shifts could lower prices and reduce revenues in the future. Such changes, seen in European markets, show that a balanced strategy is sine qua non to prioritize energy security alongside making money.

Then the real concern - only 79.4% of Meghalaya's 7,000 villages have electricity, and the average energy consumption (675.19 kWh) is behind the national average (778.71 kWh). Many rural areas, especially in remote places like those in West Khasi Hills, or South Garo Hills, have spotty power, making it hard for people to access healthcare, education, and jobs. Strictly, therefore, there is no surplus. But if such 'surplus' sales take precedence over local electrification, it could worsen the situation in rural areas.

Then, how about the diversification of our energy sources? Meghalaya has untapped renewable resources that could help. The state has potential for 3 to 9 GW of solar, 403 MW of small hydro, 165 MW of biomass, and 90 to 136 MW of wind power, but progress in using these resources is slow. By 2024, there was only a little solar capacity installed. What are the budgetary allocations for the renewable energy domain? And, how are institutions like the MNREDA functioning? Has any serious review been done recently at the highest level? MNREDA's functional "surface" of operations vis-a-vis the limited project outcomes, or the lack of large-scale impact, do not give me any reason to be hopeful.

India is also struggling to meet its renewable energy goals, which may make it difficult for Meghalaya to trade renewable energy certificates without robust policies. Additionally, the aging transmission grid restricts new renewable projects. Focussing on community-based microgrids could supply power to rural areas while reducing their dependence on hydropower. Community-driven projects, such as the pilot solar plant in Ri-Bhoi, demonstrate potential but require support and investment to expand. Above all, the state should prioritize bringing electricity to the remaining 20.6% of villages to foster inclusive growth. Many rural households still depend on kerosene for light, so investing in local energy access could enhance lives, particularly in critical sectors like agriculture and tourism. Progressing toward India's goal of universal electrification by 2030 would ensure that the advantages of surplus power benefit everyone. These efforts would align with national objectives while addressing local needs.

The Minister's vision for planning through 2035 is encouraging, but without solid investments in modernizing the grid and renewable energy, the state could still be at risk. Environmental and social factors also complicate the situation. Hydropower projects like Umiam can hurt local ecosystems, with studies showing fewer fish in the Umtra River. Previous plans to sell power to Bangladesh fell through due to environmental issues, and IEX sales may preclude crises in the short term, but cannot solve structural issues.

While the vision for long-term energy planning up to 2035 is commendable, the lack of detailed strategies to address infrastructure vulnerabilities or diversify energy sources leaves the announcement sounding optimistic but fragile. For Meghalaya to solidify its surplus status, it must immediately opt for energy diversification to ensure stability beyond short-term gains.

To conclude, Meghalaya's power surplus (with all its riders) is still a big milestone, showing better management and market involvement. More importantly, it is the cultural shift of doing business, which has been a bit alien to the psyche of government agencies, not just in our state, but in the whole country. It is a positive shift, undeniably, but not a solution. By broadening energy sources, updating infrastructure, and ensuring everyone has access to electricity, Meghalaya can turn its 'surplus' into a stepping stone for a better future for all its people. Yes, generating some cash is good, but that is only half the recipe.

(The writer is a Former member of the IAS)

Meghalaya Power Surplus

A Bright Spot or a Fragile Front?

By KN Kumar

Meghalaya's Power Minister recently announced that the state has transitioned from a power-deficient to a surplus state, now generating excess electricity and earning revenue by selling it through the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX). With a capacity of 360.75 MW from state-run plants and support from central utilities, Meghalaya is meeting its yearly demand of 600 million units while generating 'surplus' power, mainly from the Umiam reservoir. In 2024, these sales brought in over Rs 50 crore. So goes the statement. This marks a significant achievement for Meghalaya, but the claim warrants scrutiny given the state's energy dynamics and the Minister's caveats. Let us analyse:

Trading surplus power on the IEX is a good step. By turning extra water from reservoirs into electricity, Meghalaya prevents waste and brings in money to improve its energy setup. As part of India's competitive energy market, which saw huge electricity trades in 2024, Meghalaya is stepping into a new role, balancing local needs with national contribution. This change from scarcity to surplus reflects better resource management and offers hope for energy security, and clearly, monetizing the surplus bolsters the MePDCL's liquidity. But the state's reliance on central utilities like NEEPCO and NTPC for 367.5 MW of its power supply suggests that this surplus is partly contingent on external agreements. If these agreements falter or demand spikes, Meghalaya could revert to a deficit state. Increasing power demand is a marker for a vibrant economy, and if the demand growth has been stagnating, then it tells us a different story, about which, some other time.

The shift to surplus status, as the Minister himself noted, is a delicate balance, heavily reliant on favourable weather conditions and the uninterrupted operation of power-generating units. With 85% of its energy coming from hydropower, Meghalaya is at the mercy of unpredictable rainfall, made worse by climate change. The Minister was therefore right in pointing out the uncertain nature of this surplus; a dry season or problems with old power plants could quickly change things. But it is not very clear how the Minister intends to immunize the state from such shocks. Without robust contingency plans or investments in alternative energy sources, this 'surplus' could be highly slippery. In 2023, Northeast India experienced a 15% drop in hydropower due to erratic weather, and the nagging worries about low water levels in the Umiam reservoir keep raising flags once in a while, about long-term reliability. So, the risks are real, just as the cash is.

Now, let us examine how selling power through the IEX is promising, with all its uncertainties. Prices fluctuated between Rs 3 and Rs 10 per unit in 2024, and high interstate transmission costs can eat into profits, as seen in the case of Arunachal Pradesh. While revenue from sales is beneficial, focussing too much on outside markets might neglect local needs. The power sector has had its ups and downs. In the 1980s, Meghalaya had a surplus, but crises in the 2000s hit due to some management issues at the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MePDCL), which still faces a huge debt. While the current surplus is good news, prioritizing IEX sales could lead to repeating past mistakes by putting short-term gains over long-term stability. Market dynamics bring additional challenges. The IEX dominates India's power exchange market, but there's concern that future shifts could lower prices and reduce revenues in the future. Such changes, seen in European markets, show that a balanced strategy is sine qua non to prioritize energy security alongside making money.

Then the real concern - only 79.4% of Meghalaya's 7,000 villages have electricity, and the average energy consumption (675.19 kWh) is behind the national average (778.71 kWh). Many rural areas, especially in remote places like those in West Khasi Hills, or South Garo Hills, have spotty power, making it hard for people to access healthcare, education, and jobs. Strictly, therefore, there is no surplus. But if such 'surplus' sales take precedence over local electrification, it could worsen the situation in rural areas.

Then, how about the diversification of our energy sources? Meghalaya has untapped renewable resources that could help. The state has potential for 3 to 9 GW of solar, 403 MW of small hydro, 165 MW of biomass, and 90 to 136 MW of wind power, but progress in using these resources is slow. By 2024, there was only a little solar capacity installed. What are the budgetary allocations for the renewable energy domain? And, how are institutions like the MNREDA functioning? Has any serious review been done recently at the highest level? MNREDA's functional "surface" of operations vis-a-vis the limited project outcomes, or the lack of large-scale impact, do not give me any reason to be hopeful.

India is also struggling to meet its renewable energy goals, which may make it difficult for Meghalaya to trade renewable energy certificates without robust policies. Additionally, the aging transmission grid restricts new renewable projects. Focussing on community-based microgrids could supply power to rural areas while reducing their dependence on hydropower. Community-driven projects, such as the pilot solar plant in Ri-Bhoi, demonstrate potential but require support and investment to expand. Above all, the state should prioritize bringing electricity to the remaining 20.6% of villages to foster inclusive growth. Many rural households still depend on kerosene for light, so investing in local energy access could enhance lives, particularly in critical sectors like agriculture and tourism. Progressing toward India's goal of universal electrification by 2030 would ensure that the advantages of surplus power benefit everyone. These efforts would align with national objectives while addressing local needs.

The Minister's vision for planning through 2035 is encouraging, but without solid investments in modernizing the grid and renewable energy, the state could still be at risk. Environmental and social factors also complicate the situation. Hydropower projects like Umiam can hurt local ecosystems, with studies showing fewer fish in the Umtra River. Previous plans to sell power to Bangladesh fell through due to environmental issues, and IEX sales may preclude crises in the short term, but cannot solve structural issues.

While the vision for long-term energy planning up to 2035 is commendable, the lack of detailed strategies to address infrastructure vulnerabilities or diversify energy sources leaves the announcement sounding optimistic but fragile. For Meghalaya to solidify its surplus status, it must immediately opt for energy diversification to ensure stability beyond short-term gains.

To conclude, Meghalaya's power surplus (with all its riders) is still a big milestone, showing better management and market involvement. More importantly, it is the cultural shift of doing business, which has been a bit alien to the psyche of government agencies, not just in our state, but in the whole country. It is a positive shift, undeniably, but not a solution. By broadening energy sources, updating infrastructure, and ensuring everyone has access to electricity, Meghalaya can turn its 'surplus' into a stepping stone for a better future for all its people. Yes, generating some cash is good, but that is only half the recipe.

(The writer is a Former member of the IAS)

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

"A good school teaches you resilience - that ability to bounce back."

— Kate Reardon

The Shillong Times

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Silence, loud-mouths

IT would look somewhat embarrassing that Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chouhan keeps shooting his mouth off while there's a stony silence at the apex, vis-a-vis the Operation Sindoor ordered by the political leadership and executed by the Indian Armed Forces. All of Chouhan's verbal acrobatics so far yielded no clear information about some of the principal concerns in the context of the nation's brief military engagement with Pakistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi still owed an explanation on India's losses, 'tactical errors' and on the abrupt stoppage of the offensive. The Opposition is obviously restive but cautious as it seemingly does not want to cause an embarrassment to the government at this stage. At an event in Pune, Chouhan followed up on his comments from Singapore and asserted that three elements are important in every war – namely violence, the politics behind the violence -- and communication that he said was happening "continuously". Yet, the wait for answers to vital questions continues. He courageously dismisses losses, saying these are not important but the outcomes are. Talking in riddles is an art practised by those who do not want to give a straight answer; or those who have things to hide. Nor should there be a need for Chouhan or India to keep warning Pakistan by the hour that its patronage to terrorism would not be tolerated by India. After India gave a deadly hit, it is best to take for granted that the Pakistani politicians and generals have indeed learnt a bitter lesson.

Hopefully, vital questions that beseech answers might be addressed and answered in Parliament, provided that the Opposition gets its act together. In matters of national interest, the Prime Minister cannot afford to act as a Tower of Silence. Discussions in the public sphere are meanwhile taking matters to sensational levels. A retired colonel with a large viewership on the small screen has raised some pertinent issues and said that the attempt by India to target the terrorist epicentres in Pakistan without first neutralizing the airpower of Pakistan was a wrong step. He also asserted that the 'tactical error' was not on the part of the armed forces. The advance "info" provided by India to Pakistan that an action against the terror networks could happen soon has also been cited as a deadly flaw. Clearly, the "pro-Kashmiri" terror networks were offshoots of the Pakistani military, as was reinforced in the funeral of some top terrorists -- where top army personnel in uniform led the rites from the front. Treating the Pakistani army and the militant outfits there as separate entities was by itself a grave, fundamental error. Having got the information in advance, it was but natural that the Pakistani military establishment gleefully retaliated in full force. It is for the government to now clear the air on all such fears that grip the citizenry, who were fooled by the pliant media loudmouths that wore patriotism on their sleeves.

On May 25, 2025, the Delhi Unit of the Khasi Students' Union organised the first ever Mr and Mrs Hynniewtrep competition. The program was attended by Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong, Tura MP Saleng A. Sangma, and KSU president Lambokstarwell Marngar. Aimed at strengthening solidarity among the diverse communities that form part of the Khasi identity, it saw Franklin Marwein, a Khyntiam, and Aidamon Talang, a War, win the Mr. Hynniewtrep and Ms. Hynniewtrep titles, respectively. But the most interesting part about the competition weren't the winners, but the participants who took part in it. There was one person who did not win, but her participation sheds light on the historical process through which the Hynniewtrep identity may have emerged -- revealing the groups that were part of it, and those who, at first glance, might seem to be outside it but were actually included.

Enrica Ronghang, whose Kur is actually Karbi, was the second runner-up. Ronghang is one of the oldest Karbi Kur connected to the founding of the Karbi royal lineage, the Recho or Lindok. They are related to the Markhap (a Bhoi-Khasi Kur) and Malang (a Tiwa Kur) through the practice of Teh-Kur: a Ronghang, therefore, cannot marry a Markhap or Malang and vice versa. In the past, members of the Ronghang Kur became Khasi by being incorporated into the Markhap Kur. And since Ronghang cannot marry within the same Kur, the Markhap similarly can no longer marry into Ronghang, as they are now considered kin.

The practice of Tang-Jait is a slightly different version practiced by the Khasi, where a new member is initiated into the Khasi community by adopting a new Khasi surname; thus, a new Kur is born. This still leaves open the possibility that in the future, the descendants might marry someone from their mother's previous Kur since they have no memory of being part of it. This is avoided if a non-Khasi Kur is made a part of a Khasi Kur and that memory is retained avoiding the chance of committing Sang. This appears to be a very old tradition, as Charles Lyall's 1908 'The Mikir', mentions that during the Burmese wars, many Assamese escaped into the hills and became Karbi. So, ethnic

Who Makes Up the Hynniewtrep?

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

identity in the past was quite fluid and flexible. In fact, the presence of non-Khasi groups played an important role in the formation of the Khasi polity.

Fabian Lyngdoh's 2016 PhD thesis, 'A Study on the Nature and Roles of Traditional Governance Institutions among the Khasis in Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya,' identifies Raid Iapngar as one of the earliest Khasi polities, ruled by a Ka Iong Saring. However, Ka Luh Shadap

the people chose a Bengali name U Kongka and made him Syiem. Tradition also suggests that the Mawiang Syiem's family descended from four Muslims who migrated to the hills, adopted Khasi customs, and accepted the position. In fact, the tradition of the divine origin of the female progenitors of the Syiems is most likely a metaphor for non-Khasi women being assimilated into Khasi society—similar to the Tang-Jait—with the

"Get out of the way, I am going to shoot at the Bhoi!" — mistaking her for a Khasi. It was very well understood by the assailants (presumably Khasis) that Bhoi meant the Karbis.

The myth of the Hynniewtrep mentions Bhoi as being part of the seven celestial families who came down from heaven to populate the Earth. I have been told by a Pnar friend that they have a slightly different version where the members of the Hynniewtrep included the Lyngthong. This is today a clan found among the War people. The War also have their own version of the Lumsopetbneing myth. In their telling, a creeper or aerial root of diengiri (found in the War areas and used to make the living root bridges) connected heaven and earth instead of a celestial staircase. So, the story of Hynniewtrep is ancient, but the original seven may have been the seven original Kars who came from the East.

Over time, membership in the Hynniewtrep grew to include groups like the Karbi, many of whom adopted Khasi customs and traditions. The Tiwas, similarly influenced by the Khasis, could very well be included. What is most interesting to note is that the Tiwas—especially those living in the hills, i.e., Meghalaya—are matrilineal, while those in the plains are patrilineal, a clear example of Khasianisation: the process of non-Khasi groups adopting Khasi culture and identity. Just as there was an Indic model through which Sanskrit and Hindu cultural practices spread across South and Southeast Asia, there was also a Khasi model under which Khasi vocabulary, political structures, and cultural practices were adopted by various non-Khasi groups.

The Mr and Mrs Hynniewtrep competition is a very good initiative to create a sense of solidarity among the Khasi community. At the same time, it could also help bring solidarity with groups that in the past identified with the same identity – an identity which is inclusive and based on accommodation. Maybe a Maslai and a Teron should win the next Mr and Mrs Hynniewtrep. That would be a very apt outcome.

(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

Listen to the Generals...! My mother didn't raise me on just verses from the scriptures or moral science textbooks. She raised me on stories—real stories—of her two brothers. One was a top-ranking officer who flew fighter jets with the Indian Air Force, and the other marched his way up the ranks of the Indian Army.

In our house, truth came not just in verses but in uniforms, medals, and the quiet dignity of two men who didn't boast, but simply served.

And no, these weren't sugar-coated bedtime tales of valour and victory. These were raw, unfiltered accounts of courage, missteps, and sacrifice. Of having to bail out of an aircraft on fire. Of missions that went wrong. Of fellow officers who never came back. Of orders that didn't work and had to be changed mid-flight or mid-battle. Strategic errors? Yes. Tactical failures? Certainly. But what stood out was that they were never hidden, never hushed up. They were studied. Acknowledged. Learned from.

That was my mother's style of parenting. Not lofty quotes from the Bible or stern lessons from Moral

when the same bodies say something remotely positive. Who change definitions of "poverty" and "hunger" so they can claim improvement without lifting a grain of rice.

Lynching? "One-off incident."

Churches vandalized? "Local mischief."

Press freedoms declining? "Just media exaggeration."

Religious freedom? "Still the most tolerant in the world."

Meanwhile, journalists are jailed for tweets, activists vanish under outdated sedition laws, and fact-checkers are booked for spreading facts.

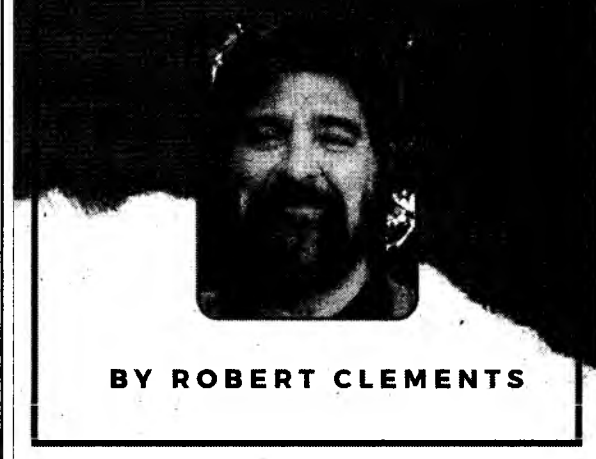
What we need is less spin and more spine.

Because when you lie about small failures, you don't just deceive the public. You slowly start deceiving yourself. And a nation that begins to believe its own lies becomes immune to correction. Immune to introspection. And eventually... immune to redemption.

Let's be honest: how long can a house of cards stand when even the breeze is blowing from within?

There's a reason soldiers earn the nation's respect

BOB'S BANTER



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

Science periods. Just this simple, powerful lesson:

Truth doesn't make you smaller. It makes you stronger.

Which is why, when I saw our Chief of Defence Staff speaking at a global security dialogue in Singapore recently and admitting, quite bluntly, that "we lost a few aircraft" during Operation Sindoor, I found myself choking on my biscuit. Not out of shock—but out of admiration.

Because here was a man, representing one of the most disciplined arms of our republic, standing on an international platform and saying, "Yes, we made a mistake. And yes, we learned from it." No drama. No spin. No "foreign hand" theories. Just plain old honesty.

He even added that the loss helped them tweak their strategy, and that led to eventual success.

Now imagine that. A government functionary who didn't pull out charts to show how many aircraft we didn't lose. Who didn't say, "Have you seen what China lost?" or "At least we're not Pakistan." He just... admitted a mistake. And grew from it.

Dear netas, are you listening? Or is the mic muted when truth speaks?

Because every time you deny a mistake, every time you dismiss a credible report, or brush away a burning issue with, "It didn't happen," you're not projecting strength. You're showcasing something else entirely—insecurity. You start sounding like that kid in school who comes last in class and then shouts, "Anyway, the teacher hates me!"

When generals lose lives, they don't rewrite history. They write reports. They analyse what went wrong. They issue statements, not slogans. And they certainly don't call The Economist "anti-national" or suggest that Amnesty International is a "foreign-funded destabilising agent" without a shred of proof.

They face the facts. That's what makes them generals.

And what do we have in you politicians? Leaders who would rather plug leaks in data than leaks in bridges. Who refuse to accept international rankings when they're bad, and then do victory laps

without flashy social media campaigns. A general doesn't need to trend on Twitter to prove his leadership. A commander earns it in the trenches, in the cockpits, in the scars he carries and the coffins he salutes.

Compare that with the politician who jumps at the first opportunity to unveil a plaque, but vanishes when disaster strikes. Who calls for candlelight vigils, but never lights the lamp of truth. Who smiles for every inauguration photo but frowns at every uncomfortable question.

Or maybe, doesn't face a question or even a press conference full of questions.

So listen to the generals, dear politicians. Not just because they wear stars on their shoulders, but because they earn them. Every single one.

Listen to how they speak. They don't call dissent "treason." They don't call human rights "obstacles." They don't build echo chambers—they build battalions. Battalions that function on clarity, courage, and accountability.

And if ever you're tempted to deny the obvious, to twist the facts, to spin another yarn, do yourself a favour—read a war memoir. Sit with a veteran. Or better still, visit a military cemetery. Maybe Pune or Kohima. Walk down the rows of names etched in stone. None of them lied. None of them ran. They stood their ground. Not on the strength of slogans—but on the strength of truth.

And if you need bedtime stories to learn all this, I still have some of my mother's. They're not in any holy book, but they've shaped better men than many of those sitting in Parliament today.

So here's a toast. To the uniformed truth-tellers. To those who lead with courage and speak with clarity. And to a future—hopefully—where our leaders learn that admitting failure isn't political suicide, but moral resurrection.

Jai Hind. And Jai Truth...

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

Letters to the Editor

Tourism in tatters

Editor

A number of columns and recently an article by Patricia Mukhim have time and again pointed out the critical issues hampering the realistic growth of tourism be it within urban or rural areas. Each have their own settings and varying landscapes but what is happening around isn't positive; rather it going in multiple directions with different sets of groups and agencies doing their own way of promoting tourism while the government is watching the spectacle.

The tragic incident of a newly married couple from Indore must wake up the entire Tourism Department and it's various wings within the government and it's community partners to prevent such incidents from repeating themselves. In fact, I had discussed the concept of having a Village Tourism Police team trained and supported with the help of the State Police and Tourism Department through an incentive model but these points, as someone rightly observed, often fall on deaf ears. The problem is that we have no clear-cut system or roadmap on how to tackle the situation when such calamities occur or how do we regulate tourist flows

and footfalls. It is therefore very important for the state authorities to sit, think and brainstorm on how we reinvent tourism on a pilot model with a few villages in each Block and then observe the outcome and impact and perhaps replicate that model in other villages too.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Wankhar,
Via email

Sohra - In the lap of nature where rain and rock have carved into your soul

Editor,

As an ultra-runner who has been training in Sohra for more than a decade, I've felt the power of the rain that made it so famous, the whispers of the wind, and the heartbeat of the hills. This land has shaped me not just as a runner, but as a person. Sohra is not just a training ground - it's home. It's where I've found strength, peace, and some of the warmest souls.

Recently, a heart-breaking incident occurred where a tourist couple from Indore went missing in the rain-drenched terrain. Till now,

nobody in authority has any clue regarding their whereabouts. As I pen this article, the search for the couple is still ongoing. This incident is indeed a reminder of how wild and unpredictable nature can be, especially if we go unprepared. Our thoughts and prayers are with the couple, their families, and those who are searching for them.

However, while the search is ongoing, it is unfortunate to come across some national media outlets making wrong and misleading headlines, even going so far as to call our home "crime-prone hills." Another media outlet wrote, "The worry turned dread when their rented scooter was found abandoned near Osara Hills in Sohra Rim - a remote area notorious for being unsafe and prone to criminal activity." These are serious, unfounded, misleading, and malicious allegations, which we do not expect mainstream national media to indulge in.

These media outlets should check their facts and not jump to conclusions, as they are aware that misleading stories can negatively impact our state, which thrives immensely on tourism. Instead of writing from the comfort of their newsrooms, they should personally come to Sohra

to get first-hand experience of everything. Before painting our home as "crime-prone hills," they should research the crime rate in Sohra over the last 10 years. They should not portray Sohra in a negative light or damage its reputation just to grab eyeballs. As far as my knowledge and experience go, the people in my state of Meghalaya and Sohra are humble, honest, kind, helpful, hospitable, God-fearing, and always ready to help.

These national media should be reminded that the local people, the police department, the Search and Rescue Team, and the government have come together, searching tirelessly and helping in every way they could to find the missing couple despite the unrelenting rains and arduous terrain.

Notwithstanding the negative narrative (without knowing the facts) set by some renowned national media outlets, it is crucial to understand that this tragedy is not a reflection of Meghalaya's safety or spirit. Like all mountainous regions, the wild, untamed character of the natural world here requires visitors to be cautious and well prepared. Perhaps visitors should make use of local guides who are well-versed in the terrain.

Being in the lap of nature can be blissful, but one

must take precautions as well. We want our guests to enjoy to the fullest without encountering any unpleasant experience. Even local residents in our state have gone missing during the rainy season, underscoring the serious challenges posed by our unpredictable weather. While the natural beauty of our landscape is undeniable, it can also turn dangerous, with heavy rains, landslides, and flash floods being common during this period. In such a setting, describing the region as "crime-prone hills" is not only misleading but deeply irresponsible. It paints an unfair picture of a place where nature itself can be both breath-taking and brutal.

Meghalaya has emerged as one of the top tourist destinations in the Northeast, recording the second-highest number of domestic tourist arrivals in the region after Assam. Recently, Union Minister of State for DoNER, Sukanta Majumdar, stated that a total of 13,71,674 domestic tourists visited Meghalaya in the 2024-25 fiscal year. The state also welcomed 19,973 foreign tourists, ranking fourth in the region for international arrivals. Unmistakably, most of these tourists must have visited Sohra.

In a region where tourism is booming, it is both mis-

leading and unfair to label Meghalaya as "crime-prone hills" - a phrase irresponsibly used by media outlets without any understanding of the state's ground reality. Such a characterisation not only tarnishes the image of a peaceful and welcoming destination but also undermines the efforts of the local communities and authorities who work tirelessly to promote safe and sustainable tourism.

The land of the living root bridges, cascading waterfalls, clouds, and misty green mountains is always ready to welcome you like family. Meghalaya will always be a gem worth exploring responsibly. Guests are like gods. Let us continue to celebrate Meghalaya not with fear but with reverence for its nature, its people, and the timeless stories that rain and rock have carved into your soul.

To Sohra, the love of my life - thank you for being my toughest trail and my softest refuge. We pray for the missing couple, their families, friends, and relatives. Hope we find them soon and safe.

Yours etc.,
Replica Becky Pde,
Via email

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

"Life has its ups and downs, but you can only look forward."

— Frank Lowy

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya Tourism Upended

A hill state that hardly makes it to the national news for anything positive is now labelled as the "crime prone hills." A television news channel showed a male relative of the still missing Sonam Raghuvanshi, making atrociously disparaging remarks about Meghalaya that labels it a state of ruffians and outlaws — a state with no governance and one where people sell body parts. The person says on camera that if Meghalaya had used drones, satellites and helicopters then Raja Raghuvanshi would not have died and Sonam, his wife, would not be missing. The Government of Meghalaya can no longer brush these sordid allegations aside and move on with the plea that what was said was the outburst of grieving relatives and hence should not be taken to heart. The reputation of 34 lakh people is now at stake and since that news channel is a mainstream one the news clip has gone viral also because news related to deaths and murders generate great interest.

What is of immediate concern is how such news can harm Meghalaya's tourism potential. Sohra alone has hundreds of homestays apart from luxury hotels and resorts. Then there are places beyond Sohra like Nongwar, Laikynsew, Mawmluh etc. What will be the impact on those who derive their incomes from tourism and who are in turn employing many young people from the area? It is expected that the Tourism Department would have gone on an overdrive to call the tour operators and homestay owners of the area to discuss what exactly could have gone wrong and the possible reasons why the Indore couple went off the track on their own without a guide.

Should it not be a Tourism Policy that people cannot venture into a destination without a guide — along the lines of the Mawphlang Sacred Grove? If the Dain Thlen and Wei Sawdong Falls are closed to tourists as claimed by the Sohra Police then why is there no sign board there to declare that in black and white? Some tourists evidently still venture close to that destination and are not turned away because there is no one to police that area. All these are subjects of discussion. Merely because tourism is community-led the Government cannot absolve itself of the major responsibility because when an untoward incident happens it is the Government and not the community that is held accountable. The recent incident is a clear example that should anything adverse happen to any tourist in Meghalaya the blame squarely falls on the Government's shoulders because it is mandated with maintaining the rule of law. It is the state that must utilise the police force in full strength to search for tourists that go missing. Considering what had happened to the Hungarian tourist who also had a misadventure in the Sohra region, the Tourism Department should have immediately made it compulsory for every tourist or group of tourists to have a guide or not be allowed to enter the place. Tourism is serious business and a large part of that is to ensure the safety and security of tourists.

Don't Stain these hills with Careless Ink

By Lyzander Sohkhet

Meghalaya like any place in the world, isn't devoid of mishaps, accidents, or tragedies. Yes, tourists have occasionally lost their way, and yes, sometimes bad things happen when nature itself can turn treacherous, especially during the unforgiving monsoon months. But what is equally true, and what deserves louder recognition, is how our communities respond. When Hungarian tourist, Puskas Zsolt went missing in March, entire villages, village parties, headmen, police, and drone teams combed steep slopes and dense forests in rain and mist for days until they found him. His death was a tragedy, but it was met with human dignity. The locals, many of whom did not even know his name, searched as if one of their own had gone missing. Now, as we face the current incident of the missing Indore couple, the story repeats — not of crime but of care. Police, volunteers, VDPs, and community elders have

lives of those who depend on tourism for their children's school fees, their mother's medicine, their roofs.

Tourism in Meghalaya has long been a story of community hospitality. In Sohra, Mawlynnong, Nongriat, Dawki, Mawphlang, a majority of homestays are run by families. Treks are guided by locals whose fathers once built the very root bridges you walk on. Tourism here is not an industry, it is a relationship. And for decades, those relationships have been safe, warm, and trusting. Even the government acknowledges that most tourist sites here are owned and managed by local communities. Paul Lyngdoh, our Tourism Minister, rightly said that Meghalaya remains one of India's safest destinations for visitors, and this recent incident, tragic and worrying as it is, should never be manipulated to tarnish an entire state.

As someone who grew up here, let me offer this too:

Amidst this struggle, it was both hurtful and deeply irresponsible to see a national daily thoughtlessly label our beautiful Meghalaya as "crime-prone hills." Such words are not only a gross misrepresentation, they insult the very spirit of a land that has for generations opened its homes, its valleys, and its hearts to visitors. I must say this plainly: Meghalaya has no history of violent crime against tourists. No record of tourist murders. No reputation for hostility against tourists.

been out in relentless rain, on treacherous terrain, putting their own lives at risk.

In Sohra, no stone is left unturned. Yet, to reduce a situation born from difficult geography and monsoon risks into a crime narrative is insulting. I say this not to dismiss concerns; every missing person is a cause for heartbreak and urgency. Every family's agony is valid. But there is a difference between honest reporting and manufacturing alarmist narratives that damage the dignity of a land.

Meghalaya is a land of rain, rock, kindness, and resilience. It has weathered storms, earthquakes, and yes, careless words before. But it stands tall, because its people do. Sohra's cliffs may be perilous, but its people have hearts wide as its valleys. To those in the media who choose easy labels over honest reporting, understand this: your words do damage. They do not just mark a place on a map but they mark the

the monsoon is not to be taken lightly. It is beautiful and brutal in equal measure. Trekkers must always go with experienced guides; especially during the rains. It is wisdom passed down by our elders, to always respect the land. The Tourism Department had sped up to rollout stricter monsoon advisories, mandatory guide requirements, and better signage at remote trekking routes. But let's be clear, Meghalaya does not need its name dragged through the mud because of nature's risks. To the family of the missing couple: Meghalaya stands with you.

The government has mobilized every resource. The villagers continue to search. And the people here pray every night for your children's safe return. I ask the media to show restraint, responsibility, and compassion in its coverage. Focus on the humanity of this story, not cheap headlines. The recent Tourist Buddies initiative is another

cover the footage.

I ask: if not the police, then who is responsible for this job? If it's the public's job to investigate, why are we paying taxes to fund a police department?

When I approached the relevant local authorities about the locality's camera network, I was told: "none of the cameras are working." I heard so many two-wheelers have already been stolen in this area, then why were the cameras never repaired? Is the system waiting for more thefts to happen before doing something?

As a non-tribal youth from a working-class family living on rent, I live with constant fear of saying too much — fear of being pushed out, ignored, or punished. My sister worked for two years to help us afford that second hand scooter. When it was stolen, and I turned to the very departments funded by our hard-earned tax money, they chose to do nothing.

A friend once told me before leaving this state: "It doesn't feel like home anymore." I never understood what he meant until now.

The government constantly boasts about its ICCA as a major Smart City achievement — then

example of how proactively our government works. Launched across Shillong, Sohra, Dawki, and Mawlynnong, it deploys trained local youth as cultural guides and safety personnel bridging the gap between visitors and communities. These are professional, certified, first-aid trained ambassadors who not only assist but enrich the visitor's experience.

Meghalaya is safe. It always has been. Our homestays are full this season. Hotels in Shillong and Sohra are booked. Thousands trek through root bridges and waterfalls without incident. What our visitors do encounter, almost without exception, are kind faces, eager guides, helpful strangers, and roads lined with families selling pineapples, betel leaves, and wild honey. Meghalaya today attracts over 1.5 million tourists annually both domestic and international and the vast majority leave with cherished memories and plans to return. It is important though, especially during this season, to remind travellers to exercise caution. The monsoon here is a beauty and a beast. Meghalaya's hills demand both reverence and respect. Trekkers must hire guides. Tell your host where you're headed. Don't venture into dense forests without locals who know the land like the backs of their hands. The government has clear advisories, and Tourist Information Centres are open daily. Emergency numbers are available, and police stations from Shillong to Sohra remain responsive.

Our hills are alive. They are not crime-prone. They are community-owned, community-guarded, and community-loved. So, to media outlets tempted to chase clicks with careless labels, I urge you, come see for yourself. Talk to the families of Sohra. Walk with the Khasi women who manage Mawlynnong's spotless lanes. Watch the boatmen of Dawki navigate glass-clear rivers. Speak to tourists who return year after year.

This isn't a land of fear. It's a land of resilience, pride, kindness, and yes, rain. And in the rain, you find both beauty and risk which makes it all the more magical.

I commend the Meghalaya Police, the Tourism Department, community leaders, and countless anonymous villagers who, despite no headlines, work daily to ensure every visitor returns with more than photos with stories of kindness and kinship.

This is our home. And it deserves to be spoken of with care.

why hasn't the police directly gone there, retrieved the footage, and properly investigated my case? Investigation requires legwork. I did mine — but the system didn't. If a student like me understands the urgency of tracing suspects through timely footage, shouldn't trained officers know it better? And if they do, why didn't they act? Every citizen has the right to ask: where is our tax money going, and what kind of justice system are we funding?

I wrote to the SP. I emailed. I spoke respectfully to every department. But still, no progress. Just silence. And fear.

I'm writing this not because I expect anything now — but because staying silent only protects the system that failed me. I still live here. I still walk these streets. And I still pay my taxes. But I've learned one thing: unless we speak, nothing changes.

Yours etc.,
Ekramul Haque,
Via email

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

The Gods and their ways

By Iasaid Khongjee

Once upon a time every village, cluster of villages, clans had their religions; this is a fact. This is the interplay of our ancestors with the gods. There were men who transformed into tigers; some waged wars (among villages, clusters of villages) when all means of settling disputes failed. At times, individuals use the spiritual powers (not supernatural powers) for personal purposes and desires. These spirits are there to do the job for us; we only have to know what to do: the communication with them, the covenant to be made, and other entailment. That we call this land — "Ka ri Ki blei" (The land of the gods), is an expression of the above.

The world we are living in is not only a physical world. All existent are spiritual in degrees we can never measure. Out of a plethora of this spiritual world, these are most well-known, and they can be broadly classified into three major categories. 1. The naturally existing ones. The spirits living on land, water. 2. Spirits having human origin, that of ancestors; they are here with us on earth. 3. The spirits that are invoked for personal whims

When this happens, there's no going back; some spirits don't allow a fall-back. The origin of this blood-thirsty spirit lies in this. This theory defies all stories about the origin of the Thlen.

Once while coming from an archery competition, a fellow archer and practising shaman told me — "phi babu, u Thlen hadien ba la shah beh na khet bneng ha U Nongthaw, u la kypad ia u Nongthaw ban shah ban wan sha pyrthei, tangba un bam da ka longbriew, bad dej nangta ba u Thlen u la wan sha pyrthei" (you see babu, the thlen, after having been expelled by the Creator, requested that he be allowed to come down to earth, but he'll feed on human blood, and the Creator allowed him). To this I rebutted, "haba u thlen u la ioh Hukum ban bam ya ka longbriew, phin khan sa ia kaei pat?" (When the Thlen has got divine sanction from his Creator to feed on human blood, then why ostracize it and turn it into an evil entity?)

The question shook him to the core, making him realize the flaw of his shamanic foundation. A flaw like this, as has been found in the tradition this writer has come

"Communication with the spirits are according to the covenant made with humans. One thing we have to be very clear, is the propitiation, as a consummation of the covenant; the personal gods (spirits) never give things for free."

and wishes, such as wealth, personal well-being, not for sustaining life, which is a universal law, a thing which has a divine sanction. Any of the above gods in the third category have retributive effect if unduly asked to come out of their ontological values just to satisfy our desire for wealth and power.

The Mother Earth (Ka Mei Ramew) is impersonal, but it can become a personal god if invoked. It will give stupendous benefits, but, beware! I had a direct experience. Against this, our ancestors warned saying — "husiar ia ka thaw-nang ioh wan ka lait-kylla", meaning — "beware of man-made actions for they have a retributive repercussion". This saying comes from the knowledge and experience that there's nothing new in the infinitely perfect Nature; from which nothing can be taken away to adorn the Essence — "the life", which constitutes the foundation of our Philosophy, the pivot on which our religions revolve.

We are living with the spirits around us, and in peace. This, the nature of co-existence as per Cosmic design, is what we call "ki para bashong-basah lang", meaning "the co-inhabitants". By design, they confine themselves to ontological boundaries, functions, respecting the above values involved in their being. Only in rare cases accidents happen when people suffer from strange diseases which result from the encounter with them. When these happen, we remind them of their Ontology; this forms the basis of the separation process — ka kren-ka khana (communication) for healing, or restoration of balance; no miracle!

The stories about U Thlen are metaphorical; not a naturally existing spirit which has a divine sanction from the Creator. The U Ryngekew-U Basa is a god that protects animals living on land, including humans.

Thus, invoking for protecting life is what is in sync with Divine law, or Natural law. With the Thlen, it's different. This spirit comes to our midst from the mistake in the invocation; we call it "U Phan Longspah" (a god of wealth). Our ancestral knowledge highlights this — any gods, even benign ones, when invoked for wealth and other ephemeral benefits, will turn into the Thlen.

across in decades, is considered to be a congenital weakness, and people with such nature are not taken seriously.

Communication with the spirits are according to the covenant made with humans. One thing we have to be very clear, is the propitiation, as a consummation of the covenant; the personal gods (spirits) never give things for free. Once they were called out of their ontological duties (the duties they do from the beginning of time), and they have answered our wish, a propitiation is binding. A failure to fulfil this is accompanied with diseases which lead to death.

A flawed covenant is dangerous. One wise old man said to me: "ki blei bam tang da ka juh shi ka juh", meaning "the gods are never pacified by the same things (items of propitiation). This means that they'll ask for a different one. For example: the first time one sacrifices (shed the blood) a little chicken according to the agreement made, and that's fine. The later gifts may not be the same as the gods will ask for more. Suppose, because of his favour, I generously give a full grown rooster; in doing this, I have made a fatal mistake. I'll no longer be in a position to negotiate with the god for it will say, "from a chicken, you gave the rooster, and now why not a thing bigger than the rooster?" At this point, I am at a dead end for there's no way to go back, or to break the covenant. But there are ways of making a covenant; a meticulous one, which binds the spirits. One is — a covenant which doesn't percolate down to the future generations. Another is the item of propitiation, that it should be the same from the beginning till the last period of the term. Giving the spirits a free choice to choose what they want, will lead even noble spirits to become U Thlen.

How do we know what they want? The spirits never talk the way we do, or appear to us physically. This dichotomy is bridged through divination. Some of the tools used in this are shells, stones, eggs, rice etc. The signs shown are a message from the other end whether they agree or not about the terms and conditions.

(Iasaid Khongjee is a school teacher, St John Bosco School, Sohra)

Letters to the Editor

Draft Meghalaya Film Tourism Policy: Some suggestions

Editor,

The unveiling of the Draft Meghalaya Film Tourism Policy 2025 by the Hon'ble Chief Minister marks a promising step toward showcasing our state's natural beauty and cultural richness on a national and global level. As a concerned citizen, I wish to offer some constructive feedback to ensure the policy's success and sustainability.

Community involvement must be at the heart of this initiative. Local stakeholders—including village councils, youth groups, and artisans should be consulted and included in both the planning and implementation stages. This will not only build ownership but also create employment opportunities and guard against exploitation of local communities.

Cultural preservation should be a non-negotiable

pillar of the policy. While film tourism has immense potential, it must not come at the cost of diluting or misrepresenting indigenous traditions, languages, and values. Clear guidelines should be established to protect our intangible cultural heritage from commercialization or distortion.

The policy must prioritize sustainable development. Infrastructure built to support film tourism should be eco-friendly and mindful of the fragile ecosystems in our hills and forests. Waste management, environmental impact assessments, and restrictions on large-scale productions in ecologically sensitive zones are critical considerations.

I appreciate the Government's call for public feedback and hope these suggestions will be taken in the right spirit. With the right balance between promotion and preservation, this policy can indeed make our state Meghalaya a leading example of responsible and community-centered film tourism destination in India.

Yours etc.,
Jerry Jeffrey K Marak,
Via email

When a system fails its own people: A citizen left without answers

Editor,

This is a follow-up to the letter I previously wrote and was published regarding the theft of my two-wheeler (Honda Activa ML05AE0842), stolen on the night of May 23, 2025. It's now been more than a week, and I wish I could say something has moved — but sadly, nothing has. No police officer has contacted me. No update has been given. No information about any investigation or suspect has been shared. The system remains as silent as it was on the first day.

I write this letter with hesitation, because every word I type carries fear — will I be harassed in future for speaking out? Will police make it harder for me if I go to them again? Will the local community authorities delay my rent documents or create other hurdles? I was born

and brought up in Shillong, but as a non-tribal, I've often felt a quiet divide — and this incident has made me feel that separation more deeply than ever.

The police and local representatives both gave me conflicting responses regarding the CCTV footage. The newly installed Shillong Smart City camera — which might have helped trace the culprit — was never accessed. Each department passed the responsibility to another, and in the end, no one took action. I now expect the next excuse to be: "Sorry, the footage has been auto-deleted."

I firmly believe that had action been taken on the very first day, my scooter could have been found. If the officers at the station at that time had reviewed nearby CCTV, traced movement, and established a boundary of the last sighting — the investigation could have led somewhere. But no such steps were taken. Instead, my case was assigned to a night duty officer, who on the next day visited the area once, upon my repeated insistence, but no follow-up was done, and no one made formal contact with those who could have helped re-

"Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."

— Sharon Begley

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Tearful celebrations

THE huge tragedy that has unfolded in the Chinnaswamy Stadium, where a celebration was decided jointly by the Karnataka government and the Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Wednesday, raises many question marks particularly on the law and order front. Some three lakh youths converged at the stadium in a sudden surge after the celebrations were announced around noon without sufficient details. The mass frenzy was palpable as it was after 18 years' wait that RCB won the IPL match flooring Punjab Kings there at the hands of the Virat Kohli-led cricket team. A deployment of a about 5000 police personnel in normal circumstances might have sufficed but for the fact that their concentration was mainly around the footloose VIP arrivals. This has been so with almost every event today. Policing has transformed into an art of "protecting" the VIPs, the crowds of politicians, ministers, holders of senior positions in government and the judiciary. A crowd formation must, with minimum law and order "arrangements," fend for itself. Confusion about release of passes for entry to the stadium, where seats were limited to 30,000 or one-third of the crowd strength, apparently resulted in the stampede, deaths and injuries to many.

Today Bengaluru is the City of Chaos. Hailed as the Silicon Valley of India, it drew techies from across states to man the large numbers of IT campuses there. They ride the crest of youth power with their substantially high income, comforts and capacity to spend. The 15-million population as a whole are both beneficiaries of this new-found wealth surge and at the receiving end of its fallout in the social sector. Infrastructure facilities are reduced to the bare minimum and old-fashioned. The roads are in bad condition. Many principal areas are still not covered by the Metro services. Political and governmental leaderships blinked for long before the Metro system was decided on. Movement by road from one place to another in the city, which progressively bulged to all directions, is a herculean task due to huge traffic jams. Yet, Bengaluru's facilities catering mainly to the young techies, professionals, business executives and their families, including a vibrant nightlife, its eateries and huge malls, are all high attractions. The hip crowds celebrate life. It was natural that they flooded the Chinnaswamy Stadium in a jiffy at this hour of pride for them. Unfortunately for them a complacent government let them down badly and yet typically showed the gumption to announce a cash compensation for the affected individuals/families.

Admitting errors, even grave ones, is not in the psyche of politicians; much less in the mind of an old war horse like chief minister Siddaramaiah. He would rather find alibis like the "unexpected" surge. An inquiry follows, but as in the past no inquiry made any sense to those who saw how it progressed and ended. Enquiry reports beat around the bush and, in the end, protect the guilty or cast aspersions on the innocent.

Letters to the Editor

For most media today the byword is, "If it bleeds; it leads"

Editor,

The editorial "Meghalaya Tourism Upended" and the special article "Don't stain these hills with careless Ink" by Lyzander Sohklet (ST June 5th 2025) made interesting readings. News about deaths and murders tends to capture public attention due to several psychological and societal factors. The brain is wired to prioritize survival-related information. Violent events trigger the reticular activating system (RAS), which heightens awareness and focus. People instinctively seek information about threats to protect themselves and their loved ones. The phrase "If it bleeds, it leads" reflects how media outlets prioritize dramatic, shocking stories to attract viewers. High-profile murders often receive weeks of coverage, while other crimes may be ignored. Studies show that murders involving certain demographics receive more media attention than others. Race, socio-economic status,

and location can influence how much coverage a murder case gets.

People are naturally curious about extreme events, especially those that challenge their sense of security. True crime stories and murder mysteries are popular because they engage emotions like fear, anger, and empathy. Movies, TV shows, and books have romanticized and dramatized crime, making real-life cases more intriguing. Serial killers and unsolved mysteries often become cultural phenomena.

The responsibility for a murder in a tourist destination can be shared between the state, local authorities, and the community, depending on the circumstances. The state is responsible for ensuring law and order, including policing, investigations, and legal proceedings. If a death occurs due to negligence, such as lack of security measures, the government may be held accountable. In cases where crime rates are high, authorities may face criticism for failing to protect tourists.

Local communities play a role in maintaining a safe environment for visitors. Tourism businesses, such as hotels, tour operators, and guides, are expected to warn tourists about potential risks.

Meghalaya Tourism Policy: Brief analysis

By Rudi Warjri

Meghalaya is in the national news unfortunately for melancholic reasons, owing to the disappearance of a newly married couple from Indore in the Sohra area. The Meghalaya Police is doing a good job in tracing the mortal remains etc. We all mourn this misfortune. Let's pray that all this comes to a closure soon so that life can move on. Converting a crisis into an opportunity is also the best lesson. Let's therefore look at the Tourism Policy of Meghalaya beginning with the safety of tourists.

Page 26, of the Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023 is on Tourist Safety and Security. The operative extracts are A) "detailed guidelines both in terms of safety and operations could be issued from time to time. Further, the entry of tourists to difficult destinations could be prohibited without an accompanying guide/expert. B) a dedicated police team may be set up as a Tourist Police Force. C) "A safety audit of all the treks could be conducted and difficulty levels assigned. First aid kits and emergency evacuation support may also be made available at all the treks." D) "All the tourist taxis may be enrolled with the Tourism Department. All such cabs should clearly display the driver's details including name, photograph, and contact number. Additionally, emergency numbers are to be properly displayed in these cabs. The taxis may also be retrofitted to have a SOS button. E) "A dedicated helpline could be set up as a single point to cater to tourists who are in any kind of distress"

Page 31, has a section in big capital letters on PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (PMF). It's well tabulated on practically every tourism related information except theirs is NIL data and way down the list is about Tourist Safety. Most urgent is what is the status on the Tourism police? Have all the tourist taxis been enrolled with the Tourism Department and the identity of drivers /chauffeurs properly displayed? The driver can also be trained as a guide at least on the sights along the route like done in most non-English speaking countries where there would be a tag on the taxi that says, "English speaking" or in Meghalaya's case even "Hindi speaking." It can enhance the monetary value of the taxi. And a guide or taxi driver should also advise tourists not to throw water bottles, chips packets etc., as a second habit. Then the much needed Helpline

which can help assist tourists in case of a transport breakdown apart from many other distress calls.

Commendably, the Policy has laid down the Core Guiding Principles and Thrust Areas. On Sustainable & Responsible Tourism where does the Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA) or Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) or the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI) stand now? This is also linked to eco-tourism which is lagging behind. On waste management we have an ironic situation. On the one hand there is the acclaimed Mawlynnong known as the "cleanest village in Asia," whereas just along the way and the surroundings there is litter everywhere. On conservation of heritage and natural assets

on paper only. The use of technology is an imperative in this day and age. It would help to know the data on the effectiveness of the 'Meghalaya Tourism' App with regards to planning the trip, booking hotels, taxis, and guides, a feedback portal for the visitors to record their experiences, grievances, and suggestions.

Synergy with other departments and schemes/programs is very poor. The centre has just announced a four-lane Shillong-Silchar expressway. Let's pray this happens. A month ago on this road, I was agonizingly stuck at Lumshong for one hour and the worst was at Umkiang Ratacherra part for four hours. I feel ashamed in this day and age that Meghalaya should have such poor roads compared to the interiors of undeveloped

events, health and wellness, etc. And that comes along with corporate presence. It's good to have five star hotels like Vivanta and Courtyard by Marriott but what is the occupancy rate? Most of the occupancy is for government related activities and events which is paid for by the taxpayers through the government.

In the service sector the concert economy has begun to pick up in Meghalaya especially during the Cherry Blossom festival. It has to spread to other towns of Meghalaya and more corporate involvement and sponsorship can take place. The announcement about the draft Film Tourism Policy is a welcome idea but the natural landscape is not enough to be successful in attracting film shooting. Other infrastructure also has to develop together beginning with uninterrupted power supply.

What about land banks? The policy says "Given the pattern of land ownership in the State wherein a large portion of the land is either owned by or is under the control of communities and private individuals, it is extremely challenging for the government to take up large infrastructure projects or to attract investments from the private sector." This is very true. The Government of Meghalaya should begin with a cadastral survey under the SVAMITVA scheme of the Government of India that aims to provide legal documentation of property ownership using drone and GIS technology and can serve as legal proof and as collateral for loans and other purposes. Mizoram has already done it.

Tourist information centers and signages at key entry points towards Shillong, Tura, Jowai, Williamnagar, Sohra are imperative. The signages should have a big bold letter 'I' which means "Information." Staff should be armed with all information relating to accommodation facilities, food availability, road condition, safety of terrain, waterfalls, advisories, etc that tourists can approach on the spot. This is done even in South Asian countries and much before in Europe and the US where any tourist can just drive and find accommodation wherever the night falls.

I would be happy to see the PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK being filled up with exhaustive data.

(The write is former diplomat)

"Community Participation as stated in the policy is very desirable and should be at the root of most projects and activities. The work of certain community organizations especially during situations of tragedies like the disappearance of the couple in Sohra area cannot be understated. The main problem however is the territorial jurisdiction of communities or Shnongs or Village Councils. Conflicts take place especially where there is commerce and revenue generating potential like is currently happening in the Dainthlen waterfalls area."

portions of the walking path along the David Scott trail are disappearing because of the stone and sand mining especially towards the Sohra route. On employment generation and entrepreneurship data is required as per the PMF.

Community Participation as stated in the policy is very desirable and should be at the root of most projects and activities. The work of certain community organizations especially during situations of tragedies like the disappearance of the couple in Sohra area cannot be understated. The main problem however is the territorial jurisdiction of communities or Shnongs or Village Councils. Conflicts take place especially where there is commerce and revenue generating potential like is currently happening in the Dainthlen waterfalls area. And neither the Government nor the District Council want to step into this tricky situations for fear of political fall-outs. Hence innovative ideas like revenue sharing will remain

Africa which were in much better conditions when I traveled in that country in the early 1980s. I wonder where all the revenue generated from the cement, coal, boulders etc., go? The policy also talked about a "comprehensive long-term plan where a channel of formal communication may also be established with the Public Works Department (PWD)." Has this happened yet? The less said the better about PWD road conditions in the interiors.

As stated in the Policy, "the centrality of youth to the Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023" should be fundamental. At the end of the day if there's no future for the youth all policies are meaningless.

It's correct to say that "Quality Accommodation facilities are critical to the growth of tourism." Tourism however cannot develop in isolation. It is connected to development in other areas as well. People travel not necessarily only for sight-seeing. They travel for business, conferences, seminars

An urgent appeal to the stakeholders in Education

Editor,

It is my earnest appeal to all stakeholders in Meghalaya's education sector: it is time to act decisively to safeguard the quality of education in our state. The declining academic standards are steadily eroding Shillong's identity as the educational hub of Northeast India.

The academic demands under the New Education Policy (NEP) have significantly increased. Colleges are now required to offer 40 honours papers instead of the earlier 18. Additionally, institutions must run co-curricular components like skill enhancement courses, ability enhancement courses, vocational training courses and mid-semester internship programs. Under such pressure, it is simply unrealistic and academically dishonest—for any institution to enroll an excessive number of students. If a college continues to do so, it is clearly prioritizing quantity over quality. The time when 200 students could be stuffed into

a classroom has long passed. Continuing this practice undermines the goals of the NEP and compromises the learning experience.

Worryingly, some elite institutes well-known for their brand name but predatory in practice are aggressively recruiting large numbers of students, ignoring ethical considerations. If this trend is allowed to flourish, quality education will soon disappear from our state.

We must remember that the education sector, particularly the influx of students from other states, plays an inevitable role in Meghalaya's economy. Therefore, it is imperative that the Department of Higher and Technical Education strengthens its vigilance. It must ensure that colleges uphold academic standards, provide adequate infrastructure, and appoint qualified faculty. Routine checks should be institutionalized.

No academic institution should be allowed to allot more than 120 students per classroom under any circumstance. Furthermore, the department must actively verify whether internship programs and vocational training courses are being implemented fairly and meaningfully.

Another area of concern

is the mechanical forwarding of central government directives especially cultural programs or campaigns without properly studying their relevance to the context of Meghalaya. Some of these initiatives are, frankly, absurd and disconnected from the academic and socio-economic realities of our state. Asking institutions for action-taken reports on irrelevant directives is not governance; it is bureaucratic formality that wastes time and energy.

If we fail to arrest this decline, no external agency will step in to rescue us. The burden of failure will fall entirely on us. It is, therefore, essential that our Education Minister and the Ministry of Higher and Technical Education act with competence, awareness, and a strong sense of responsibility. They must not remain passive or symbolic. The future of education in Meghalaya hangs in the balance and if current trends persist, we may soon drive a nail into its coffin.

Yours etc.,
Mary L. Laloo,
Via email

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Zelenskyy's gambit: A tactical masterstroke that threatens strategic collapse

How Russia will respond to the shock is the critical question

By M A Hossain

By any military measure, Ukraine's 'Operation Spider Web' was an astonishing success. In a meticulously planned operation, Ukrainian drones struck deep into Russian territory, obliterating at least 40 military aircraft—including nuclear-capable Tu-95 and Tu-22M3 bombers—in a single, devastating blow. The attack revealed not only meticulous Ukrainian planning over 18 months but also the glaring vulnerabilities of Russia's so-called impenetrable airspace. It was a coup de main that will be studied in military academies for decades. But as history too often reminds us, tactical brilliance can be the prelude to strategic disaster. The world now holds its breath, waiting to see what comes next.

The immediate question is not whether Russia will respond—it will—but how. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy must now reckon with that distinction. Launched on the eve of scheduled peace talks in Istanbul, Spider Web didn't just dismantle a third of Russia's strategic bomber fleet—it may also have dismantled the fragile architecture of diplomacy that remained. If this was a calculated move to strengthen Ukraine's bargaining position, it was cynically timed and perilously shortsighted. It risks transforming what was still, however tenuously, a brutal regional war into an epoch-defining catastrophe.

We've seen this before. In 1914, the assassination of an Austrian archduke triggered a cascade of commitments, mobilizations, and miscalculations that led to a global conflagration. In 1941, Japan, feeling cornered by U.S. embargoes, attacked Pearl Harbour—a masterstroke of surprise that ultimately led to its own annihilation. And in 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the planet within inches of nuclear oblivion, saved only by backchannel diplomacy and the mutual recognition of unacceptable costs.

Ukraine's gamble did not occur in a vacuum. It came at a time when President Trump has been seeking to limit American exposure and end the war, while Europe is increasingly divided over how far to support Kyiv without inviting catastrophe. It also came amid a U.S. political landscape reshaped by Donald Trump's return to the White House, a president who has made clear his disinterest in "forever wars" and who, notably, has remained silent on this latest escalation.

The American public, too, seems less inclined to bankroll Kyiv's ambitions, particularly when those ambitions risk dragging NATO into a direct confrontation with a nuclear adversary.

Zelenskyy's supporters will argue this operation was necessary—a bold stroke to jolt Russia from its entrenched positions and to demonstrate Ukraine's capability for long-range asymmetric warfare. They will say it sends a signal to Moscow: Ukraine cannot be intimidated and has the resolve to strike at the heart of Russian military power. They may even compare it to Israel's 1981 strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor—a preemptive blow to degrade a long-term threat.

But the analogy doesn't hold. Israel acted in secrecy against a latent, undeclared threat. Ukraine struck openly, on the record, against a nuclear-armed power just hours before peace talks. Worse, it struck not against fielded forces in battle, but strategic nuclear bombers inside Russia, a move that risks prompting a doctrinal response from Moscow. Since its updated nuclear posture last year, Russia allows for nuclear use in response to conventional strikes that threaten its strategic deterrent—exactly the kind of attack Spider Web represents.

It is no exaggeration to say that Zelenskyy has lit a fuse dangerously close to a powder keg. Which raises a larger question: What exactly was the purpose of this attack?

Some suspect it was less about battlefield utility and more about political optics. With Western support waning and battlefield momentum stalled, Zelenskyy may have felt compelled to show that he still commands initiative—that he remains a credible partner worth backing. There's also speculation that this operation was a plea for continued arms shipments now under threat from Trump's "America First" administration.

But if this was an attempt to impress or pressure Western allies, it may backfire. The attack has already emboldened voices in Washington and Brussels who argue that the war is spiralling out of control. And it gives ammunition to Moscow's propaganda machine, which is portraying the strike as Russia's own Pearl Harbour. When a nuclear power perceives itself as the victim of an existential assault, dangerous decisions follow.

We must also ask: was NATO involved? Did European allies—through satellite intelligence or remote drone operations—have a hand in the planning or execution? If so, this operation could cross a previously avoided threshold, bringing NATO into direct conflict with Russia. That's not just a strategic misstep—it's a generational blunder.

President Zelenskyy must now answer for the consequences of his audacity. Yes, the strike humiliated Russia. Yes, it exposed the rot within Moscow's security establishment. But the cost of that humiliation could be paid not just in Ukrainian lives, but potentially in the lives of millions across Europe and beyond, should Putin interpret this as justification for escalation.

History is littered with leaders who mistook tactical victories for strategic triumphs. Napoleon's march into Moscow, Hitler's advance into Stalingrad, even George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" moment in Iraq—all stemmed from an overestimation of short-term success and a blindness to long-term consequence.

Zelenskyy, admired as he rightly is for his courage and resolve, must now be judged for his judgment. By launching Spider Web when he did, and in the manner that he did, he may have sabotaged the very peace he claims to seek. Worse, he has placed the entire international order at the mercy of a man like Vladimir Putin, whose worldview is shaped not by cost-benefit logic but by grievance, pride, and a paranoid sense of historical destiny.

The West must now perform a high-wire act. It must reaffirm support for ending the war. It must also demand restraint and a return to diplomacy. A nuclear confrontation, even a "demonstrative" one over a deserted military base, would rewrite the rules of war and peace for generations to come. It would show that nuclear blackmail works—or that nuclear retaliation can be normalized. Neither outcome is acceptable.

Operation Spider Web may be remembered as a brilliant military feat. But unless it is followed by swift and sober diplomacy, it risks becoming a historical monument to hubris—the kind that ignites wars from which there is no return. The lesson from history is chillingly clear: great fires often begin with a single, dazzling spark.

(IPA Service)
By arrangement with the Arabian Post

"Gratitude is riches. Complaint is poverty."

— Doris Day

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JUNE 7, 2025

Gratuitous blame game

MEGHALAYA'S former Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma has gone hammer and tongs at the MDA Government's handling of the tragic disappearance of a tourist couple in the Sohra region. The newly married couple from Indore who last stayed at a homestay in the Nongriat Double Decker Living Root Bridge, disappeared on May 23 and the dead body of the husband was only found on June 2 in a gorge in Sohra Rim area. region. The wife - Sonam Raghuvanshi is still untraced. Considering that Meghalaya is now in the eye of the storm, Mukul Sangma could have reserved his ammunition for another day and not launched an attack on the Government at a time when all guns are trained at the people of the state. The word, "crime prone hills," is a huge disservice to Meghalaya as a whole and to the Sohra region in particular and at this juncture all elected representative should be standing together to pool their resources on how best to find the missing woman because until she is found there are speculations galore.

This is no time to score political brownie points; instead, the Opposition parties too should offer their suggestions to the government without making a spectacle of the sad event. To put the blame on drug users and to claim that a system for smooth conduct of tourism, including security measures was put in place during Dr Mukul Sangma's time and that everything was allowed to collapse is hyperbolic. Dr Mukul Sangma is critical not only of how the tourism sector is being run but he also disapproves of the present government's attempt to run it on a private-public-partnership (PPP) mode. Why not sit across the table and discuss the pros and cons of the medical college being run on PPP mode instead of trading charges through the media. Meghalaya should look around at the status of state medical colleges in the North Eastern states.

Mizoram got its first state medical college in 2018. Five years later, it tried to offload it onto the centre. The college has been facing both funding and faculty shortages and hence the Government wanted the centre to take care of the management of the medical college. However, the central government has rejected this on the plea that the institutes in the North Eastern states have different seat distribution patterns where 85% of the seats are distributed among the eight states. Faculty shortage is something that will likely become a problem in the Tura Medical College too since young doctor faculty would also look at the kind of education system and other facilities available in Tura for their children vis a vis the other cities. The Government of Meghalaya would struggle to run this medical college on its own, loaded as it is with several other responsibilities to manage even basic educational facilities. Like the Mizoram Medical College, it would struggle to find both resources and faculty. Pragmatism demands that problems be minutely dissected so as to avoid future bottlenecks.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya and its warm hospitality

Editor,
The recent tragic incident involving the disappearance of a couple from Madhya Pradesh in Sohra has deeply saddened us all. It has been widely reported in both local and national media, and it is truly unfortunate that such a heartbreaking event has occurred especially as this is the first of its kind involving tourists in our beautiful state. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the couple during this unimaginably difficult time. I extend my deepest condolences to the family members of (L) Raja Raghuvanshi. May his soul rest in peace.

Despite this tragedy, it is important to remember that Meghalaya remains a land known for its breathtaking beauty and warm hospitality. One isolated incident should not overshadow the kindness and generosity that define our people. Tragedies, while devastating, can occur anywhere in the world but it is unfair and unjust to generalise or label an entire community based on a single incident.

Recently, I came across a Facebook post discussing this incident, where I saw comments questioning the hospitality of the people of Meghalaya. While I understand the pain and anger that may lead to such statements, I urge everyone to look at the

bigger picture. Thousands of tourists, both domestic and international who visit Meghalaya, speak highly of the friendly, welcoming, and helpful locals they encounter. As a resort and campsite owner, we've hosted solo travellers, including women, who have always felt safe and welcomed here.

There are countless testimonials from visitors who have found Meghalaya to be one of the safest and most peaceful tourist destinations in the country. This tragic case, while alarming, should not erase those positive experiences or the truth about who we are as a people.

Let us all refrain from making conclusions until the investigation is complete and the facts are known. Meghalaya continues to be a haven for travelers, and we remain committed to welcoming tourists with open hearts and open arms.

Let this be a moment of unity and compassion not one of division or blame.

Yours etc,
Lemuel Gordon Lynda
Via email

The Sohra episode

Editor,
In the recent scary and horrifying incident, a newly married couple from Indore, Madhya Pradesh who had travelled to Sohra, Meghalaya for their honeymoon and went sight-seeing before they both went missing is also mysterious. Since

Understanding the 14th Pope Leo

By Deepa Majumdar

(This article is dedicated to Sister Elvira - my Catholic "Other-Mother")

On the evening of May 8th white smoke poured forth from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, signaling the election of a new pope. Then came the ringing cry - "Habemus Papam" ("We have a Pope"). Then Pope Leo (the 14th) appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica. We were thrilled - not because we have forgotten Pope Francis - but because he reminds us of his august predecessor.

That the conclave elected Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, a humble servant of Christ, as the 267th pope of a worldwide Catholic Church, must have been the grace of the Paraclete (Holy Spirit), which guided the voting members to choose a suitable leader, not just for the church, but for the world. For, the voice of this church matters in global affairs. That they elected a first ever US pope, must have been divine dispensation. For now, more than ever before, the world (especially the US) needs a US-born pope.

When Pope Leo stepped out to greet the world, with the urbi et orbi blessing and simple Christian greeting, "Peace be with all of you" - his whole being expressed a quiet dignity, calmness, detachment, and simplicity. The warmth underlying his veil of reserve was underscored by humility and modesty. He seemed more a dispassionate witness, than a participant in the spectacle orchestrated in his honor.

A presence so quiet and reserved comes from a lifetime of deeds, rather than words. Indeed, one could hear the serene spirit behind his words. The total converse of politicians, who try to impress by empty words rather than deeds, Pope Leo came across as a calm administrator, a servant of both God and man, who has spent decades serving the poorest of the poor in Peru. A vicar of Christ, he will unify fissures both inside and outside the church - especially those between the political Left and Right. A measured person, he is rational without being cold - because faith illumines his reason.

Pope Leo carries a heavy weight - not just because the Catholic Church is now global - but because it is plagued by problems, both internal and external. Internally, the church is torn apart by a fissiparous politics that pollutes the pure spirituality that should always rule as the core of a religious institution.

Even with rules that express the highest ethics - human institutions are often torn by warring factions. The Catholic Church is no exception. Such schisms harm all institutions. But they are especially harmful in those that are ecclesiastical. Anything but a benign NGO, as some in the west would like to see it, this church represents the body of Christ. Yet, like a medieval court, it has its intrigues - with many conflicting ideologies (orthodoxy versus reformist, intellectual versus pastoral, ornate protocol and luxuries versus simplicity, etc.) tearing it apart.

Pope Leo is ideal for harmonizing these warring factions - first and foremost, because he is a peace-maker by nature. Even as a child, he once transformed dangerous Chicago gang members, into friends, by just talking to them. Something in his measured voice of love synthesizes and integrates. An able administrator, Pope Leo uses this virtue of love (which is more than a skill) as his surest "weapon." Indeed, no management school (given their usual bent towards the utilitarian), could possibly inculcate such love in its graduates.

But second, Pope Leo matters because he is a principled pragmatist. Speaking from a podium of Truth, which, St. Augustine identified with Christ, he transcends the impassioned politics of Left versus Right. He is therefore uniquely qualified to harmonize both. Third, his Augustinian roots vest Pope Leo with the monastic ideals so essential for the church right now. As a monk-priest, and as one who has served the poorest of the poor - as a shepherd who smells like his sheep, no matter who they are - he is committed to renunciation. Whether in his diet, or attire, he is, in his simplicity, a worthy follower of Pope Francis. Fourth, Pope Leo has been destined for greatness since childhood, when prescient adults foretold that he would one day be a pope. As a child, he played at being a priest, using his mother's ironing board as an altar. This proves that he was born with a strong vocation for priesthood and pastoral work. Although St. Augustine eschewed the doctrine of reincarnation - and despite the fact that Pope Leo belongs to the Augustinian order - these extraordinary signs from his childhood prove the veracity of rein-

carnation. How else do we explain so strong a vocation in a young child?

The self-styled "progressive" political Left identifies with some of the moral positions adopted by Popes Francis and Leo - stances that earned Pope Francis the opprobrium of conservative cardinals, and their censorious charge of being "a woke or liberal" Pope. But Popes Francis and Leo are neither "progressive" nor regressive, even if they sound "progressive." For they transcend politics. Beset by the deracinating passions, the Left has inordinate "love" for the other, even as it denies its own roots. By contrast, Popes Leo and Francis, given their disposition, have always been devoted to their roots, even as they served the other. Moreover, the political Left operates mainly discursively - through empty intellectual outpourings that can be severed from deeds by hypocrisy. But Pope Leo, like his predecessor, Pope Francis, is a man of actions.

Yet the criticisms of the Left matter when it comes to the chief shadow darkening Pope Leo's pontificate. Like his predecessor, Pope Leo faces the ominous shadow of horrific sex abuse and rape scandals that have rocked the church since the twentieth-century. Abuse survivors have accused Pope Leo (like they did, his predecessor), of being inadequate in his responses to guilty priests. Pope Leo has spoken boldly and clearly in defense of the traditional family, bemoaning marriage equality as a kind of moral sophistry. Indeed, the traditional family matters because children are at stake. But children are more damaged when abused and raped by pedophile priests and nuns. While parental betrayal is terrible, that by clergy is worse - because the latter are religious.

The Left would like to hear Pope Leo speak more forcefully against such priests and nuns, than he has in the past - for at least two reasons - because these crimes are sins, and because they are committed by men and women of the cloth. In fact, they would like to hear him prioritize this issue over valorizing the traditional family. Crime deserves punishment - primarily because it is a sin, and only secondarily, because it breaks an existing law. If such laws extend beyond cardinal sins, to cover other issues - then we may conclude that while

all sins are crimes, not all crimes are sins. Moreover, that which is not a sin, cannot be a crime, even if it breaks a law. Thus, when Gandhiji used morally sound means to break immoral laws, his actions were neither sinful, nor criminal - but virtuous.

Sexual assault and rape are crimes, not just because they break laws, but more importantly, because they constitute the deadliest of deadly sins. Moreover, a pedophile-rapist priest or nun is far worse than a lay person accused of the same crimes. For such clergy betray a trust far more precious. Their betrayal breaks a far greater covenant than that between adults and children - namely, that vested in religious men and women, who have taken vows of celibacy. For a man of the cloth to sexually assault, rape, and abuse a child, or rape a nun is infinitely worse and therefore deserving of far stiffer punishment (instead of indulgence or cover-ups) than that accorded to a lay criminal. We can only hope Pope Leo will transcend the temptation of ideological Christianity, to deliver the purest ever version of the Catholic religion - through perfected catholicity - by serving as the truest voice for those who are the most voiceless - namely, survivors of clerical rape and sexual assault.

Like HH, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Pope Leo carries personal moral authority that comes from strength of character - not status, power, or position. The very presence of such moral leaders purifies the collective consciousness, purging it of violence. Their voices are heard well beyond the borders of their religious jurisdiction. Their prayers and meditations alter the winds of history. Hopefully Pope Leo's moral authority will grow through forthright actions taken to identify, weed out, and punish pedophile-rapist priests and nuns, altering canon law if necessary - actions that should warn potential clerical offenders of dire consequences, should they transgress.

Of secular monarchs, Shakespeare said, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Indeed, the crown thrust upon a reluctant Pope Leo is heavy. Yet, despite this weight, his inner calm reveals his state of self-surrender. In his moments of silent prayer, I am sure he opens his heart to the Paraclete, so he can serve as a pure conduit of Christ.

PM's boasting about India being 4th largest economy has many gaps

A nation of 142 crore has largest number of poor people with scant facilities

By D Raja

India is being paraded on global and national platforms as the world's fourth-largest economy. With a nominal GDP of nearly 3.9 trillion dollars, the government claims it has scripted an economic miracle. The Prime Minister thunders from every stage about India's rise under his watch, and media outlets amplify this narrative with breathless headlines. But behind this celebratory façade lies an undeniable reality: this is a growth story scripted by and for the elite, while the majority of Indians continue to suffer from hunger, unemployment, and deepening poverty.

The official GDP numbers obscure more than they reveal. India's per capita income today stands at around 2,800 dollars, or 2.33 lakh rupees per person annually. Compare this with Vietnam's 4,300 Dollars and China's 12,500 Dollars. In rupee terms, that is 3.57 lakh and 10.38 lakh per person respectively. Far from being a global economic leader, India lags behind countries that were once considered its peers or even behind it.

Worse still, this 2.33 lakh Rupees figure is itself an illusion. The top one percent of Indians control over 40 percent of the country's wealth. They are the corporate houses and big business houses owned by people like Adani and Ambani. If we exclude the wealth of this one percent, the remaining GDP available to the rest of India's 1.4 billion people drops drastically.

What remains is about 115 lakh crore, leading to an actual per capita income of just 82,000 per year, or roughly 6,800 per month. If we go further and remove the 62 per cent controlled by the top five percent, the rest of the country is left with 89 lakh crore, resulting in a per capita income of just 67,000 a year—less than 5,600 a month. This is what most Indians survive on. This is not an economy for the people—it is an economy for profit, pomp, and propaganda.

In a country where 80 crore people depend on free ration schemes for their daily survival, celebrating global GDP rankings becomes a grotesque joke. How can the same government that boasts of economic might simultaneously, and shamelessly, also take credit of distributing free rations? If GDP growth is real, who is lining up for free ration? Either the country is shining, or it is starving. It cannot be both. When these contradictions are pointed out, those asking the questions are labelled anti-national. But what is more anti-national: questioning hunger in the face of wealth, or ignoring hunger entirely? Can a malnourished child in Bihar or an unemployed graduate in Madhya Pradesh eat GDP numbers? Can a farmer ruined by high input costs in Maharashtra feed his family with social media frenzy?

Beyond income, India's social and human development indicators reveal a crisis. The country ranks 134th on the Human Development Index, way behind developing economies like Sri Lanka and Vietnam. It ranks 111 out of 125 on the Global Hunger Index. Thirty-five percent of Indian children are stunted. Over 230 million people still live in multidimensional poverty. Female labour participation is among the lowest in the world. India ranks 127 out of 146 in the Global Gender Gap Index. On almost every index that

actually touches the lives of real people—education, nutrition, health, food, housing equality—India performs dismally. Is this the real face of the "world's fourth-largest economy"?

To make matters worse, the very basis on which these rankings are celebrated is questionable. The 3.9 trillion Dollar figure is calculated based on nominal GDP in current US dollar terms, heavily dependent on exchange rates. The Indian rupee is now hovering around 83 to the Dollar—an unprecedented low. What happens when the rupee weakens further? If the value of the Dollar rises to 90, the size of India's economy in dollar terms shrinks. It's that simple. Is this economic strength or statistical sleight of hand? The same Prime Minister who once called the rupee's value a matter of national honour is today silent as it slips year after year. The GDP number used to construct the illusion of ascent is fragile, reversible, and unrepresentative. India's economy has not become richer—its currency has become cheaper.

But this deceit serves a purpose. It masks the government's failures. It gives the BJP a headline. It offers the illusion of victory in the absence of substance. It is no coincidence that the GDP celebration comes at a time when the rural economy is in shambles, joblessness is rampant, and inflation continues to hit the poor hardest.

The truth is, that this is not inclusive growth. It is concentrated accumulation. Aided by policy, protected by propaganda, and polished by media spectacle. The majority of Indians remain on the margins of this story. Farmers die by suicide. Workers walk home barefoot during pandemics. Children drop out of school. Women vanish from the workforce. And yet, a select few watch their wealth double every few years. This is not a developmental model. It is a system of organised neglect and deliberate exclusion.

If India truly wants to be a great nation—not just a large one—it must change course. The goal should not be to impress credit agencies or compete in global rankings, but to ensure that no child sleeps hungry, that every young person has a job, and that no Indian has to choose between medicine and food. True patriotism lies in demanding answers, not in blind applause. True nationalism lies in feeding the hungry, not in feeding them numbers. True growth lies not in GDP charts but in lives lived with dignity. Until then, this economy remains what it truly is: hollow at the core, glittering only at the top, and dangerously disconnected from the millions it claims to represent.

To conclude, PM Modi's much trumpeted Vixit Bharat 2047 should be examined in light of what it means for the poorest sections of our society. India's so-called economic ascent must be seen for what it is—headline for a few and a hardship for the majority. Growth that widens inequality, deepens ecological destruction, and disregards the majority, cannot be celebrated. A nation, where crores depend on food rations while a handful hoard obscene wealth, is not rising, it is rupturing. India urgently needs to abandon this lopsided model and chart a new path—one that is equitable, ecologically sustainable, employment-generating, and rooted in justice, dignity, and democratic planning. The time for real development, not its illusion, is now. (IPA Service)

Medical negligence cannot be tolerated!

Editor,
I write this letter with a heavy heart, as a citizen deeply disturbed by the recent tragic incident at the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Hospital in Jowai, where a young mother, and her unborn child lost their lives—lives that could have been saved. This is not just another case of medical mishap; this is a glaring case of gross negligence and carelessness by those entrusted with the sacred duty to heal and protect.

Sadly, this is not the first time MCH Jowai has come under scrutiny. In just two years of its existence, there have been two reported incidents where surgical cloth was left inside mothers' bodies after childbirth operations. These are not small oversights—these are life-threatening errors that point to a deeply flawed system of medical practice within the hospital.

What is equally alarming is the indifferent and often rude attitude of doctors and nurses in many of our government hospitals. Patients—especially in rural and low-income areas—are made to feel like burdens. Medical professionals, instead of serving with empathy, often act as though they are doing a favour by simply showing up. This culture of arrogance must end.

Moreover, the excuse of being "understaffed" rings

hollow when the same doctors have the time to run private clinics both in the morning and evening, while reporting late to government duty and leaving early. This is a blatant misuse of government time and a betrayal of public trust.

The district administration has now formed a committee to investigate the recent death at MCH Jowai. Shockingly, this committee comprises three doctors from the same department as the one allegedly responsible. How can we expect an impartial inquiry when those investigating are colleagues of the person in question? This is not justice. This is protectionism. The government must reconstitute the committee with independent medical professionals and legal experts, so that the truth can come out and those responsible are held accountable.

We must ask: how many more mothers must die before we take this seriously?

It is high time the Government of Meghalaya takes strict disciplinary and legal action against negligent medical staff—not just to punish, but to set a precedent that such behaviour will not be tolerated in our healthcare system. Doctors and nurses must remember that their profession is not a privilege, it is a responsibility.

Yours etc,
R. Passah
Jowai

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

Why do children bully other kids?

The federal government in Australia has launched a "rapid review" to look at what works to prevent bullying in schools.

Led by mental health experts, the review will underpin a new national standard to respond to bullying. This follows the death of a young Sydney school student last year.

It also comes as the Queensland government rolls out a AUD 33 million anti-bullying plan in the state's schools.

As schools, parents and governments look at what more can be done to prevent bullying, we have to ask why children bully other kids.

If we understand the motives, we can help these children change their behaviour - and achieve their goals or have their needs met in other ways.

What lies behind bullying?

Research tells us children broadly bully for social reasons. For example, a 2022 study showed children can bully to gain social status among peers - to be seen as powerful, tough or cool. Or they can bully to maintain status as part of an in-group. Perhaps another child is seen as a "threat" to that status.

Children can also bully for revenge for perceived insults. Or for entertainment - making a joke at another student's expense.

Research shows motivations can also differ depending on the type of bullying. For example, face-to-face bullying seems to involve more children who bully for social dominance, while those who cyberbully do it more for entertainment and "fun".

In a 2014 study, Marilyn Campbell and colleagues asked different groups about their perceptions of why young people engaged in cyber-bullying. Parents said children did it out of revenge for being bullied themselves, teachers said students did it for fun, and students thought others cyber-bullied because of peer pressure.

This highlights how complex understanding children's motives can be.

They may not bully for long

We should be careful about thinking of all students who bully as long-term "bullies".

Most children who bully try the behaviour and stop when it does not get them what they want, just as many



children who are victimised are not bullied for long.

Though of course, even being bullied for a short time can still be damaging and traumatic for the student on the receiving end.

This could suggest there is a developmental phase in bullying as most bullying occurs between children in Year 6 through to Year 10.

However, there are those students who persistently bully others and these are the students whose behaviour remains a problem despite interventions and prevention approaches.

Who is more likely to bully?

There are certain personality types who are more likely to persistently bully others. These include: 1) students with defensive personalities. This means they think very highly of themselves and actively seek attention but can't take criticism 2) students with narcissistic personalities, who are likely to become aggressive when their egos are threatened 3) students who are emotionally unstable.

But research is mixed on the ques-

tion of self-esteem. Some researchers say children who bully have high self-esteem, yet others have found they have low self-esteem.

There are many reasons why a child might develop the personality traits that would lead them to bully.

Physical abuse in childhood can play a role. There is an association between a child being exposed to domestic violence at home and then bullying their peers.

Parenting can also be a factor. For example, being overvalued but not well disciplined by parents can lead to higher traits of narcissism and a greater likelihood a child will bully.

What can we do?

Children who persistently bully may require targeted and nuanced approaches. Current approaches emphasise restoring positive relationships, rather than punishments or sanctions.

One approach is individual motivational interviewing. Here a school counsellor shows young people they can achieve their goals by other

means. This encourages perpetrators to see there are more benefits in not bullying than in bullying. For example, "I want to be popular. But if I bully, I also make other kids scared of me and not want to hang around me." More broadly, schools can also teach explicit programmes on social and emotional learning.

These programmes focus on emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, enabling students to recognise and manage their emotions, understand the perspectives of others and have positive relationships with peers.

Schools which respect the diversity of students, are also better placed to address bullying.

If all students have opportunities to participate in learning, it will develop their sense of belonging to their school community. This not only decreases rates of bullying but supports students who have been victimised. (*The Conversation*)

The author is Marilyn Campbell and Shannon O'Brien, Queensland University of Technology

Is black mould really toxic? Expert explains

Mould in houses is unsightly and may cause unpleasant odours. More important though, mould has been linked to a range of health effects - especially triggering asthma.

However, is mould exposure linked to a serious lung disease in children, unrelated to asthma? As we'll see, this link may not be real, or if it is, it's so rare to not be a meaningful risk. Yet we still hear mould in damp homes described as "toxic".

Indeed, mouldy homes can harm people's health, but not necessarily how you might think.

What is mould?

Mould is the general term for a variety of fungi. The mould that people have focused on in damp homes is "black mould". This forms unsightly black patches on walls and other parts of damp-affected buildings.

Black mould is not a single fungus. But when people talk about black mould, they generally mean the fungus *Stachybotrys chartarum* or *S. chartarum* for short. It's one of experts' top ten feared fungi.

The focus on this species comes from a report in the 1990s on cases of haemorrhagic lung disease in a number of infants. This is a rare disease where blood leaks into the lungs, and can be fatal.

The report suggested chemicals known as mycotoxins associated with this species of fungus were responsible for the outbreak.

What are mycotoxins?

A variety of fungi produce mycotoxins to defend themselves, among other reasons.

Hundreds of different chemicals are listed as mycotoxins. These include ones in poisonous mushrooms, and ones associated with the soil fungi *Aspergillus flavus* and *A. parasiticus*.

The fungus typically associated with black mould *S. chartarum* can produce several mycotoxins.

These include roridin, which inhibits protein synthesis in humans and animals, and satratoxins, which have numerous toxic effects including bleeding in the lungs.

While the satratoxins, in particular, were mentioned in the report from the 90s in children, there are some problems

when we look at the evidence.

The amount of mycotoxins *S. chartarum* makes can vary considerably. Even if significant amounts of mycotoxin are present, getting them into the body in the required amount to cause damage is another thing.

Inhaling spores in contaminated (mouldy) homes is the most probable way mycotoxins enter the body. For instance, we know mycotoxins can be found in *S. chartarum* spores. We also know direct injection of high concentrations of mycotoxin-bearing spores directly in the noses of mice can cause some lung bleeding.

But just because inhaling spores is the probable route of contamination doesn't mean this is very likely.

That's because *S. chartarum* doesn't release a lot of spores. Its spores are typically embedded in a slimy mass and it rarely produces the spore densities needed to replicate the animal studies.

The original reports suggesting the US infants who were diagnosed with haemorrhagic lung disease were exposed to toxic levels of mycotoxins were also flawed.

But it can cause allergies

Moulds can affect human health in ways unrelated to mycotoxins, typically through allergic reactions. Moulds including black moulds can trigger or worsen asthma attacks in people with mould allergies.

Some rarer but severe reactions can include allergic fungal sinusitis, allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis and rarer still, hypersensitivity pneumonitis. These can typically be controlled by removing the mould (or removing the person from the source of mould).

People with impaired immune systems (such as people taking immunosuppressant medications) may also be prone to mould infections.

In a nutshell

There is sufficient evidence that household mould is associated with respiratory issues attributable to their allergic effects.

However, there is no strong evidence mycotoxins from household mould - and in particular black mould - are associated with substantial health issues. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 8, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Sun on your solar return chart and it is a good combination. You will get good benefits and gains. Your financial position will be good. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will do some work that will bring you criticism, but there is no need to get anxious. Your name and fame will rise. New job offer will keep coming. Your business too will expand and grow. You will make good profits. Your romantic life will be wonderful. Your marriage could get fixed to a person of your liking. You will show interest in welfare and charitable work. You will also find a solution to all the problems because of your self confidence. Be cautious while investing your money. In job you will make progress. Auspicious functions will keep taking place in your home. You could meet an influential person who will help you a lot.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The week begins on a positive note. The planetary configuration indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. Your outlook on life has been a little more serious and responsible. In the past while, you might have reached out to others in an attempt to validate yourself, looking for ways to boost your confidence. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more likely to be successful.

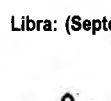
Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This week brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your physical body and mannerisms are a focus. There would be a newfound identity and a realistic understanding of your own limitations and your capabilities as well. In terms of career and projects, outward signs of progress would lay a foundation for future success and progress. Lifeless or outworn relationships may have been especially hard to bear for you. You could take up some form of physical program that completely changes the way you feel about yourself. The things that give you joy and positive feedback figure prominently and you feel renewed and regenerated.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings success in professional and personal relations. You would feel particularly strong and personally powerful. There is no such thing as playing the victim, you're the victor and you feel it. You enjoy an increased ability to concentrate and focus on what really matters to you. It would be wise to make something of your hobbies - even if it doesn't bring an income, you might find that expressing yourself creatively really helps to define yourself and to understand yourself better. Health is likely to be balanced.

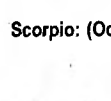
Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and an opportunity to travel. Try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bolder in expressing your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. A strong desire for companionship dominates at this time.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The first phase of this year increases confidence and courage at work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

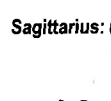
Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Friends and loved ones take priority. You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity



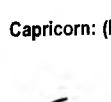
Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration brings success, responsibility and maturity. You have much energy for new money-making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. Relationships take on a fun outlook and activities with children increase. You possess extra charm in your professional interactions. A new affair is in the offing for the unattached. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.



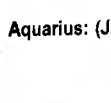
Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is apparent. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, marketing, promotional activities and other such endeavors are favored now. You may face some minor ailments on the health front.



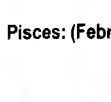
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel drawn to intellectuals with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not along with the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the limelight during this phase.



Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.



Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering at this time. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources. Social life takes priority in your life. You would become serious about family relations and feel responsible towards them. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Taking care of business is your main focus. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.



Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. Striking a balance between your attention to your career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either.

Protect yourself from narcissists' weapon — passive aggression

Imagine asking a coworker to help you on a project, and although they agree, they suddenly "forget" whenever the deadline approaches. Or a friend saying "you look beautiful today, I barely recognised you," after you show them your new haircut.

Perhaps you know all too well the feeling of a parent or partner ignoring you following some perceived slight.

On the surface this behaviour may seem relatively minor. But if it happens often, this could indicate a narcissist is using passive-aggressive behaviour to try and hurt you.

To protect yourself, it helps to know where a narcissist is coming from.

The term "narcissist" can refer to people with high levels of narcissism, not necessarily that they have a clinical diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. There are generally two types: grandiose and vulnerable.

Grandiose narcissists usually view themselves as special and superior to others and are likely to brag about their achievements. Vulnerable narcissists tend to be self-conscious, sensitive to the slightest criticism and have an insatiable need for external appreciation.

Both can be self-centred and prone to aggression, though passive-aggressive behaviour may be more often used by vulnerable narcissists.

One explanation for their behaviour could be their motivation to become dominant and gain status. For example, they may feel like belittling their competition strengthens chances of getting a promotion at work. Another reason is that they can be thin-skinned. Any negative evaluation against them, like being left out of a work social event, may trigger a defensive reaction to attack another person to try and maintain their self-esteem.

They also have a tendency to feel ostracised even when it's not true. Research has shown that when narcissists are provoked, they tend to respond with aggression. Subtly undermining someone is more deniable than overt ways of expressing their anger and resentment.

Here are some examples to help you spot when it's happening: -social exclusion - avoiding eye contact, ignoring messages, excluding you from their social media account or withholding affection to punish you - hostile undertone - making fun of

Grandiose narcissists usually view themselves as special and superior to others and are likely to brag about their achievements. Vulnerable narcissists tend to be self-conscious, sensitive to the slightest criticism and have an insatiable need for external appreciation. Both can be self-centred and prone to aggression, though passive-aggressive behaviour may be more often used by vulnerable narcissists

others through jokes, backhanded compliments or sending messages that suggest you are at fault while minimising their role in a conflict - indirect criticism - sharing embarrassing stories, or trying to undermine you by gossiping to others - sabotage - regularly leaving tasks that are their responsibility to complete to the last minute, and making it your problem.

Such behaviour on its own might not be much bother, but being exposed to it regularly could cause distress. As an example, repeatedly being socially excluded at work has been linked to emotional exhaustion and reduced wellbeing.

Research on victims of narcissistic behaviour is limited, perhaps because passive-aggressive behaviour is often hidden. But the research we do have has shown people on the receiving end of narcissistic abuse experience anxiety, depression, low self-worth and a tendency to prioritise others' needs over their own.

How you can protect yourself

Given that narcissists react aggressively to criticism, it's probably best not to fight fire with fire. The following approaches may help.

Set clear boundaries. Make it clear you will not tolerate such behaviour. You could say something like: "I noticed you are not responding. I am

willing to chat with you when you are ready to talk respectfully." Emotional detachment. Narcissists will probably throw digs or sarcastic comments your way to get a reaction. Once they get a reaction, the cycle escalates. One helpful technique may be "grey rocking", where you keep your interactions and responses as brief and as uninteresting as possible. When a sarcastic comment is made, you could just say "yep" or "noted".

Look after yourself. Prioritise your own needs and your wellbeing. For instance, immerse yourself in hobbies you enjoy or have fun with friends. Try also to make space for reflection so you can avoid internalising their comments. It's about them, not you.

Seek support. Reaching out to people you trust or seeking professional support from a counsellor may help to strengthen your resilience. In the context of work, you may reach out to HR if the passive-aggressive behaviour is persistent, but remember to document everything and be factual. This may help minimise a narcissist's efforts to gaslight you or others.

Power imbalance

Not everyone can easily create distance between themselves and that narcissistic person they know. Some people may be living with a narcissist, work with one, or they could be part of their social circle. Given that narcissists often crave status, there's a good chance there may be a power imbalance between you. This can be tricky as you may feel intimidated if they persistently use passive-aggressive behaviour, if they are senior to you at work for instance.

In this situation, it's even more important to save important email chains, log conversations and seek support from HR if needed. If there's a power imbalance with someone outside work, take extra care to set clear boundaries with them.

Each situation is different, and some things will be beyond your control. What you can do though is focus on what's within your control: your reactions, your wellbeing, and the support systems around you. (*The Conversation*)

By Daniel Waldeck, Coventry University and Rachael Leggett, Coventry University

"The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once."

—Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 297

SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 9, 2025

'Blueprint' for rigging

IN a fresh volley, aspersions are cast on the way the Election Commission is doing its job of organising successive elections and declaring the results. While the Leader of Opposition and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has come upfront to repeat the opposition charge that recent election results saw manipulations of a high order, he also made specific demands to ensure transparency of future elections. Among other things, he asked EC to release consolidated, machine-readable digital voter rolls and CCTV footage from polling booths in Maharashtra. This must be considered. Significantly, he has also demanded release of all post-5pm CCTV footage from Maharashtra polling booths vis-à-vis the 2024 assembly polls. Worse, he alleged that the Maharashtra polls were a "blueprint for rigging democracy" and that "this match-fixing" would happen next in the upcoming Bihar assembly polls.

All these are serious matters — and more so, as they came from the Leader of the Opposition. But, a point to note is that Rahul Gandhi has remained silent for all these months after the Maharashtra polls. The Congress did raise suspicions about the Maharashtra verdict when the BJP-led alliance registered a landslide win despite assessments that the government would be voted out. Veteran leader Sharad Pawar had raised suspicion about a massive rigging of the polls. As Pawar noted, a similar scenario had emerged in Haryana shortly before, when the BJP retained power despite wide predictions of a Congress win there. In fact, similar allegations had been raised in Andhra Pradesh too, where the popular government of YSRC chief minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy had been badly mauled in the general elections and the BJP-plus alliance of his rival Chandrababu Naidu took the reins. A set of techies, who saw Naidu as a hero, was alleged to have "played games" with the electronic voting machine. However, so far, no one could prove any charge against the fairness of the electronic voting system. Rahul Gandhi's present charges span beyond that. He smells a rat in the way the voters list saw a huge bulge, and also alleges manipulations in the polling booths. Had there been such irregularities, a question arises as to why he or his party could not do an investigation and come up with clear evidence so far. As of now, his allegations lacked substance. A shadow war is not advisable.

It is nobody's argument that electronic voting machines cannot be tampered. Manipulation of machines is possible. Yet, Tampering of the system at polling booths level is quite unlikely on a large scale as word would spread sooner or later. That would be a scandal of epic proportions, undermining the very credibility of India's electoral systems. EC swears that the system is tamper-free. Unless proven otherwise, the people are duty-bound to take this at its face value. Fact is also that, state after state, the Congress is doing precious little to take on the governments and to build its organizational strengths.

Stop Planting Trees, Start Protecting the Forest

By HH Mohrmen

This is the first time in my life that I did not plant any tree, nor did I take part in any World Environment Day (WED) celebration. It could be a coincidence, but at the same time, it is what was meant to be. There is a reason for me not planting any tree or not taking part in any WED celebration, and the first reason is that the majority of the plants planted fail to survive. People talk about environmental protection only during the celebration, and the moment they leave the gathering, they indulge in habits that are detrimental to the environment. I realized that there is no point in celebrating the day if our behavior or actions throughout the year are not aligned.

Failed Government Efforts to Protect the Environment

The Government has been engaged in tree plantation programs for decades. It would be interesting to know how many different tree plantation programs have been implemented in the state over the years. A study to determine the total area covered under these programs at various points in time would be valuable.

The state of Meghalaya has spent crores of rupees of public money on regenerating land by planting trees or afforesting barren land. However, the question remains: how much of this effort has truly borne fruit? Various government departments, such as the different branches of Forestry, Social Forestry, Wildlife, Soil Conservation, and, more recently, the Meghalaya Basin Development Agency, have implemented projects to this effect. The Government organizes tree plantations during World Environment Day every year. Trees were also planted by various village employment committees under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Unfortunately, most of these efforts have failed due to several reasons. Everybody, including government officials, agree that the survival rate of planted trees in the state is very negligible.

Ignoring Local ITK
Government interventions in tree plantation projects often fail because of a top-down approach, which excludes local indigenous traditional knowledge. All government projects are planned by officials of implementing agencies, without consulting local communities who have intimate knowledge of the land. Ignoring local communities is a significant reason for the failure of government tree plantation programs. Local people have invaluable knowledge about the land,

soil types, topography, and traditional practices handed down through generations.

Complex Land Tenure System

Another major challenge in implementing any forest regeneration or tree plantation program in the state is the land ownership system. Most land in Meghalaya is privately owned by individuals, clans, or communities. Unlike other states where land belongs to the government, land ownership in Meghalaya leaves the government with limited power to implement projects. This makes community participation crucial for the success of such programs.

The diversity in land ownership across the state adds another layer of complexity. In some areas, the majority of land is community-owned, while in others, clans or individuals own most of the land. For instance, in Garo Hills, much of the land is managed and controlled by the Nokmas. In the Amlarem and War areas, land is primarily owned by clans, with very little community land remaining. On the Jaintia Hills plateau, where community land ownership was once the norm, only a few villages still have community lands, and these are gradually shrinking as the community uses them to provide housing plots for new families or for other purposes.

The failure to understand the diverse landholding systems in the districts is another reason for the failure of various tree plantation programs. Implementing agencies often take the easy route, engaging only with community lands through village headmen, rather than reaching out to clans or individual landowners. Reaching out to the different stakeholders is one thing, and properly engaging with them is another.

Change of Land Use

The conversion of community lands into private lands further complicates matters. Community lands often become private when allotted to individuals for residential purposes. Over time, as households in villages increase, community lands shrink.

Another issue hampering tree plantation programs is the lack of regulation on land use. Private and public lands can easily be converted for purposes such as mining and stone quarrying, as there are no rules to control such activities. Landowners or even community lands are being used for sand mining and stone quarrying, even at the sources of drinking water.

In East Jaintia Hills, for example, community or clan lands with coal deposits have been converted to private ownership. There are cases where even community forests have been sold for mining purposes in this district.

The absence of rules in District Councils to regulate land use and ownership patterns exacerbates the problem. For instance, land designated for rice cultivation or forest use can easily be converted for other purposes, like LHC (Land Holding Certificates). Similarly, lands that serve as catchment areas for different rivers and their sources are converted to LHC. When land is changed to LHC, even catchment areas can then be used for the construction of houses and other purposes. This is how houses started to come up on the banks of the river because there is no regulation.

Local Governing System

The traditional local governing system is also to be blamed for the failure of many government projects. Frequent changes in village leadership also undermine tree plantation projects. Village headmen serve limited terms, and each headman's interests and priorities vary. This lack of continuity often disrupts ongoing projects. There is no free lunch in the world, so goes the saying. Another significant challenge is the pro bono nature of the headman's role, which sometimes leads to personal preferences taking precedence over community responsibilities, further affecting project outcomes.

Animal Grazing and Cow Herders

Grazing is a major challenge for any tree plantation program in the state. It is the main cause of the failure of tree plantation programs. There is no tradition of dairy farming in the area, and milk was never part of the tradition in these hills. Generally, the animals that people rear are cattle, goats, and sheep in some areas, and these are kept for meat and farming purposes. These animals, led by the cow herders, feed on grasses in open spaces and, when left unattended, feed on the saplings that were planted.

Innovative solutions for addressing grazing issues are the immediate need of the hour to ensure that the trees that were planted grow. New approaches, such as partnering with the cow herders to help protect the saplings, are the need of the hour. Partnership with cow herders, including providing them with skills related to conservation

and rewarding them for helping in the protection of the trees, is one such example. The cows need to be fed no matter what, so alternative grazing land is also another idea to ensure that the trees are protected. Good fodder grass can also be introduced in the land allotted for animal grazing.

Forest Fire: The Major Cause of Deforestation

The reason for people starting fires, according to oral narratives, is to ensure that the grasses produce sap quickly, which the herders feed to their animals. There is, however, no scientific evidence to support that claim, but forest fires during the dry season are also started for no reason at all. Although fire lines are made by planters to control forest fires, the success rate is obviously very low. Forest fires during the lean season are the major destroyers of forests. They destroy not only newly planted trees, but even long-standing forests.

The solution to stop forest fires rests with the authorities—both the State Government and the Autonomous District Councils. In the context of Meghalaya, much of the forest is under the purview of the ADCs; hence, the Councils have a very important role in ensuring that forest fires are stopped. The Councils can introduce legislation to ban forest fires and reward local communities that prevent forest fires in their areas.

Bio-fencing

Fencing plantations is expensive, but traditional practices can offer alternatives. For example, broom grass and bamboo, which have traditionally been planted around gardens for protection, can be used to fence plantation areas. Alternatively, even banana plantations can be introduced as bio-fencing. In fact, banana plants endemic to the region can be a good bio-fencing alternative because banana trees themselves hold so much water, which can help in fighting forest fires.

Conclusion

The lack of stakeholder engagement in planning and implementing projects, the absence of political will to enforce existing rules to protect catchment areas, control forest fires, and regulate grazing affects efforts to protect forests in the state are hurdles in afforestation. No tree plantation program in the state will succeed without community participation and political will to enforce existing rules and regulate new ones. The need of the hour for the Government is to protect the existing forests and the planted trees, rather than engaging in ceremonial tree plantation programs.

History & land dispute associated with Dainthlen & Wei-Sawdong falls

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

Wei-Sawdong is in the news every single day in every media channel of the country simply because the body of one of the missing couple from Indore was recovered from the adjoining gorge. This sensational incident is indeed tragic and unacceptable but all manner of speculations are looming large in the minds of people vis a vis this incident. However, this should not undermine the sincerity and determination of the local community who nurture their surroundings to promote tourism. It is perhaps for the first time in the history of the region that such an incident has happened. From all indications the Police Department is doing well despite allegations of their being incompetent by family members of Sonam Raghuvanshi. However, in solidarity with the victim's family, we sincerely hope that this mystery should come to its logical end and justice is delivered to the aggrieved family.

Wei Sawdong the 'three-tier' natural waterfall is located at the bottom of the Dainthlen falls. It's difficult to reach, yet beckons the adventurous to explore it. Wei Sawdong was unknown to the outside world for several years until some years ago, the village folks from Laitduh comprising mostly youngsters constructed a rough ladder like stairs to promote the spot for tourism purposes. And with the blessing of social media, the spot became a popular destination. But who knew that such an initiative would trigger worldwide attention as has happened today. The route to the spot is deep down from the Laitduh-Mawsaw road which is directly opposite to Dainthlen Falls. On the other side of the road on the right side is another gorge known as 'Arliang-riat' where the Mawsynram plateau is clearly visible. Above the other side of the 'Arliang-riat' lies an ancient hamlet 'Rangjyreh' known for the iron-smelting industry that had flourished there.

Ever since the spot was opened to tourists the inflow has been phenomenal and no one anticipated that such a gory incident would happen despite the sincere efforts of the local community to ensure safety and security to the visitors. When the order for closure was imposed in 2023 by the Civil Sub-divisional authority under section 144 CrPC, both the tourist spots Dainthlen and Wei-sawdong became abandoned and unvisited. Even though police patrolling happens every day for a few hours, since it is a contentious spot, the need for a temporary check post should have been contemplated seriously by the district administration. This is perhaps a factor why the perpetrator of the crime used this location to execute their vicious plan.

The reason for the concerned authority to enforce precautionary measures was because of the frequent confrontation between the three villages - Laitduh, Umblai & Mawphu, all of whom claim ownership over these spots. Incidentally the Syiem too who often attempts to exert absolute administrative control on these particular areas is involved in the fracas. The KHADC has in fact directed the Syiem of Sohra to expedite the process of codifying the boundaries of these villages according to the traditional pattern envisaged by the previous 'Syiem' and village chiefs during the early part of the 20th century. But that has not happened due to reasons best known to the current traditional heads. If this exercise had been completed, such a tragic incident would have not happened in this area.

Since my ancestors were from this area I can recall stories and events narrated by them and how each and every spot derived its logical nomenclature such as Dainthlen, Wei-sawdong and others. But what strikes my mind is that in today's world, the written document is the only evidence to establish a fact before the law. Now considering that Khasis are an oral tradition people and only got our script in 1841 our ancestors establish facts and settled agreements before the advent

of the written word through word of mouth. They demarcated their territories not in written form or maps but strictly on the commitment of their verbal agreement taking as boundary, landmarks such as a particular tree, a stream, stone, hill or a bush. But today, politics has taught our rural folks many things to the extent that valuable and meaningful practices of the past are neglected and set aside. This should not happen and as citizens of the enlightened century we should honour and respect the good example and initiative of our fore-parent.

From a historical perspective all these villages currently antagonistic to each other belonged to the erstwhile Khasi state known as 'Khatynriew Shnong' (an agglomeration of several villages) with 'Rangjyreh' as the headquarter and centre of trade. Later it merged with the 'Khatar-Shnong' to form the 'Hima Sohra' at the initiative of the Basan (elder) of Nongksh according to history. Therefore, in such a scenario these boundary disputes and confrontation among these villages and their dorbars are funny. The reason I use the word "funny" is because there is something behind the scenes that has prompted these villages to engage in a dispute. As a matter of fact, for many decades, perhaps a century or less, people of these villages have been living a peaceful and respectful life along with the Syiem as their honorable chief. This is common knowledge and not just my version and all those who hail from the region will agree with me on this aspect. For many decades, the inhabitants of Laitduh village have been the guardians of all the surrounding areas of Dainthlen and Wei-Sawdong. However, things suddenly took an ugly turn the moment the places began to go commercial and tourism became a thriving business in the area.

Before the year 2000 perhaps until the late 1990s, individuals had to walk 15 kms to reach Sohra market due to absence of road connectivity and proper bridges along the Sohra - Laitduh road. During those days, nobody had any interest or even bothered about the welfare of these areas except the local community there. Villagers from Umblai, Mawphu and other adjoining areas would transport their agriculture products through Laitduh village and store their items, especially bay leaves and oranges in large quantities in their friends' or relatives' homes at Laitduh free of cost, before shifting to Sohra on the market day. They supported each other cohesively without prejudice and that was the golden age of the region. Even traditional heads too never interfered or attempted to encroach in their neighbour's affairs, unlike the present where land and boundary disputes are common. So the question arises as to why these disputes?

Sometimes people behave like wild animals when they see new developments and projects coming up in a particular location. They will try their best to stop such projects from taking off and the reason is pure and simple - jealousy. They seem to believe in the dictum that "it is better for all parties to lose rather than for only one to gain." Land disputes always involve individuals and traditional leaders. For the individual and common people, livelihoods and shelters are the primary objectives for acquiring land. But for those at the higher rungs of the hierarchy it is a different kind of objective. To them, the more land they can control and manipulate the larger and better the scope to execute a deal with anyone. Having said this, I do not intend to blame anyone for this but since the issue involves the scheduled areas, the sole responsibility for addressing these problems lies with the KHADC. However, the question remains as to whether our MDCs or the MDC of this particular area has the guts to tackle these thorny issues at the cost of his vote bank.

Letters to the Editor

From Hope to Heartbreak: A Faculty's Reflection on the Shifting Tides at NLU Meghalaya

Editor,
On July 3rd, 2023, I arrived in Meghalaya with my heart full of hope and dreams. The journey to my appointment as Assistant Professor of Law at the National Law University Meghalaya had not been an easy one. It followed three rigorous rounds of scrutiny—research presentations, interviews before panels comprising vice chancellors, emeritus professors, and academic stalwarts from across India. When the appointment letter finally came, I felt the weight of expectation and the promise of a new beginning.

I remember stepping out of the Shillong airport for the first time. The air was crisp, the hills lush and misty. My cab driver greeted me with a warm smile and offered me *khawai*—betel nut wrapped in *paan* leaves with lime, a tradition deeply rooted in Khasi culture. He patiently taught me how to say "bah"—the Khasi word for "brother," akin to 'daij' in Nepali. That small gesture made me feel at home. What followed were months of joy and dedication. The faculty team was more than a group of colleagues—we were a family.

We worked together to build something meaningful. At NLU Meghalaya, we weren't just teaching from classrooms; we were reaching out to the very community we lived among. Through our legal aid clinics, awareness drives on the POCSO Act, domestic violence, and customary law documentation, we tried to bridge the gap between law and society. Our students, many of them locals, led grassroots research on traditional healers, legal pluralism, and the evolving challenges of customary norms.

We had big dreams—to build the School of Constitutional Studies, a Centre for Criminology and Victimology, and an Indigenous Law School that would reflect the richness of Northeast India's legal and cultural tapestry.

But two years down the line, the warmth has slowly given way to a chill. Agitations from the Khasi Students Union (KSU) have cast a shadow over the university. I have found myself at the center of unfounded allegations—targeted not for my teaching or research, but for having earned my Master's and PhD from IIT Kharagpur, and for being a doctoral student of someone the Vice-Chancellor happens to know through familial ties. It is perplexing and painful.

The very community that once welcomed me now seems divided, stirred by politically motivated misinformation. The toxicity has taken a toll.

In just a few months, six colleagues—four Assistant Professors, a Research Fellow, and a Post-Doctoral Fellow—have silently left. Not in protest, but in quiet sorrow.

It breaks my heart. Not just because I am being personally targeted, but because a project we all believed in is unraveling. NLU Meghalaya was envisioned as a people's university—one that listens to the hills, learns from its tribes, and builds with its people. That vision still lives on, in the hearts of those who came here not for power or privilege, but for purpose. I still hope that NLU Meghalaya grows, and grows well. I hope that the genuine intentions of its founding faculty are not forgotten. I hope the students remember that we believed in them, worked with them, and saw their potential as scholars, leaders, and changemakers.

Meghalaya gave me a lot more than a job—it gave me a reason to believe in law as a tool for justice, healing, and community. And that is something I will always carry with me.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Ankita Chakraborty,
Via email

Genuine pet lovers always care for stray dogs

Editor,
In view of the growing number of stray dogs and

the resulting menace in the state, people have barked complaint after complaint. But sadly, that did not quite draw the attention of the concerned departments. The public continues to bear the brunt, mainly due to frequent dog bites and faeces littering public spaces. It seems that public grievances in Meghalaya invariably fall on deaf ears.

However, there's finally a glimmer of hope. In response to the PIL filed by a concerned citizen, Kaustav Paul, the Honourable High Court has issued strict directives to address the stray dog menace across the state. "High Court seeks steps to check stray dog menace" (ST, May 16, 2025). More than anything, the concerned departments must immediately undertake a massive drive for sterilisation and vaccination. It is highly praiseworthy that the court laid extra emphasis on the need for permanent shelters for stray dogs, since the existing temporary arrangements are simply not enough. Of course, a roof today can certainly save a bite tomorrow. The court has also directed the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) and state authorities to expand temporary accommodations while permanent facilities are developed.

Incidentally, what is heartbreaking is that many concerned animal lovers in Meghalaya have also raised concerns about the cruelty of pet owners towards their dogs.

One lady officer from a certain government administrative department lamented that there are several cases in our state where humble pet dogs are cruelly tortured by their owners, often during drunken fits. Some, perhaps, just derive sadistic pleasure from hurting their pets, as pointed out by the lady officer. Reports have also surfaced of unkind pet owners abandoning their helpless dogs or puppies during the rainy season. Isn't it hypocritical that those who claim to be animal lovers still ill-treat their loyal and playful pets?

Less than two months ago in Hyderabad, a pet keeper was captured on CCTV killing five newborn stray puppies that had taken shelter in his basement. He did this by violently smashing them against the floor and wall. The man, identified as Ashish, admitted he was trying to "control" the puppies. This incident sparked a massive public outcry and led to widespread calls for strict legal action.

In another disturbing incident in April, in Thodupuzha, Kerala, a dog was found severely injured with deep cuts near its spine and head. According to news reports, the animal was attacked and abandoned by its own owner. This act of cruelty shook the local community and reignited calls for stronger animal welfare laws.

Another shocker -- a pet

dog belonging to an animal lover was subjected to cruel abuse at a "pet clinic" in Thane, Mumbai. Viral video footage showed clinic staff beating the chow breed dog, leading to public anger and the arrest of the perpetrators. The real concern here is how one could trust a "pet clinic" when the staff, who are supposed to give tender care to animals, turn out to be callous abusers. Well, if trusted hands betray, who will defend the ones who suffer in silence?

Given these unsettling facts, there is a need for sustained efforts on the part of the municipality and the state's veterinary department to raise awareness about cruelty to animals. The authorities should not hesitate to enforce tougher measures to prevent such acts. The department concerned should make it mandatory for all pet owners to register their animals and ensure their vaccination. I believe surprise inspections by veterinary doctors could be highly effective. As human beings, animals too depend on us for kindness, care, and protection. After all, what sets man apart from the beast is not just brute power but compassion and love.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gecwail,
Shillong

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"War is the unfolding of miscalculations."

— Barbara W. Tuchman

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JUNE 10, 2025

Lest We Forget

THE Meghalaya Police has redeemed the image and reputation of the State by zeroing in on the key suspects surrounding the Raja Raghuvanshi murder case. This case of a honeymoon gone completely awry and which many refer to as resembling a scene straight out of a Crime Patrol television series is something Meghalaya could have done without. The gory incident has put a lot of strain on the scarce resources of the state and the fact that the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) had to be requisitioned in addition to the state's own disaster relief team means a lot has been invested to first find the missing couple and when the husband was found murdered, the wife was missing from May 23 up to the wee hours of June 9 and that in distant Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi- Ghazipur main road.

It has taken my strenuous and dangerous hours of searching first for Raja Raghuvanshi and after his dead body was found then the search began for his wife Sonam. Apart from the Meghalaya Police, the NDRF and SDRF what must never be forgotten is the effort and empathy shown by the West Jaintia Hills District Mountaineering Club led by Sambor Surong. This dangerous expedition that only those who rappelled and did all kinds of stunts to reach the deep gorges of the Sohra region at great risk to their lives and limbs. shows the level of commitment of individuals and groups in Meghalaya to look for a missing tourist. It is jarring therefore to listen to the insensitive statements of Sonam Raghuvanshi's father who keep making trite comments and blaming Meghalaya's Chief Minister and the Meghalaya Police. The question to this man is -how is he so sure about the character of his daughter and her silence from May 23 when until Raja Raghuvanshi's body was found on June 2. If Sonam could ask a dhaba wallah for his phone to call her family members, why could she not have done it earlier? And if as she claims she was actually kidnapped then by now the names of the kidnappers should have surfaced. As of now Sonam is the prime suspect since it was she who last saw her husband alive. The love triangle that has surfaced has made things murkier.

But to get back to the West Jaintia Hills District Mountaineering Club, their effort in trying to find Sonam Raghuvanshi amidst the inclement weather complete with deep fog along the canyons only added to their misery as they had no spotlights and no safety nets and only the deep gorge several hundred feet below them for company. After all this, it is heartless of people to paint such a grim picture of Meghalaya as if the police sat on their haunches and did not try hard enough. What's worse is the attempt by family members of the deceased to politicise the issue by claiming that they want a CBI enquiry and that they are writing to the Union Home Minister and Prime Minister. In all of this sordid drama, the spirit of voluntarism of the West Jaintia Hills Mountaineering Club should always remain in public memory.

Tracing 2,000 Years of Environmental Change in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

If one were to type Meghalaya on Google Earth, they will get an aerial view of the entire state. Most parts of the state will appear green except for the central part of Meghalaya, which has a brownish tinge stretching from West Khasi Hills to East Jaintia Hills. To the south is the War region, characterised by deep canyons carved into the plateau by water accompanied by the chemical weathering of limestone, giving rise to the many caves we find today. As for the north, the brown zone ends around Umiam: this is also the starting point of Bhoi. Unlike War, this region has gentle, undulating topography with shallow river valleys used for rice cultivation.

The War and Bhoi regions are particularly interesting, as they contain either the oldest known settlements—such as the Neolithic sites around Lumsohpetbng—or the oldest identifiable Khasi group, the War-Amwi. Settlers appear to have arrived much later in the central brown zone, but today it is the most degraded of all. The brown colouration is an indication of the region having lost most of its tree cover and is now covered by grass. In many places, bare earth is visible year-round, with a sprinkling of grass. One of the best places to observe this is Sohra.

In 1831, the British declared Sohra as the headquarters of the British administration sending its officers and the first British Christian missionaries. As was typical during colonial rule, the British made detailed reports on the regions they sought to administer. These reports included sketches and three of them are very revealing of the landscape into which they had arrived.

One sketch by Henry Yule, dated to around 1841–42, depicts a cottage on top of the plateau with what appears to be goats or sheep grazing nearby. Although the colours have almost faded, the lack of vegetation in the picture is clearly visible. In the background, there is another cottage and an adjoining watershed, likely the Khat-ar Shnong area, which is also denuded of vegetation along its summit. An earlier sketch, dated 1832, of the sanatorium in Sohra by an unknown artist also depicts a grassland landscape. In this picture, there is a British officer riding a horse through

a treeless landscape. Interestingly, there is a group of monoliths on the right-hand side with a few cottages in the background girdled by their stone walls. And finally, there is a sketch of Sohra, which appears in J.D. Hooker's 1854 Himalayan journals. This sketch has a Khasi woman sitting on top of a monolith looking at the hills beyond the plains in the distance. She is at a higher elevation and one can see a War village along the slopes which are thickly forested. In the middle ground lies the tableland and what may have been a British outpost, with the landscape once again appearing treeless. Beyond this, the land descends toward the Sylhet plains, with the hills of Tripura visible in the distance.

Mawsynram, to the west and Mawkyntse, to the east also have similar landscapes. So, the grasslands that we find now in the middle of Meghalaya (the brownish tinge) are ancient and existed before the coming of the British. However, these are not climogenic, i.e., natural grasslands that result from specific climatic conditions, e.g., Savannah, Steppes, etc. They are, instead, anthropogenic, i.e., an effect of human intervention.

The process of degradation of these landscapes began around 2000 years ago when iron smelting was first discovered in Nongkrem. Even now, one can find iron smelting workshops in villages around Myllem. In the past, these were likely widespread across regions where the Khasis had settled, and they used charcoal as fuel to fire the furnaces. This resulted in vast tracts of forest being cut down. Following deforestation, high rainfall (over 1000 cm) intensified soil erosion, washing away large amounts of exposed topsoil. This ultimately resulted in the degraded landscape seen today where the primary vegetation (sub-tropical to tropical evergreen forest) has given way to stress tolerant grasses.

The discovery of iron smelting changed the Khasis' political economy. The shift to an export-oriented economy, emphasizing export of iron ore and tools to the plains, appears to have replaced the previous subsistence economy focused

on local consumption. The Khasis were already trading with communities in the plains, exchanging agricultural produce like honey, oranges, wax, and cinnamon in return for rice, cloth, and salt. However, these commodities did not deplete the very resource base the community depended on for survival. In 1853, Colonel Frederick George Lister, a British military officer and political agent in the Khasi Hills, revealed the export of approximately 746 metric tonnes of finished iron products and pig iron to the Assam and Surma Valley. In 1864, the annual export of pig iron was almost 1700 metric tons. Now imagine this occurring for the last 2000 years, and one can clearly understand how the plateau lost its trees, replaced by grasslands.

With the import of cheap iron ore, the traditional iron smelting industry declined. While local production of iron tools has continued, the export market has collapsed. This, however, did not stop the process of deforestation. Burning of charcoal is still an important activity, while quarrying and coal mining are already having similar impacts on the landscape. What is worrying is that the brown zone could expand and bring in areas that were previously out of it.

The discovery of iron smelting has been beneficial for the Khasi community. It allowed them to forge weapons that were more durable than those of the surrounding groups. These slave raids on the Garo and Naga villages were evidence of that advantage. It also must have been instrumental in the growth and formation of the Himas, two of which Hima Jaintipura and Hima Khyrim (Shillong) became powerful and had diplomatic relations with the Ahoms. But it also led to large-scale landscape degradation, which destroyed the long-term prospects of the community.

In the past, the domains of Khasi polities such as Nongstoin, Shella and Rambrai extended deep into the plains. But the British decided to restrict the Khasis to the Hills and dispossessed them of these lands. The impact of colonisation on the Khasis has been devastating in terms of territorial losses

both to the north (Brahmaputra Valley) and to the south (Sylhet). Without British intervention, the Khasis would likely have continued to control large areas of the plains, greatly facilitating trade and enhancing their prosperity. However, British colonial rule and the present Indian nation-state has largely confined the Khasis to modern-day Meghalaya. Therefore, we must manage our landscape wisely to ensure our people's future. To achieve this, lessons from the past and actions in the present are both important.

While much of the area around Sohra is degraded, many villages still possess forestland of various types. An excellent example is the village of Laitryngew, where coal was first discovered and mined. Although much of the area is highly degraded, the village also possesses one of the largest and most well-managed Law Adong (protected forests) in the area. This is true of many villages that also have specific rules for managing their forests. Then there's the Law Kyntang (sacred forests) that are still found in many locations. This shows the tension that has always existed between exploitation and conservation, driven by changes in the political economy of the region. This tension still exists.

Going through the district council website, one finds a lot of Acts and Rules dealing with general governance, but only a few on the natural environment. Many of these legislations cite customary norms, but they do not discuss how these norms govern environmental management. The question of the state of the natural environment has become even more pressing because of climate change. Sohra and the associated landscapes (including the areas ravaged by coal mining) are a testament of the destruction wrought by changes in the political economy (focus on export rather than creating a circular economy). Unlike in the past, except for the elites or the "Donburoom Class," the common Khasis now have nowhere to go. And unless we take earnest steps, that future will arrive very soon.

(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)

What does the unfortunate Raghuvanshi episode say about Meghalaya tourism

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

For the past ten days Meghalaya tourism has been under a relentless media trial. The fourth pillar of democracy projected the district administration of East Khasi Hills and the state government as being inept, ineffective and if we go by some media stories – 'complicit'. Now, complicit is just a step away from saying that the people of Meghalaya are criminals. This is highly condemnable and now since the unfortunate Raghuvanshi episode is coming to a logical conclusion, these media houses will need to do some soul-searching. But, the bigger picture here is what is at stake for Meghalaya tourism and are there lessons to be learned?

Safety and security

Tourism is a highly sensitive sector. It is easily impacted adversely by unstable and insecure conditions. The covid-19 pandemic is the best reminder of recent years where the other economic activities were opened from September 2020, whereas tourism was allowed only from February 2021. Then, during the second wave the restrictions was re-imposed in April 2021 and tourism resumed only from October, 2021. Tourism is a leisure activity and as such people would travel only under conditions of safety and security. It is high time that all the tourism operators in Meghalaya across all service providers – accommodation, food and beverages, transportation and logistics, guides, CBT management committees, etc., are registered with the state government. This would then also include compulsory registration of the employees being employed by all the tourism service providers. This will help in tracking personnel involved in tourism activities and also act as a database for policy making. Further, it should be compulsory for the tourists to share their itineraries with the district administration/state government once a tour package is confirmed. Even independent travelers (who do not take a tour package) are required to share their travel plans by registering into a portal. Law and order, and safety and security are a state subject; but, it is time for the Meghalaya tourism stakeholders and the tourist to play their parts as well.

Integrated tourism

applications

Today, tourism businesses cannot think of succeeding without leveraging their operations on the platform of technology. Everything across recording of transactions, accounting and finance, human resources monitoring, marketing and advertising, etc. are today done by using cloud-based applications which can be accessed from any location through multiple devices. For example, Zoho Books is pretty popular in India. While applications are available at micro (enterprise/unit) levels, the challenge is to have an application at macro level. This is the task that Meghalaya tourism is faced with currently. The registration of the tourism service providers and their employees, the recording of the tourist itineraries, etc will require a major portal/application which is supposed to run 24/7. Here, the state government can think of involving a corporate like TCS (Tata Consultancy Services) to help out. It would involve paying the big bucks, but it is an investment worth every dime. Further, the tourism application should be integrated. This means, for instance – A does an accommodation at Hotel XYZ and then takes the transportation service from ABC Enterprise and the adventure activities from DEF Enterprise. Now, the application should work in such a way that Hotel XYZ, ABC Enterprise and DEF Enterprise will be intimated that A is their common point of contact. This will help in

providing seamless services and also track the movements and whereabouts of A.

Village tourism

volunteers

A number of villages have volunteers around the trek routes. For instance, in the Nongriat trek and beyond leading up to Rainbow Falls there are youths who function as assistants. However, it is time to formalize the entire activity. It should now be the responsibility of every village that is already practicing tourism to formalize youths as 'village tourism volunteers'. This prerogative of the Village Dorbar should then be under the supervision of the state government. Strict guidelines are to be in place to ensure do's and don'ts are adhered to. For better cooperation from the side of the tourist, it is better if the volunteers are in uniform with a name tag. This will also help in dealing with issues such as littering, plastic usage, etc. It is to be noted that these volunteers are not guides. Only those youths who have had formal training on tourism guiding are to be considered as guides. For villages who are trying to start tourism activities, it should be mandatory for them to first have volunteers and guides in place.

Entry fee

Meghalaya tourism is nature-based but there has been no attention given to carrying capacity. Attractions like Sohra and nearby areas have all exceeded their carrying capacity for years together. Carrying capacity gets no attention from the tourism service providers as it would mean lesser footfalls which in turn results in lesser revenue and profit. It is a common drum between the need to preserve the environment and the demands for a livelihood. One possible strategy is to start an 'environmental preservation and economic assistance fee' charged per day from the tourist. It would be a case of hitting two birds with one stone. Firstly, the fund collected would help in interventions to preserve the environment. This will also help in attracting high-end tourists. Secondly, the service providers who would then be impacted by the decrease in footfalls can be assisted economically from the fund. It is a win-win situation. This can be executed effectively through integrated tourism applications.

Fascination with numbers

has to stop

These days there is a talk of achieving a footfall of 20 lakh tourists per annum in the coming years. Madness! Even with regards to the current footfall of 15 lakh tourists, the tourism services have been found wanting on many occasions. Research studies on service quality of Meghalaya tourism highlight a dismal picture especially when it comes to food and beverages, and accommodation. Meghalaya has to turn on a new leaf and focus on the things that matter. Carrying capacity and capacity building are the need of the hour. The integrated tourism applications and the entry fees can help with issues of carrying capacity and training of the service providers. However, the starting point is the political and stakeholders resolve to stop looking at the numbers game.

In the end, the unfortunate Raghuvanshi episode is about data science and how it can help in quality services, over-tourism management, safety and security of host and tourist, etc. It is time for Meghalaya tourism to embrace digital-based and environment-based interventions. It is a cumbersome task; hence, this effort can be taken as a long-term project of 4-5 years. The outcomes will undoubtedly be positive.

(The writer teaches at NEHU; Email – benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

Letters to the Editor

Well Done Meghalaya Police!

Editor,

The disappearance of the honeymooning couple in Meghalaya was a nightmare for the state. That the condemnation of the incident quickly came from all sections of the state was an affirmation of its evolving maturity. That this incident was unacceptable and treated as a crime, immaterial of who the perpetrators could be or who the victims were, was certainly a great milestone. Unfortunately, some strident threads in the media landscape lost no time in questioning and condemning the law and order of the state and the supposed latent criminal intent of our society. Others vociferously voiced their lack of confidence in our police force or its investigative agencies. The government too was subject to intense political and media pressure and obviously the Meghalaya Police was in the firing line.

Under these trying circumstances it was the calm demeanour of the SP East Khasi Hills Vivek Syiem that certainly stood out. Addressing the media, he succeeded in instilling hope of a breakthrough in the investigations. Probably his public acknowledgement of the support the search operations were receiving from other agencies and the local community ensured that this broad-based team effort achieved success under very

difficult circumstances.

The people of the state stood together in their outrage and the political leadership too played its part well. But it is the Meghalaya Police, their leadership and the actual boots on the ground that proved crucial in removing a blot on the state that it never deserved. Thank you Meghalaya Police for a job well done and a hearty congratulation to all agencies and individuals who made it possible. You have saved the fair name of our state.

Yours etc.,
Prof Sanjeeb Kakoty
Via email

Raja murder case: A tale of tragedy and tenacity

Editor,

In the remote, rugged terrains often stigmatized as crime-prone and volatile, the recent Raja murder case has shaken the conscience of the nation. A deeply tragic incident wrapped in the folds of a twisted love story, the case has cast a dark cloud over a region already burdened with countless allegations of lawlessness and unrest. However, amidst this gloom, a powerful narrative of collective courage and tireless determination has emerged — that of the state government and local people, who defied all odds to uncover the truth.

From the very moment the case came to light, what followed was not a retreat in

the face of danger but a coordinated, relentless search operation through treacherous terrain. Despite the difficult terrain of the region and the very real threats that lurked in the shadows, government authorities alongside local villagers took it upon themselves to ensure justice would not be denied.

This was not just an investigation — it was a testament to human resolve. It would have been far easier, and perhaps safer, to allow the mystery to fade like many others. Yet, the state authorities refused to give up. With drone surveillance, forensic teams, and an active ground search, every possible effort was made. In a region where cynicism could have easily overridden action, people came together, united by a sense of duty and shared humanity.

What makes their endeavour even more commendable is the context: this was not a high-profile case involving political elites or wealthy individuals. This was the story of two ordinary individuals — caught in an extraordinary, tragic web of love, obsession, and betrayal. And still, their story mattered. Raja's life was not reduced to just a statistic; his murder was mourned deeply, investigated thoroughly, and ultimately brought to light through the unwavering effort of the community.

It is time we change the narrative around such regions. This incident, while harrowing, has exposed not just the vulnerabilities of love and youth, but also the immense strength of collec-

tive will. The state government has set a powerful example of how institutions can function even in challenging landscapes. Equally, the people — who risked their lives, combed through forests, and provided crucial leads — have shown us the power of unity and resolve.

Justice may not bring Raja back, but the pursuit of it has brought forth something equally important — a reaffirmation of human spirit in the face of darkness.

Yours etc;
Jack Syiemlieh,
Via email

A twisted plot straight out of Crime Patrol

Editor,

The Raja Raghuvanshi murder case is a plot twist straight out of the screens of crime patrol. Now the wife of Raja Raghuvanshi, Sonam was found and arrested from Ghazipur? This whole case with the missing couple from Indore in Meghalaya is tragic. As citizens of Meghalaya, we are mostly peace-loving and don't bother anyone. When a woman walks down the road, there is not one local man who cat-calls or says anything derogatory. As compared to walking down the roads of mainland India, being ogled at, judged and cat-called. Yes, someone lost their life. That should be the focus. But what happened instead? Mainland India media headlines screaming "unsafe Meghalaya," families going

on national TV calling our place dangerous, and everyone suddenly acting like they know the whole story.

The mainland media wants to be Indian soap series just to score TRPs that they concocted a whole false narrative for views with no hard evidence, calling for CBI inquiry. Our Meghalaya police is capable enough, thank you. Excuse me, but since when did we start blaming an entire state, its people, and its tourism before the investigation is even complete? Is this journalism or a PR smear campaign? You can ask for justice without spreading hate. Also sorry to say, but even the family, grieving or not, should not be throwing wild accusations before knowing the full truth. I had friends from mainland India who were messaging me saying, "Is Meghalaya really unsafe?"

Media houses need to be held accountable for what they write. Journalism must be rooted in cold hard facts instead of fiction. Their words affect real people living in Meghalaya. Our ever-smiling locals mind-ing the Maggi and tea stalls at tourist spots, our ever-helpful guides ready to help the confused tourists to guide them safely and the grassroots level workers who benefit out of the whole local tourism machinery cannot be tainted with one murderous brush. An entire state does not deserve to be branded unsafe just because it fits a juicy headline. The media is supposed to serve citizens, not stir fear and fuel bias. The media words matter and

influences peoples' views.

Yours etc.,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

Sensational murder case

Editor,

The people of Indore have more than maligned the State of Meghalaya, Shillong and Sohra in particular. The Raghuvanshi couple had earlier planned to visit Srinagar. If the incident had happened in J&K which happened here in Sohra, we can imagine the consequences. In my opinion the tourist states like J&K, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Goa and the entire North-eastern states for that matter should, from now on, be very strict with tourists. I salute all those involved in the search for the couple be they the NDRF, SDRF, local police, people, volunteers from Jaintia Hills etc., God was so kind that no untoward incidents happened to them though they have ventured in some of the dangerous gorges in the area.

Well, since the culprits are in the police net. The law will take its course. Lastly, those mindless people who tried to bring a bad name to our beloved state cannot be pardoned.

Yours etc.,
E. Syiemiong,
Via email

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"Beware the fury of a patient man."

— John Dryden

The Shillong Times

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Adversity, advantage

INDIA'S population bulge—reaching a size of 1.46 billion as per UN's latest State of world population report—remains a concern, but the future might not be as hopeless as was feared in the past. For one, the fertility rate has fallen below the replacement level of 2.1 to 1.9 births per woman now. Notably, in the 1970s, an average Indian woman had five children. With the advent of birth control measures and changes in lifestyle, the unbridled growth in population has been checked across the world.

Thomas Robert Malthus, advancing a theory before the start of the 18th Century, envisioned famine and pestilence as natural ways to control population growth. Yet, his stress was that the growth in food supply will not match with the larger growth in population -- and that this could result in poverty and other hardships. In response, China went in for harsh population control steps, while India used persuasion to promote population control. China's overdrive reached a level wherein it recently started encouraging more child births, as controls reduced the population in a big way. The red nation thus feared facing a problem of insufficient manpower to boost its economic growth. India, on the other hand, overtook China as the world's largest-populated country while it also boasts of having the world's largest stock of young population.

The fear of population growth is dissipating worldwide. Most European nations now depend on migrant labour to run its economic activities. Women there are less interested in marriage and child-rearing and concentrate more on employment and individual freedom. In Asia, Japan faces a similar scenario and its labour force is largely drawn from neighbouring nations like South Korea. In the new age of Globalization, migrations have majorly increased. The large numbers of Indians are not only criss-crossing states but also going abroad and taking up jobs even in the guise of education. Most families here limit the number of their offspring to two, as is also evident in the fall in fertility rate. Some 68 per cent of the population in India today is in the working age of 15-64. This demographic advantage, however, is not being properly made use of. Large numbers of them lazy away their time in the absence of opportunities to engage in productive work. Large-scale industrialization was the way forward, but this has not been happening due also to our corrupt systems and bureaucratic red tape. The manufacturing sector is not growing at the desired pace. If the present demographic dividend is not taken advantage of, and if huge savings are not done for the future from the present favourable scene, India will face a problem of feeding a huge, unproductive old-age population. Notably, life expectancy is steadily increasing due to better health care facilities. China, on the other hand, is making full use of its people's energies, ensuring huge economic growth and saving for the future. It's time to turn adversity to advantage here too.

Northeast Defence: NE States must wake up now

By K N Kumar

Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh's interim leader, recently ignited a diplomatic fire during his visit to China. Describing India's Northeast as "landlocked" and positioning Bangladesh as the region's "only guardian of the ocean," he provocatively suggested that Bangladesh could serve as an extension of the Chinese economy, inviting Beijing to "build things, produce things, market things" through Dhaka. These remarks, made at a Beijing roundtable, drew immediate and strong condemnation from India, including Assam's Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who labelled them as "offensive." I had hoped for reactions from other state Chief Ministers to support him, but didn't come across any. Yunus's statements, coupled with Bangladesh's reported plans to revitalise the Lalmonirhat airbase (just a two-hour drive from Siliguri) with Chinese investment, have raised serious alarms about China's deepening influence in India's strategic backyard. China's persistent claims over Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet," its aggressive dam construction on the Brahmaputra River, and its expanding military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) pose direct and formidable threats to the Northeast. The Brahmaputra dams, for instance, have the potential to disrupt agriculture and power generation in downstream regions of Assam and Bangladesh.

In a retaliatory move, India terminated a transshipment facility for Bangladeshi exports to disrupt Bangladesh's trade with Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar. This geopolitical play will continue, but we should, for the present, focus on the Northeast's need to develop defence ancillary industries and reduce reliance on external routes like Bangladesh's Chittagong port. My premise in this article is to urge the state governments to realize the manufacturing opportunities in the defence sector that can have a transformative effect on the NE's economy while doing their bit for national security.

I believe that these geopolitical developments, notably comments from Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus and China's continued assertive posture, are a wake-up call for the northeastern states. Sharing borders with China, Myanmar, Bangla-

desh, and Bhutan, the Northeast is not merely a frontier but a critical region for national security. Embedded in this challenging situation, however, lies a great opportunity for economic growth. China's regional ambitions are aimed at countering India's growing geopolitical leverage, particularly through the Act East Policy, which seeks to transform the Northeast into a vibrant gateway for trade with ASEAN nations. By developing defence ancillaries locally, India can effectively counter some of these threats, ensuring both economic and strategic resilience.

The 2020 Galwan Valley clashes highlighted the repercussions of logistical delays, highlighting the need for defence production within the northeast. By establishing ancillary defence industries in states like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Manipur, India can drastically reduce its reliance on distant defence manufacturing hubs like Bengaluru, Nashik, Hyderabad, etc. A FICCI report (2023) indicates that producing drone components in Guwahati, rather than shipping them from southern India, could yield savings of up to 30% in logistics costs, while ensuring faster mobilization during critical situations. Another CII study (2024) highlights that local production of ancillary defence components could cut logistics expenses by 25-35% compared to shipping from southern or western India. Furthermore, the region's connectivity to Southeast Asia positions it as a promising export hub, with markets in Myanmar and Thailand. India will benefit immensely from achieving its ambitious \$5 billion defence export target by 2025.

I want to look beyond the region's strategic significance and focus on presenting a few economic arguments that, to my mind, are compelling: (1) The defence industry, renowned for its exacting standards of quality and precision, naturally generates skilled, well-paying jobs. A single ancillary unit can employ hundreds, ranging from highly qualified engineers to skilled technicians, while simultaneously spurring growth in crucial supporting sectors like logistics and maintenance. A 2022 NITI Aayog study

estimates that every direct defence job generates an additional 2.5 indirect jobs, which is a significant boon for a region facing considerable unemployment challenges, such as Assam's 8% rate in 2023, according to CMIE. (2) Unlike large-scale defence manufacturing, ancillary units typically require less initial capital, making them more accessible to promising startups and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). (3) To catalyse this growth, the Assam Aerospace & Defence Policy 2023 offers attractive incentives, including up to 50% subsidies on land and machinery, with an ambitious goal of attracting Rs 10,000 crore in investments and creating 50,000 jobs by 2030. (4) IIT, Guwahati is actively collaborating with DRDO, driving innovation through projects such as bamboo-based drone frames and AI-powered surveillance systems. Startups like Bamboo Innovations Pvt. Ltd. in Guwahati, which secured a ₹5 crore DRDO contract in 2024, and a Nagaland-based unit currently testing communication devices for the Indian Army, exemplify the region's entrepreneurial spirit and its potential to contribute directly to national security.

It is not my case that there are no challenges. Infrastructure gaps, such as an inconsistent power supply (only 30% of Northeast districts have reliable industrial power) and limited industrial estates, will hinder rapid growth. Access to capital remains another significant hurdle, with Northeast startups receiving less than 2% of India's total venture funding. Furthermore, specialised skills in aerospace-grade manufacturing are still developing, necessitating targeted training programmes. My simple answer to all these questions: Begin somewhere.

However, significant progress is already evident. Over Rs 1.5 lakh crore has been invested in Northeast infrastructure since 2014, encompassing a vast network of highways, vital rail links, and advanced 5G networks. Targeted training programmes are being conducted in collaboration with DRDO, and various universities are actively equipping the region's youth with essential skills in advanced manufacturing and cybersecurity. I learnt that a Northeast Defence

Innovation Hub in Shillong is proposed, though I am not aware of what it is all about, or its current status.

A Call to Action: At the heart of this transformative journey lies the youth of the Northeast. The defence sector provides an unparalleled canvas for entrepreneurship, where startups can develop innovative products such as eco-friendly packaging derived from tea waste or smart textiles for soldiers. These ventures not only create essential jobs but also ingeniously utilise the region's unique resources—including bamboo, jute, and the skills of local artisans—to produce high-value, specialised products. Making the Northeast a defence manufacturing hub aligns seamlessly with India's broader ambition to become a global defence exporter. Its strategic proximity to Southeast Asia, coupled with deep-rooted cultural ties, positions it as a vital bridge to emerging markets like Thailand and Vietnam. The Act East Policy further reinforces this vision, transforming the Northeast from a historically peripheral region into a dynamic geopolitical hub. By actively countering China's regional influence and simultaneously reducing dependence on external routes, the Northeast can unequivocally strengthen India's standing in the Indo-Pacific.

With sustained government support, the relentless spirit of youthful innovation, and the urgency of current geopolitical shifts, the region is poised to emerge as a formidable defence and ancillary hub. For its vibrant youth, this presents an unprecedented opportunity to build enterprises that truly matter, create jobs that empower communities, and contribute directly and meaningfully to India's national security. The time to act decisively is now. What beats me is why Meghalaya, or for that matter, any hill state of the NE, has yet to come up with any policy to establish defence ancillary industries in their respective states. Why can't we establish a Defence & Aerospace Economic Zone in relatively underpopulated areas of the state/NE, where barren and infertile lands abound? More importantly: Why isn't there a Meghalaya Aerospace & Defence Policy? Why?

The writer is former IAS officer of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Servant Leader or Supreme Ruler?

It was like watching a low-budget remake of a despot's courtroom drama—except this wasn't set in some banana republic or fictional dictatorship. No, this bit of tragic theatre played out in the sterile, overworked corridors of a government hospital in Goa, where the stethoscope is mightier than the sword—except when a minister decides he's the emperor.

Enter Health Minister Vishwajit Rane, stage left, flanked not by a medical board or even a clipboard, but by—wait for it—a television crew. Ah yes, nothing says "urgent medical crisis" like a cameraman in tow. The Goa Medical College Hospital (GMCH) has his chosen arena, and the unsuspecting Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Rudresh Kurtikar, his target. With all the righteous indignation of a man who had just been told his soup was cold at a five-star hotel,

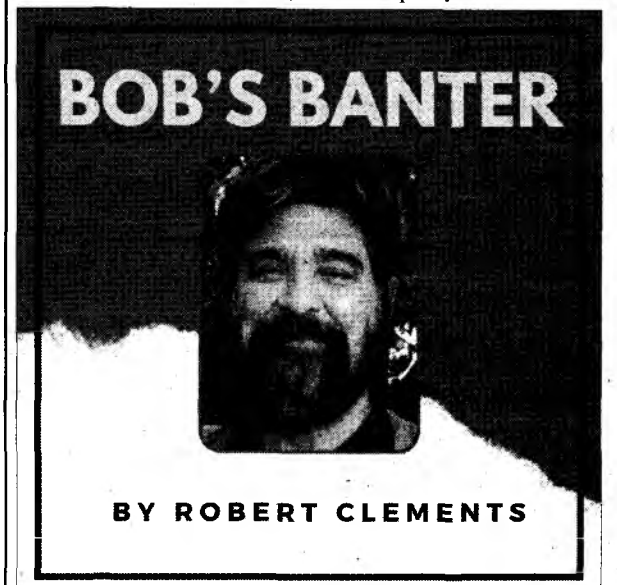
being loud. It's about being just.

You don't fix a system by breaking its spirit. You don't improve a hospital by insulting its chief healer. Would you storm into the cockpit mid-air and slap the pilot because your samosa was cold? Or bang on the police commissioner's desk because your scooter was towed? Then why this tamasha in a hospital?

Because it's easy, isn't it? Doctors can't strike. Patients can't protest. And TV crews love drama. It's the perfect recipe for manufactured outrage.

But here's what's harder: real reform. Fixing infrastructure. Increasing budgets. Improving staff-patient ratios. Creating feedback mechanisms. That takes time, humility, and a working knowledge of healthcare systems—not just of how to locate the camera's best angle.

This episode was not a wake-up call. It was a warn-



the minister stormed into the casualty ward.

"Where is the CMO?" he thundered, as if asking for a treasonous rebel, not a medical professional.

Dr. Kurtikar appeared, possibly mid-duty, possibly sleep-deprived, and tried to explain. Bad move. The minister, in full performance mode, shut him down, told him to get out, and called security—yes, security—to escort him away.

Not even a "thank you for your service" on the way out. And all because a journalist's mother allegedly didn't receive timely care. Not proven negligence, not corruption, not malpractice. Just an allegation. That too, without even a formal inquiry. Judge. Jury. Executioner. All rolled into one health minister with a taste for drama and, quite evidently, a flair for lighting.

Let's pause here, shall we? Because what happened next wasn't just an insult to one man—it was an injury to the very spine of public service. To every doctor working overtime, every nurse burning the midnight oil, every ambulance driver navigating potholed streets in the rain. What message did it send?

Simple: "We don't need process. We don't need proof. We just need power."

Now, let's be clear. Accountability in government hospitals? Crucial. Monitoring patient care? Essential. But humiliating a senior doctor in public, in front of his juniors, while the cameras rolled like it was a soap opera? That's not accountability. That's arrogance in technicolour.

My dear Minister, here's a gentle memo from the people who elected you:

You are not the owner of the hospital.

You're not even the warden. You are a public servant. Elected by the people. Paid by the people. Expected to serve—not show off!

And while we're talking memos, here's one from Leadership 101: You never humiliate a senior officer in front of his team. Because when you do, you don't just break a person—you shatter a chain of command. You erode respect. And you send a chilling message to every junior doctor in that hospital: "If he can fall like that, so can you."

Leadership isn't about

ing siren. That our elected officials, some of them at least, no longer see themselves as stewards—but as sovereigns. That they confuse fear with respect. That they believe the rule of law begins with them and ends when the cameras stop rolling.

This attitude, dear readers, is not unique to Goa. It's a virus spreading through the system. Ministers conducting surprise raids. Bureaucrats berating teachers. MLAs slapping airline staff. It's all the same pathology: the belief that power justifies humiliation. But leadership, true leadership, isn't about bluster. It's about balance. It's about walking into a hospital not to shame, but to support. To listen, not to lash out. To uplift, not to upstage.

What India needs today is not leaders who roar—but those who reflect. Not men who demand submission—but who earn respect. Not television theatrics—but quiet, solid service.

Let's stop pretending that accountability means aggression. That discipline means decimation. That service means servitude. Let's start asking the real questions: What resources does the hospital lack? How can we support our doctors better? What systems failed—and how can we improve them?

Because when we break down professionals on live television, we don't raise standards—we bury them.

So, Mr. Minister, if the government still believes in retaining you, may I suggest a different script for your next hospital visit? Leave the cameras at home. Take off your ego like you would your shoes before entering a temple. Walk in not with the air of a boss, but with the humility of a steward. Greet the staff. Ask questions. Listen carefully. And if something has gone wrong—investigate. In private. With dignity. Then act, if needed, with fairness.

Because this isn't your kingdom.

It's our country. And we, the people, are not extras in your political drama.

We're the audience. We're watching.

And we vote....!

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

Letters to the Editor**Kudos to the Government!**

Editor,

As a citizen of Meghalaya, I would like to sincerely congratulate the present NPP-led Government for the developmental work it has undertaken in various sectors of the state. I would like to mention three important sectors among others. First of all, this government has undertaken on a war-footing the development of road networks all over the state. I must confess that I have not witnessed so much of political will with regards to road development at any time in the past. I must commend the government for the newly constructed roads in the Mawpdang region connecting to the Shillong by-pass highway. As a resident of Mawpdang, I have lived the harrowing experience of a bad road from Mawpdang to Ummir and Mawthum-thum. The road was stony and muddy and we had to cross the Ummir river driving through the waters since there was no bridge. The poor farmers of Ummir village had a lot of difficulty in transporting their agricultural produce in order to get them to the market. Today, thanks to the new high-class road and the beautiful bridge, the whole area has received a facelift. Ummir is such a scenic beauty and with proper in-

vestment from the Tourism Department, it can become a tourist destination. Recently, the narrow and dilapidated road connecting Mawpdang to Diengpasoh and to the bypass, has been widened and today it has become a standard road. Apart from these, the Shillong-Sadew four-lane highway is progressing at a very fast rate. Soon the commuters will be spared the annoying experience of traffic jam. The Shillong-Dawki international corridor construction is also gaining momentum. Besides these, there are so many new road networks that are being developed by this government. Roads are the lifeline of a nation and good road connectivity means a sure path to progress and development.

Secondly, this Government has also given a mighty boost to tourism in the state. The increasing flow of tourists to the state, proves that there is a substantial revamping of the tourism sector. Through the support of the Tourism Ministry, many local tourism entrepreneurs have been able to enhance the infrastructure of their tourist spots and thereby attract more visitors. This means a lot for the growth of the state as it increases the economic status of the people and ensures more employment for the youth. The unfortunate incident

regarding the Indore couple has temporarily put the state in bad light. But thanks to the efficiency of our Police Department and other collaborators, the case has been solved in favour of the people of Meghalaya. Thirdly, I should commend the government for the keen interest it has taken in promoting sports and games as well as music of the state. There are lots of initiatives taken to encourage our talented youth in the areas of sports, games and music. The hosting of the National Games as well as other national games like the ISL etc, is a step in the right direction.

The launching of the state-owned OTT platform Hello Meghalaya in 2024, provides a huge prospect for the talented youth of our state. This has enabled such youth to showcase their unique God-given talents and offered them the possibility of becoming national and international celebrities. In conclusion, I once again congratulate the government led by our Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma and I look forward to more creative initiatives by the Government in order to put our state not merely in the national map but in the global map as well.

Yours etc.,
Barnes Mawrie sdb,
Via email

A criminal can run but cannot hide for long

Editor,

Apropos of the news "Its honeymoon bride Sonam behind groom Raja's murder" (ST June 10, 2025), there's a saying, "You can run, but you cannot hide." No matter how much someone tries to escape or avoid consequences, they will eventually be caught or confronted. Criminals may flee, but authorities will eventually track them down. This is exactly what the Meghalaya Police and the Special Investigation Team (SIT) did in connection with the homicide of a businessman who went missing on May 23rd in Sohra and was later found dead. A combination of forensic evidence, digital tracking and coordinated interstate operations led to a breakthrough on June 9, that also finally led to the arrest of the wife of a businessman and four others who are now on transit remand (temporary custody granted by a court to law enforcement authorities to transfer an accused person from one jurisdiction to another for further legal proceedings). It is not explicitly defined in the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) but is commonly used in practice).

Sonam Raghuvanshi was granted 72-hours transit remand to be transferred from Uttar Pradesh to Meghalaya for further investigation. Hats off to Meghalaya Police and the SIT for nabbing those who thought they could run but they forgot that they cannot not hide. Soon it will be known who the Supari killer was and who hired them.

The alleged murder of Raja Raghuvanshi during his honeymoon in Sohra has sparked discussions about Indian marital culture, particularly in the context of arranged marriages and personal agency. The case has triggered outrage, with Bollywood actress and Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, Kangana Ranaut questioning why Sonam resorted to murder instead of seeking a divorce. The incident has raised concerns about coercion in marriages and the consequences of personal dissatisfaction. The case highlights issues within Indian marital culture, including societal pressures in arranged marriages, lack of personal autonomy, and extreme responses to marital dissatisfaction. It underscores the need for open conversations about agency, divorce, and ethical decision-making.

Yours etc;
V.K.Lyngdoh,
Via email

Meghalaya escapes infamy

Editor,

At last the murder mystery that had gripped Meghalaya and other parts of India as well has come to an end. Sonam Raghuvanshi, the bride, was found to be the conspirator of the tragic death of Raja Raghuvanshi whose body was found in a deep gorge in Sohra. Meghalaya Police had to spend considerable time and resources to track down Sonam until they found her in Uttar Pradesh. Police were also able to nab the other assailants that Sonam had hired to eliminate her husband Raja.

Meghalaya Police deserve congratulations for cracking the case that had shocked the state and the nation as well. Sohra also escaped the disgrace of being called "crime prone." How can a place depending on tourism ever think of destroying its own reputation? It is a great relief for every one of us that we are not tagged as a tourist unfriendly state by people from other parts of the country.

Hats off to Meghalaya Police!

Your etc.,
Deepak Chhetry
Tura

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

"We may brave human laws, but we cannot resist natural ones."

—Jules Verne/John Updike

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SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 2025

MLP Ambushed by Media

CRIME has always interested humans which is why crime thriller books and movies sell. The Raja Raghuvanshi murder case has turned sensational because of constant media attention and a 24x7 reportage for the past two weeks. From being labelled "crime prone hills" to a relative of the deceased mouthing out before the camera that "Meghalaya is inhabited by a murderous mob and the state should be kicked out of India," everything defamatory has been meticulously recorded by television media channels. Thankfully for Meghalaya its pride as a state that had no hand in the murder of Raja Raghuvanshi was redeemed by the Meghalaya Police and its diligent and meticulous investigation by putting together digital footprints and solid evidence that led them to the killers. To have pieced up the entire murder mystery and to bust it in seven days required hard labour which the Special Investigation Team (SIT) should take credit for. Meghalaya Police were blamed for not giving the family members a blow by blow account of their work. But investigation demands a certain amount of confidentiality especially at the early stages when police have to also rely on conjectures until they hit upon hard evidence. This therefore entails a lot of hard, investigative work for which the Meghalaya Police need time and space to compete their job creditably.

But the manner in which the Superintendent of Police, East Khasi Hills under whose jurisdiction Sohra — the place where the crime was committed falls, has been grilled by the so-called national media it would appear as if he is under interrogation. He should have been left to deal with the case rather than to answer searching questions for the media. If the case is still under investigation can the police reveal everything including their modus operandi just to satisfy the hawkish media that wants to be the first to report every twist in the tale. It is exhausting for anyone to deal with such intrusive media. Perhaps it is high time the Meghalaya Police appoint a spokesperson who will deal with such aggressive media persons so that those involved in policing are not hampered in their work by having to constantly answer queries from now until the sensation dies down in a couple of weeks.

It is evident now that the electronic media is no longer pursuing the traditional media agenda of informing, educating and entertaining. Things have become so sensationalised that they are spiking the human adrenaline and as a result people want more and more sensation and drama. Now that the alleged murderers have been brought in for questioning the Meghalaya Police should be given their time and space to carry out their duties with due diligence so that they build up a water-tight case against the killers of Raja Raghuvanshi and deliver due justice to his family members even as the perpetrators of this cruelly executed crime are given their due punishment. A cacophonous media can become a stumbling block to the justice delivery system. Above all, media speculation on this murder case does more harm than good. Meghalaya Police needs a respite from media hounds.

Murder in the Headlines, Compassion on the Ground

By Lyzander Sohkhlet

It is easy to tell a story with villains. It is harder to tell one with the truth.

The name of our state, Meghalaya has been in headlines across the country. But not in the way it deserves to be. Not for our cliffs of cloud, or our bridges of living root, or our extraordinary people, but as a backdrop to a tragedy that has been carelessly labeled a "Meghalaya honeymoon murder." Those words sting. Not just because they oversimplify, but because they imply something sinister about the land and its people. And that, I must say plainly, is not only unfair, it is false. Yes, a terrible crime occurred. A young man, Raja Raghuvanshi, came here on what was meant to be a celebration of love and union. He left behind a body, and now, a grieving family. And we in Meghalaya grieve with them. But this was not "a Meghalaya murder." This was not a tale of local violence. This was a tragedy imported, not born from our soil, nor rooted in our people. The police investigation has been thorough and clear: this was a murder planned in Indore, executed by contract killers allegedly brought here by someone he trusted most. Meghalaya was the stage, not the reason.

And yet, from the moment the story broke, sections of the national media have been quick to cast shadows. "Dangerous hills," "crime-prone destinations," "unsafe terrain" these are not just careless words. They do harm. They distort the truth. They hurt communities who depend on tourism for their daily bread, their children's fees, their mothers' medicines. Words have weight, and some headlines have crushed more than just reputations, they've insulted generations of hospitality.

But Meghalaya has not responded with anger. It has responded with grace.

In Sohra, that ancient town of rain and stone, locals gathered not in defense of their image, but in mourning for a man they never met. A candlelight vigil was held on the cliffs, in a clearing overlooking the mist-soaked valleys that Raja might have seen. Dozens of

villagers stood silently, holding candles in cupped palms, their faces dimly lit by flame and cloud. Khasi men and women, elders and children, tourists and officers, all stood still as a prayer was spoken for his soul. A moment of silence, pierced only by the steady rhythm of the rain and sun. Some wiped away tears. Some whispered hymns. All felt the weight of a young life lost too soon.

There were no cameras staged for effect. No politi-

dusk. Some didn't know his name a week ago. But they came, because it felt right. Because in these hills, we are taught that the guest is sacred, and that grief, even when it is not ours, deserves to be carried. The sky had cleared just enough for the vigil to begin. A soft drizzle hung in the air like breath held in sorrow. A line of candles stretched along flowers. Khasi women in jaikyrshas wrapped shawls tighter as they stepped forward to place wildflowers



cal slogans. But the press did come. Videos of the vigil were aired across the country, and in them, you could see what this place is really made of, empathy, dignity, and unshakable solidarity. They won't tell you that the villagers here felt it deeply, that a guest had died in their land. And they certainly won't tell you that it hurt them to know that the world now saw this not as a moment of shared loss, but as a stain on the name of Meghalaya.

This is why I had to write again.

When the news first broke, that the couple from Indore had gone missing, our hearts clenched in collective worry. Police, villagers, special teams, everyone searched, day and night. We hoped. We prayed. And then, the unthinkable truth emerged, it was not an accident. It was not the terrain. It was a betrayal written in blood.

And still, even then, we did not turn cold. As they held a candlelight vigil for Raja Raghuvanshi. No fanfare. Just people, locals, guides, elders, schoolchildren, holding flickering flames against the

under the banner of a young man most had never met. A few locals read short prayers. One elder simply said, "He came in trust. Let him leave in peace."

It wasn't grand. It wasn't meant to be. It was human.

And yet, even as these small acts of mourning unfolded, headlines elsewhere had already moved on to sensationalism. "Honey-moon Murder in Meghalaya." "Bride Turned Killer in the Hills." Clicks, not context. Labels, not listening.

But let me say it again, clearly: this was not a Meghalaya murder. Meghalaya did not kill this man. Meghalaya tried to save him. And when it could not, Meghalaya mourned him like he was one of our own.

It is easy, too easy, to write places off in the heat of horror. To project a single act of evil onto an entire people. But if you had stood where I stood, you'd understand: these are not crime-prone hills. These are caring hills. Heartbroken hills. Hills that still believe, even in the shadow of betrayal, in the sanctity of the guest. There was no

intended publicity about the vigil. No hashtags. Just love. Just regret. Just a community trying to hold dignity in its hands as the world tried to call it something else.

Our leaders did not remain silent. They came forward, not with defensiveness, but with dignity, refusing to let careless narratives tarnish the soul of our state. They reminded the nation, firmly, publicly, and calmly, that what happened was not born of Meghalaya's spirit, but in spite of it. Their voice became the voice of the hills that evening. Clear. Unshaken. Honest. SP Vivek Syiem and the Meghalaya Police never once backed down from the responsibility thrust upon them. They worked with urgency, with precision, and most of all, with compassion. Day after day, they coordinated efforts across unforgiving terrain, brought in drone surveillance, tracked calls, traced foot-steps, and in the end, pieced together the fragments of a tragedy with professionalism and integrity. The police here did not retreat. They led, in spite of the hateful criticism. Because when a moment like this comes, when a single act of horror threatens to define a people, it takes courage to speak back. Not just emotionally, but officially. Not just from the heart, but from the frontlines. And our representatives did that. It would have been easy for them to offer condolences and step away. But they didn't. They stood between Meghalaya and misrepresentation. And that matters.

To those who read headlines and think they know a place, pause. Ask what else happened, not just to the victim, but around him. Ask how people responded. Ask who stayed behind to search, who prayed in silence, who lit candles in the rain. To those who thought that this would break us, it has united us even more.

Meghalaya still has its arms open. But make no mistake, it also has a heart. And this week, it beat heavy with sorrow for Raja.

Let this not be a story of crime alone. Let it be a story of how even in the midst of horror, kindness flickered quietly in the hills.

Government Nursing Colleges in Meghalaya – Defective at Birth

By RB Dkhar

The two Government Nursing Colleges of Meghalaya, which the government desires to establish with the noble vision of advancing professional healthcare education, appear to have been conceived with a structural flaw — a foundational defect that will undermine the dignity and growth of its teaching cadre. At the heart of this defect lies an ignored discrepancy: the lack of equivalence in position and status between teaching posts in Nursing Colleges and those within the Directorate

is a Professional and not a General study.

Furthermore, this anomaly beginning at the top percolates down to the pay disparity of the proposed positions of Assistant Professors, associate professors, Professors, and Tutors. This is clearly not an institutional oversight but an intentional negligence by those in the Directorate who are involved in framing the service rules for the Nursing Colleges.

This anomaly may have come either because of the presupposition of the officers



of Health Services.

Despite being governed under the same Department of Health and Family Welfare, the two arms — academic and administrative — have not evolved with equal weight. Senior lecturers, associate professors, and principals in nursing education institutions, who will shoulder the immense responsibility of training future nurses, will remain in limbo when compared to their administrative peers in the Directorate.

This disparity is not merely symbolic. It manifests in

in the Directorate that there will clashes in the protocols in the Nursing Cadre or their unwillingness to shed their pride "How can they be equal to us?" or "Who will control them?" and so on and so forth. Whatever the case is, the upcoming Nursing Colleges will be launched without a clear framework.

The consequences will be far-reaching. Young nursing professionals are now discouraged from entering teaching roles, faculty retention is weakening, and the morale within nursing colleges will dip. At a time

"This disparity is not merely symbolic. It manifests in unequal pay scales, grade pay, service benefits, promotion pathways, and institutional recognition. A Principal of a Government Nursing College, for instance, with decades of experience and a master's or doctoral degree, will hold neither parity in pay nor in protocol with an officer of equivalent responsibility in the Directorate."

unequal pay scales, grade pay, service benefits, promotion pathways, and institutional recognition. A Principal of a Government Nursing College, for instance, with decades of experience and a master's or doctoral degree, will hold neither parity in pay nor in protocol with an officer of equivalent responsibility in the Directorate. This misalignment — a birth defect, so to speak — will create a systemic imbalance unless adequately addressed now.

It may be brought to the notice of those who are in the Directorate (Nursing Division) that the Principal of Government General Colleges in Meghalaya is equivalent to the Deputy Director in the Directorate of Higher and Technical Education (DHTE). Another classic example is that the Principal of the upcoming Shillong Government College of Engineering which offers a 4 years Professional Degree Course is equivalent to the Joint Director in DHTE which is Level 19 of the State Pay. Clearly, there are no clashes in the clarity of roles and responsibilities of both the Colleges and the Directorate. Those in the Directorate (Nursing Division) perhaps do not realize that Nursing

when Meghalaya — and India — desperately needs well-trained nurses, the very institutions tasked with preparing them are being structurally sidelined.

"There must be political and bureaucratic will to correct this defect. Nursing educators at this juncture are not asking for more — they are silently acknowledging that they deserve fairness". However, because of the regional training received, these poor nurses have only learned to submit to their bosses and not to question them.

As the nursing colleges in Meghalaya start and continue to grow in number and responsibility, the question remains: How long will they be expected to function with a defect at birth?

The silence and unwillingness to resolve matters now will, over time, become a norm and the future generation will pay a heavy price. Those in power now will retire soon and perhaps that is what they want — "let those who come after us resolve this issue!" Retire they will, but with a long-lasting legacy that they have failed the Nurses by not addressing the issue at the time of conception, and hence a serious defect at birth.

Letters to the Editor

Pahalgam and Sohra

Editor,
The tragedies in Pahalgam and Sohra may seem very different in cause and scale of violence. Yet there are striking parallels. Besides, even one murder is one too many.

The first parallel lies in the incredible pre-capitalist hospitality offered to tourist visitors from outside these states — the greatest proof that the guest is still God in India. I heard the anguish of local hoteliers and tour guides in Pahalgam, with one Muslim man saying he would rather give up his own life than have his guest harmed. Although Muslims, with those executed, Hindus, they mourned the dead as fellow human beings. The same might be said of Meghalaya and its incredible hospitality towards mainland tourists. This kind of love for strangers is fabled and unheard of these days.

The second parallel lies in the response of Mainland Indians to the two states. After the Pahalgam tragedy, a host of anti-Muslim hate incidents (both online and in reality) were reported, despite the fact that one Muslim tour guide in Pahalgam lost his life trying to save Hindu tourists. After Raja Raghuvanshi and his newly wed wife.

Sonam Raghuvanshi disappeared (four days into their trip, which started on May 20, 2025), no effort was spared in Meghalaya to find the lost couple. As the BBC reports, "Police and disaster relief teams, accompanied by local people, searched for the couple. Videos from

the area showed rescuers rappelling down hills and cliffs in valleys covered in mist. Officials said rain and low visibility were hampering the search operations." A week later, Raja Raghuvanshi's murdered body was found in a gruesome state. As in the case of Pahalgam, mainland Indians (family members on both sides) not only showed no gratitude, but blamed Meghalaya police in the state. As BBC reports: "Their families mounted a huge campaign, accusing the Meghalaya police of not doing enough to solve Raja's murder or find Sonam — an accusation contested by the state's chief minister. The couple's families demanded that the case be handed over to the federal police for a proper investigation and met influential caste leaders and federal ministers in their home state to lobby for this. Last Friday, they also wrote a letter addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to deliver justice for Raja and find Sonam." To add insult to injury, Times of India characterized Meghalaya as "crime-prone hills." Sonam and three others have now been arrested, with a fourth man now arrested in Meghalaya. It is commendable that Raja's brother has now apologized to the Meghalaya state police, and expressed gratitude.

But the larger implications of these two tragedies lies in how mainland Hindus lack a sense of inclusivity in their vision of India — as evinced by how they "other" those different from themselves (whether the Pahalgam Muslim or the people of Meghalaya). This betrays every tenet of the highest Ve-

dantic Hinduism, which sees the Divine in every being (not just human beings). India is a marvel of harmony amidst diversity. But how can it hang together if an ugly majoritarianism raises its head? Majoritarianism should be generous in its inclusion of minorities.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

When Hek & Mukul let our state down; when the CM did not bow down to pressure

Editor,
In an attempt to paint the Meghalaya government in a bad light, and what can be termed a display of having no faith in their own police force, Meghalaya cabinet minister A.L. Hek backed the demand for a CBI probe into the Raja Raghuvanshi case days before the Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the East Khasi Hills police unravelled the dark mystery behind the brutal murder of the young newlywed from Indore. Similarly, Leader of the Opposition Mukul M. Sangma went on record saying that "political interference" would undermine "police efficiency." But when the SIT brought the facts on record, both Hek and Mukul were quick to laud the police force.

It was unbefitting of the two senior politicians of our state to jump the gun without knowing the complete facts of the case. Unlike Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, who maintained his composure from the beginning until

the SIT unravelled the case, Hek and Mukul displayed immaturity despite being senior legislators. While Mukul is the senior-most legislator in the current Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, having been elected since 1993, Hek is the second, having won his first election in 1998. Besides, both have been at the helm of the administration for a long time, and it was unbefitting of them to issue immature statements. We applaud the Chief Minister for not bowing to pressure and for maintaining his faith in the state police.

A few days after May 24, when the case was first reported, the two leaders were aware that the image of our state and its people had been tarnished through media reportage and public comments by the general public, especially by the families of the newlywed couple. The least Mukul and Hek could have done was to lend support to the state, as ordinary citizens have been doing since day one. They could have avoided making unnecessary statements that could have demoralised the police force and the public. Unfortunately, in their attempt to score political points, they failed in their duty as legislators. Perhaps they could pick up some maturity tips from the common man who has risen above political differences to stand shoulder to shoulder with the state.

It is during such critical moments that all leaders and citizens should set aside their political differences and support the greater cause. But then, some politicians will remain politicians, indulging in petty political games to serve their vested interests. While

constructive criticism should be welcomed, we also need to call out blatant displays of political immaturity when we encounter them. We hope that the people have been able to read the intentions of such so-called leaders.

To the people of our state, a heartfelt thank you for standing shoulder to shoulder when Meghalaya was slandered through irresponsible reporting by sections of the national media and the immature statements made by many. Unity is our strength; division is our downfall. To the people of Sohra — your resilience in the face of unwarranted and unprecedented slander has truly won our hearts. Equally moving was the candlelight vigil held on June 10 at Saitsohpen in honour of Raja Raghuvanshi, an innocent soul who was mercilessly taken from us. May justice be done, and may his soul rest in peace.

Yours etc.,
Sanbor Wahlang,
Via email

Water tight case

Editor,
Apropos of the news "SIT promises watertight case against Sonam, other accused" (ST June 10, 2025) what exactly is a watertight case? It is a legal case that is so strong and well supported by evidence that it leaves no room for doubt or loopholes. It typically includes clear and compelling evidence like physical proof, witness testimonies and forensic reports that strongly support the prosecution's claims. The case is built on solid legal grounds, making it difficult for the defence to challenge. The prosecution ensures that

there are no inconsistencies that could be exploited by the defence. Given the strength of the case, the accused is likely to be found guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

A watertight case in court has several key implications: (1) If the prosecution presents strong, indisputable evidence — such as confessions, forensic reports and digital communication, it significantly increases the likelihood of a guilty verdict. (2) The accused and their legal team will struggle to find loopholes or inconsistencies to challenge the case. This reduces the chances of acquittal or a lighter sentence. (3) A well-prepared case with clear evidence can lead to quicker court proceedings, minimizing delays caused by weak arguments or insufficient proof. (4) In high-profile cases like the Meghalaya honeymoon murder, a watertight case ensures that justice is seen as being served, reinforcing trust in law enforcement and the judiciary. (5) If the case is handled effectively, it can set a legal precedent for similar crimes, influencing future investigations and judicial decisions.

In the Honeymoon murder case, it is heartening that the Special Investigation Team promises to build a watertight case against the accused and her accomplices by gathering strong evidence, including her confession, digital communication and forensic reports.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"The society based on production is only productive, not creative."

— Albert Camus

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2025

Mid-Air Tragedy in Ahmedabad

IN what is one of the most disastrous air crash in India's aviation history an Air India flight AI171, a Boeing 787 Dreamliner carrying 242 passengers and crew, crashed into a residential area in Meghani Nagar on Thursday just after take-off at 1.38 PM as confirmed by the Director General for Civil Aviation (DGCA). The Air India flight was bound for London's Gatwick airport and was piloted by Captain Sumit Sabharwal and co-piloted by Clive Kunder with 232 passengers, including 230 adults and 2 infants, along with 12 crew members, totalling 242 people. The pilot had given a mayday call to ATC and then crashed outside the airport perimeter shortly after take-off. The plane caught fire after crashing and fire tenders were rushed to the spot to douse the blaze. As of writing this edit, it is not yet clear if the aircraft had any technical fault. Only one passenger seated on 11 A managed to miraculously escape and even limped his way to the ambulance with some injuries on his face. Since the plane crashed into a nearby building which was a hostel for medical students of the BJ Medical College, it is possible that some students there could have suffered injuries. Former Chief Minister of Gujarat who was on the flight was one of those who died in the crash.

Meanwhile the relatives of the deceased have had their DNA tests done so that they can claim the mortal remains of their loved ones. Since the plane went off in flames it was a challenge to pull out any of the passengers from the wreckage. The single survivor was probably seated in the emergency row. Civil Aviation Minister Rammohan Naidu and Home Minister Amit Shah are both in Ahmedabad to offer support and Prime Minister Modi too is following up on the entire rescue operations. According to aviation expert Sanjay Lazar, the failure of the aircraft to achieve height and be lifted up happened at a very low altitude of 825 feet. He said the aircraft was clearly unable to climb up. Other experts state that from an early analysis of flight visuals serious questions have been raised about the aircraft's configuration and technical malfunctions during its final moments. They claim that as the Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner departed its landing gear remained extended and its wing flaps were fully retracted which is an extremely abnormal situation for the critical initial take off.

As a result of the crash the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport (SVPIA), Ahmedabad, is currently not operational and all flight operations are temporarily suspended. It is learnt that two of the stewardesses are from Manipur. What was meant to be a vacation for some and work or study for others on the fatal aircraft has turned into a nightmare for their family members. This is also a call for better security measures and aircraft maintenance. After all human lives are involved and each life is precious. People get into a flight with full faith in the pilots and the airworthiness of the aircraft. While accidents can happen anywhere and at any time, extreme care is needed to reduce fatalities on account of pilot error or aircraft malfunction.

Meghalaya: Where the hills and gorges are desecrated

By Patricia Mukhim

We have been reading stereotyped definitions and adulations of Meghalaya in the last few days – written of course by our own pen-pushers. Some of these claims are hugely exaggerated and culled from ChatGPT. We don't need to over-sell or under-sell Meghalaya. Sure, we need tourism to boost up especially our rural economy but we also need to tie up the loose knots. There is need for realism and a reality check. At present there are nineteen to the dozen homestays that have come up in Sohra but ask any of the homestay owners if they know the difference between a homestay and a guest house and you get a blank look!

What's a Homestay?

The Cambridge dictionary defines a homestay as a holiday where tourists stay in the home of a person they do not know. The homestay owners have extra rooms that they rent out to guests while they share the same living room. People choose homestays because they want an intimate experience of a place; its culture, its sensitivities; what destinations to visit in and around the area; how much it would cost to take a cab to different destinations and also what are the local cuisines that the guests would like to savour.

In my experience I have found Ashok Lyngdoh who runs the Rock Cliff homestay at Dhankheti-Malki to be the most authentic of all in that he entertains his guests and they get to understand so much of our cultural nuances such as how to interact with people in the rural outback where the scenic beauty of Meghalaya is hidden. I had the occasion to meet with a couple from Bengal once at that homestay. The man was an Air India pilot and we had a nice time interacting and learning about one another's professions and the challenges.

Ashok Lyngdoh's home is like a museum with so a range of artefacts; a lush green garden and above all several vintage cars. This is what vacationers actually savour. However, Lyngdoh says he is very choosy about who he lets out his rooms to. I guess that is a personal choice since it's important to have the right kind of guests in a homestay because of the proximity between the homestay owners and the guests. If you have unpleasant, rowdy guests who believe that holidaying also means drinking themselves silly then the

homestay owner is unlikely to have sound sleep. So those running a real homestay also run the risk of having to interface with unpleasant guests. But the reverse is also true. If you have cultured guests who bring with them their own stories and life experiences there is so much to learn.

Sadly, in Shillong and elsewhere, homestays are located at a distance from the owners' homes, hence knowledgeable tourists who choose a homestay with the idea of interacting with the owner/s and learning more about the culture of the place are left disappointed. Such is not the case in Arunachal Pradesh though. Homestay owners treat their guests with the dignity they deserve and spend time with them; cook the local food; offer them the local drinks too in case they are interested. Some of the homestay owners even take their guests to some of the sights and sounds. Tourists return home with unforgettable experiences and a desire to revisit.

Why Homestays are unique

The reason I am dwelling at length on homestays is because the Raghuvanshi couple – Sonam and Raja both checked into Shipara Homestay (shipara means siblings) at Nongriat. If the homestay owners had even engaged in a casual conversation with the couple they would have been able to tell the police a lot about the body language of the duo and their comfort level with one another. But obviously this was a homestay where the owner is semi-educated and does not care to make conversation. Or it could be homestay in name and possibly run by someone else; not the owner which is the case in 90% of homestays.

The other bewildering part is how Sonam knew the geography of the area and how she figured out that the area near Wei Sawdong would be deserted. It would appear that Sonam has either done a reconnaissance of the place before her marriage or one of her accomplices must have done a survey to know exactly where to commit the murder and where to throw the body and thereby throw off the scent. It's true that the couple evidently checked out very early from the homestay. According to sources they checked out at 5 am

and might have reached the top of the stairs by about 8 am. By the time they reached Wei Sawdong it would have been close to about 9 am and hence the place would have been quiet and isolated and hence it was easy to carry out the murder unhindered.

That complete strangers to the place could not just plan but execute an almost perfect murder plan should shake us up and push all the tour operators and tourism stakeholders to seriously consider the loopholes in the system that allow such gruesome murders to be carried out without anyone having an inkling that it was happening. The Government speaks a lot about community-led tourism but is everyone in the community really invested in tourism? How much really accrues to the local people from the tourism revenue generated? Someone should do a research on this. True that in the aftermath of the murder people got together to protest against the slur cast on the Sohra community but are they committed to work together to ensure that tourism is not just about revenue generation but more about a reputation that needs to be nurtured?

Meghalaya: From overselling to overkill

Many paeans have been written about Meghalaya's natural beauty and its undulating hills and misty canyons but without mentioning its flip sides too – the deep gorges that beckon murderers to use them as a dumping ground for dead bodies and to therefore cast what the Khasis call "Ka Tyr-ut (a curse) on all of us who live in these hills.

Meghalaya Tourism App an imperative

This is why the Government generated Tourism app will come in handy once the homestay owners/guests houses/hotels/ Air B&B's all start using the app compulsorily. The app will link the names registered and the phone numbers to the local police station. This would make it easier to track down tourists in case something untoward happens to them.

Conflict over tourism locations a bane

Another point that needs mentioning is that if the Dainthlen and Wei Sawdong Falls were not abandoned due to claims and counter-claims between two or more dorbar shnong the place

would not have been deserted as it is today. It is amusing that earlier when those places were not yielding revenue the dorbar shnong of the respective localities co-existed in relative peace. The moment the places started yielding revenue they became contentious. This is because tourism was promoted before putting in place a mechanism for revenue sharing and that is because there was no revenue model in place that would benefit both the dorbar shnong. It's always a case of putting the cart before the horse and that's why we land ourselves in trouble from time to time.

The Krangshuri waterfalls in West Jaintia Hills is an example of how a dispute between two clans resulted in the place being off limits to tourists as protestors squatted there with placards. In September 2024, the Meghalaya High Court ordered the squatters to move away or face contempt of court. The Court directed the District Tourism Promotion Society to put in place a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for managing the revenue generated until the disputes are settled. This was so unnecessary. It shows us up as a society that is incapable of working together in the larger interests of tourism because of the greed of each party in conflict to profit from the destination single-handedly and not share revenue with anyone.

Need for SOP to manage tourism destinations

To my mind all tourist destinations ought to be managed by the Government with revenue accruing to the communities if they are unable to resolve their disputes. At present even Nongkhnum in West Khasi Hills is under dispute. What next?

Has avarice overtaken Khasi society?

Has the Khasi society reached a point of avariciousness so deep as to lay claim over mother nature? We should be asking ourselves what right we have to sell a God-given nature and to profit from it without adding back anything to the environment. The truth is that none of the destinations are even asking for a waste management system. They don't care about such nitty-gritty. All they are interested in is the money. It is this mercenary nature that will destroy tourism in Meghalaya. No apologies for soothsaying either!

Murder most foul

Editor,

The honeymoon of Raja Raghuvanshi and his wife Sonam on May 22 which turned into a murder trip coupled with an extra-marital affair has sent shockwaves across the entire nation. Sonam and her boyfriend Raj Kushwaha with whom she was madly in love with should be given capital punishment and her entire family should be punished because they knew of her plans. This murder case is a plot twist straight out of the screens of crime patrol.

The murder mystery that had gripped Meghalaya and other parts of India as well has at last ended. Sonam Raghuvanshi, the bride, was found to be the conspirator of the tragic death of Raja Raghuvanshi whose body was found in a deep gorge in Sohra.

Meghalaya Police had to spend considerable time and resources to track down Sonam until they found her in Uttar Pradesh. The police were also able to nab the other assailants that Sonam had hired to eliminate her husband Raja.

Meghalaya Police deserve congratulations for cracking the case that had shocked the state and the nation as well. Sohra also escaped the disgrace of being called "crime prone."

Yours etc.,
Jubel D'Cruz,
Mumbai

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Op Sindoor: Have the objectives been achieved?

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

A month after the military engagement between India and Pakistan asked appears a good time to ask whether the objectives Operation Sindoor aimed to meet have been achieved. The Indian government's equivocation on whether and, indeed, if, the Donald Trump-led US administration helped to broker that cease-fire has left the issue of how, why and what exactly happened to stop the 'near war' situation dangling.

Soon after the ghastly terror attack on tourists in Pahalgam, India's clearly stated objective for launching 'Operation Sindoor' was to attack and destroy terrorist bases and infrastructure inside Pakistan. A total of nine such locations were targeted and considerable damage inflicted on buildings and the personnel in them who, clearly, had the support of the Pakistani state, which has over the past few decades formalised the use of terror as an instrument of its foreign policy, particularly against India.

Unfortunately for India, the narrative which played out after those strikes, especially across the western world, was of a belligerent India attacking civilian targets inside Pakistan. India also lost some of its strike aircraft in Pakistan's counter-attack, as hostilities escalated to a 'near war-like situation' between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

As the theatre of the fireworks in the night skies shifted from news studios into homes, the Indian government, realising the critical nature of the perception of these events, decided to mount detailed official-military briefings, with the sober Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri leading the official briefing and two lady officers, from the Army and the Air Force, Col. Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Cdr. Vyomika Singh, providing details of the military operations undertaken. This injection of realism into the theatre of speculation helped to restore some credibility in the proceedings, despite the bypassing of questions.

However, when US President Donald Trump, on his social media feed, announced that the India – Pakistan military engagement would cease, to allow for dialogue, the Indian government stated that there would be a cessation of hostilities, but would not confirm the role of the United States in bringing an end to the violence. India categorically stated that any dialogue would be between India and Pakistan and, as is its traditional position, no third party mediation would be involved. No dates for any impending dialogue appeared imminent.

So whether India achieved what it set out to do, in terms of eliminating the threat from groups of state – sponsored terrorists in Pakistan, is unclear. What is clear is that the message it sent out, that terrorist attacks on its citizens would be countered militarily, appears to have removed the focus from the terrorist acts and brought back equivalence in the India-Pakistan relationship.

The Indian government's prevarication around circumstances in which it agreed to the cease-fire, and the losses it incurred in the hostilities, has seen questions raised at international forums and a re-hyphenation, globally, of the India-Pakistan equation.

Having largely succeeded, since the 26/11/2008 outrage by Pakistan in Mumbai, to de-hyphenate the bilateral relationship, Operation Sindoor has revived the India – Pakistan equation,

on par, despite the vast economic and developmental differences between the two countries.

Having taken on India militarily, Pakistan found itself back as the cynosure of global attention. Islamabad received its due tranche of IMF aid and elevated its Army chief, Asif Munir, widely seen in India as the perpetrator of the Pahalgam outrage and coordinator of Pakistan's military response, to the rank of Field Marshall only the second in Pakistan's history. Additionally, a key US military commander has lauded Pakistan as a pillar of cooperation in the war against terrorism.

Forced onto the back foot and finding itself rather isolated globally, New Delhi opted to send groups of its parliamentarians to 33 countries to explain that India, and not Pakistan, was the victim of terrorism. However, given the level and nature of the interlocutors they encountered and the fact that Pakistan, in its position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), has found itself in key anti-terrorism committees, assuming the Chair of the 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee and Vice Chair of the 1373 Counter-Terrorism Committee, the optics surrounding India's outreach does not appear to have been successful.

Within India, a special session of parliament was not convened to lay out the details provided to foreign interlocutors for the domestic audience, among whom many voices have even questioned why the government accepted the cease-fire, when it was ahead militarily.

Similarly, it was at a forum abroad that India's chief of defence staff (CDS), Gen. Anil Chauhan, disclosed that India had indeed suffered reverses and lost aircraft on the first day of the operation. He also said the Indian armed forces "remedied" and "rectified" their strategy thereafter and emerged on top after causing substantial damage to Pakistan's military assets.

In sum, while there is no doubt that the Indian armed forces emerged ahead of the military engagement and got a chance to test their battle-readiness in the modern theatre of war, in terms of perception, certainly, Operation Sindoor did not quite achieve what it set out to do.

The global view has seen India moving from being a credible counter to China to returning to a form of equivalence or a re-hyphenation with Pakistan. Responding to terrorist attacks in India with retaliatory military attacks on targets within Pakistan has assumed a predictability that allowed Islamabad to prepare accordingly and put up a substantial fight back. The issue of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir remains unresolved, despite rhetoric.

The absence of any forms of engagement with Pakistan other than military has narrowed India's options substantially. As a sovereign state, Pakistan cannot be seen to nor will it bow to coercive tactics. The current Indian establishment's perennially punitive approach to Pakistan and efforts to humiliate it by making it an object of domestic ridicule has not brought any dividends.

What Operation Sindoor has done is to clearly show up the need for detailed recalibration of its Pakistan strategy if India wants to regain a semblance of the global authority it aims to wield.

Letters to the Editor

Laudable order by EKH District authorities

Editor,
Reference here is made of the news item titled "Illegal discharge into city rivers put to a halt" (ST June 12, 2025). Part of the order reads "to tackle the rising pollution levels in Shillong Rivers, EKH DC, RM Kurbah, issued a public order prohibiting the illegal discharge of waste and sewage into the Umkhrah and Umshyrypi rivers, citing serious threats to public health and environmental safety". As a concerned citizen who has always raised the issue of the ever increasing pollution levels in the above-mentioned rivers, I wish to put on record my heartfelt thanks to Ms Kurbah for this well timed order issued by her office.

The directive is very specific on action to be taken under Sec 223 of the BNSS and relevant provisions of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974 together with the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981. Altogether a formidable set of Pollution Control Acts ready to penalize "all forms of illegal waste discharge and dumping in and around the affected river stretches and includes waste from septic tanks, residential premises, vehicles, commercial establishments and other sources." Of interest is the wording "In and around the affected river stretches," which literally translated means the entire catchment of the two rivers

, including Municipal and non-Municipal Areas and localities. One wants to make it absolutely clear that the DC of EKHs, in the interest of the general wellbeing of the public within the district, is totally competent in passing such an order.

Now we come to the interesting part for which I am sure I shall be trolled and perhaps criticised, but it's time to call a spade a spade, so here goes. The order speaks of penalties for violators of the order. Now how about those who abet such violations; or who turn a blind eye to such violations or who despite being responsible for the governance of specific areas, pretend they are helpless to take action when it comes to implementing the above order? Yes I speak of the numerous Dorbar Shnong and their office bearers, especially the Rangbah Shnong of localities that make up the Greater Shillong area; the entire catchment area of the two rivers. They too are equally responsible, if not more, by allowing violations of such orders to take place within their respective jurisdictions. They too must be penalized. They cannot plead ignorance. They know who directly discharges overflowing toilets into the nearest drain; they know who disposes off garbage into the nearest nalla. Such violators need to be stopped and if they refuse then it is the onus of the Dorbar to report them to the DC.

My point is that to ensure the cleanliness of the Umkhrah and Umshyrypi, all citizens; irrespective of rank or office held, should be equal stakeholders; sharing the same

responsibilities and duties; facing the same penalties and punishments. No discrimination should be made for order violation. Only then will the noble goal of Umkhrah and Umshyrypi cleaning be achieved.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

A laudable elegy to Sohra

Editor

I am writing to express my gratitude to Lyzander Sohkhlet, for his poetic piece, "Murder in the Headlines, Compassion on the Ground" (TST, June 12, 2025). The image he portrayed of Sohra villagers mourning the loss of Raja Raghuvanshi, was heartrendingly beautiful.

"In Sohra, that ancient town of rain and stone, locals gathered not in defense of their image, but in mourning for a man they never met. A candlelight vigil was held on the cliffs, in a clearing overlooking the mist-soaked valleys that Raja might have seen. Dozens of villagers stood silently, holding candles in cupped palms, their faces dimly lit by flame and cloud. Khasi men and women, elders and children, tourists and officers, all stood still as a prayer was spoken for his soul. A moment of silence, pierced only by the steady rhythm of the rain and sun. Some wiped away tears. Some whispered hymns. All felt the weight of a young life lost too soon."

These words reminded me of a family tragedy, from decades ago. The Bengali couple had just arrived in Shillong. Here they lost their

infant son, thanks to the negligence of doctors in the local hospital. The father had to bury the child all by himself, his blinding tears getting in the way. Khasi villagers came forward to comfort and console him and to help him bury the child. Clearly this basic righteousness and altruistic love still prevails in Meghalaya, despite modernity.

In the light of this incredible love for the stranger, it is all the more sad that Meghalaya's image has been unjustly tarnished -- as Lyzander Sohkhlet rightly points out. It is mainland India's loss if they cannot see through the haze of defamation and appreciate the incredible goodness of the people of Meghalaya.

May Raja Raghuvanshi's soul rest in peace.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Call for public apology to Meghalaya from national media houses & others

Editor,

I have learnt from Rajat Sharma, the Editor-in-Chief of India TV that individuals from Indore are planning to visit Shillong to tender an apology to the people of Meghalaya. If true, this would indeed be a welcome gesture— a sign that they are beginning to recognise the truth, however late it may be.

However, I would strongly urge that representatives from media houses like The Times of India, Republic TV, and others who have played a role in defaming the name and dignity of our state must also come forward and apologise in person. A mere clarification or written statement such as The Times of India's claim that they consistently reported the search team's progress is not enough to heal the deep hurt caused to the people of Meghalaya.

I say this not out of malice, I am not a heartless individual, and I do not wish to curse anyone. But I do firmly believe that true accountability demands more than just distant words, it requires physical presence, acknowledgment, and humility before the very people who were wronged.

In my earlier letter to the editor dated June 10, 2025, I stated clearly that those who tried to malign the good name of our beloved state cannot be easily pardoned. Apologising from the comfort of your offices in Delhi, Noida, or elsewhere does not deliver justice.

My heartfelt condolences go out to the family of the late Raja Raghuvanshi. May God give them strength, and may his soul rest in peace.

Lastly, I extend my sincere appreciation to everyone who contributed to uncovering the truth in the Raghuvanshi case. I especially salute the Meghalaya Police for their dedication and commitment in resolving this mysterious case.

Yours etc.,
E. Syiemiong,
Via email

"Reality is the leading cause of stress
among those in touch with it."

— Lily Tomlin

The Shillong Times

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Modi's 11th year in office

NARENDRA Modi, who enters the second year of his third term as Prime Minister this month, has reasons to hold his head high. Neither his government nor his party is facing any hurdles in their forward march. The national economy remains in good shape, while political stability and favourable monsoons are helping in economic growth, taking India to the level of the world's fourth largest economy. Chances of it becoming the third largest are bright, though the first two – the US and China – are far ahead and unassailable in the near future. By 2028, India hopes to have a GDP of \$5.58 trillion, positioning it ahead of Germany. Political stability and economic growth are supplementary and complementary to each other. One helps the other; and if one fails, the other would be hit too. Modi and the BJP are fortunate to have stability on both these fronts. At the same time, India is at the lowest in terms of per capita GDP, at \$2,480, due to its population bulge and other reasons. China facing the same constraint however has its figure at \$12,164 – impressive compared to India's positioning, while the US at the top level boasts of a high per capita GDP of \$82,769. Under Modi's terms, the rich grew richer and the poor remained mostly where they were in the past. The free/subsidized ration system, however, keeps the unfortunate hoi-polloi's tempers under control, which helps in political stability as well.

Modi has been fortunate on the political front too. He won a third term for the BJP but failed to gather a majority of seats in the 2024 parliament polls. This resulted in new allies like the TDP, JDU and JDS propping up the central government and extracting their pounds of flesh. Yet, the BJP won three assembly polls hands down in the last one year – in Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi, reinforcing the PM's clout as well that of the saffron party. The opposition is nursing its wounds from these set-backs. What came as a fresh boost to the image of the PM and the ruling establishment was Operation Sindoor, which helped India demonstrate its hi-tech military might and reinforce the resolve of its soldiers. The political leadership will have many questions to answer when Parliament meets. For now, however, Modi is winning praise from within and outside.

Several sectors saw progress in the past 11 years, mainly in the infrastructure, defence production-acquisition sectors, and in raising the national revenue through GST, a gold mine. That the GST's conceptualisation was during the UPA period under Manmohan Singh is not lost sight of. Reforms in other sectors have mostly suffered under Modi, including in the vital agricultural sector where he brought in bills but cut and ran. Corruption has grown hugely in the bureaucracy, not excluding officials of the central investigating agencies like the CBI and ED. This, even as Modi and his ministers are claiming to be incorruptible.

Tourism Education Gap in Meghalaya: A Ladder with Missing Rungs

By Dapbianglin Sohkhlet

Tourism in Meghalaya is a case of aspirations taking flight but the system clipping the wings of the aspirants. In international summits, policy corridors, and strategic plans, tourism is hailed as the golden goose fuel for economic growth, a fountain for rural development, and a platform for cultural diplomacy. Yet beneath all the declarations and development jargon, there is a quiet disconnect, a silence too loud to ignore. In Meghalaya, where mist-kissed hills and living root bridges draw travelers from around the world, tourism remains something we talk about proudly, but teach about poorly, if at all.

We celebrate tourism's success in speeches, but in schools, it barely exists.

In village classrooms, students still dream of becoming doctors, police officers, and engineers, careers passed down through textbooks and tradition. Ask them about tourism, and most wouldn't know what you mean. Ask their teachers, and they may fumble for a definition. How can we expect a child to chase an unfamiliar star?

Here lies the contradiction: **tourism in Meghalaya is most actively practised in rural areas**, yet it is precisely in these spaces that it is least understood as a discipline. Homestays flourish, local guides are in demand, yet our schools and colleges often carry no syllabus, no module, no mention of tourism as a field of study. If tourism is the second-largest contributor to Meghalaya's economy, why then is it absent from our blackboards?

The answer, I fear, lies in a cocktail of oversight, elitism, and misplaced assumptions.

Too often, tourism is boxed into a professional category something to be learned through a brief, two-month training; not a career to be studied deeply, critically, or creatively. The result? A generation of "trained" individuals with certificates but no confidence. **Where is the professional in that?** What we have built is a system where those who walk the talk, guides, hosts, and local entrepreneurs are not offered real tools for excellence, and those who study the field academically are left stranded without employment, relevance, or recognition.

I recall, personally, how my own village honoured me for completing my Master's degree in Tourism. It was a proud moment. And yet, beneath their applause was something humbling – a shared curiosity, almost confusion: "What exactly do you study in tourism?" they asked with genuine wonder. That moment, more than any examination, was my education. It made clear just how distant our formal institutions are from grassroots realities.

And this is not an isolated case. A teacher once shared the story of a former student, a tourism postgraduate, now working on malaria control in the Health Department. A worthy job, no doubt, but is this the destination for a tourism graduate? Was all that study,

fieldwork, and vision only meant to land elsewhere, because the tourism sector simply couldn't make space?

The education system demands degrees. The employment system demands experience. But no one tells us how to build that bridge in between. Fresh graduates are often told they are "too fresh" for government jobs, lacking experience, exposure, and eligibility. Yet these same systems claim to seek "innovative minds" and "young energy." This contradiction is not just frustrating; it's unjust. **What about those without family businesses to inherit, or wealth to fund start-ups?** What about students who hold knowledge but no network, who possess passion but not privilege? For many, education is not a stepping stone it becomes a stumbling block.

Meanwhile, the informal tourism sector trudges along, full of promise and yet plagued by problems. Local tour operators navigate without guidelines. Home-stay hosts offer hospitality with no training in safety or sustainability. The value chain is broken and fragmented between those who study tourism in theory and those who live it in practice. Where is the connection? Where is the collaboration?

We have scholars without platforms. We have practitioners without guidance. We have dreams without destinations. And we wonder why tourism, for all its beauty and buzz, remains underdeveloped. But it doesn't have to be this way.

We speak proudly of ecotourism, but behind the buzzwords lies a quieter truth: **where is the plan?** Who is measuring how many is too many? Where is the carrying capacity report before the next trail gets trampled? Where is the pricing strategy that values both the local host's effort and the visitor's experience? Who teaches segmentation – how to shape experiences for backpackers, families, cultural seekers and not just treat every traveller the same?

And then there's the illusion I've seen too often: locals selling chips, bottled water, and trinkets at tourist sites, counting the day's small earnings and mistaking it for sustainability. It feels like progress, but it isn't a plan, but a survival masked as success.

True sustainability is not built on daily sales, but long-term systems. Without training, structure, and strategy, rural tourism risks becoming a revolving door of missed opportunities. We need more than tourists. We need teachers. We need tools. We need to stop mistaking the smoke for the fire and start building from the roots, not just the revenue.

Tourism is not just about sightseeing. It's about **human connection, shared stories, dignity in service, and pride in culture.** It is a living, breathing sector that deserves to be nurtured, not only in the market, but in the classroom. Not only in cities, but in the hills

and hamlets that make tourism possible in the first place.

So, what now?

Let us introduce tourism as a subject in school syllabi and college curricula not as an optional add-on, but as a viable, vibrant field of study.

Let us empower rural tourism service providers with real training professionals that are standardised, and accessible.

Let us create jobs where tourism graduates can do what they were taught not push them into unrelated sectors just to survive.

Let us stop equating success only with entrepreneurship. Let us make room for those who want to be employed, mentored, and grow within systems, not just start one.

And most importantly, let us listen.

Let us listen to the student who wonders if their degree means anything.

Let us listen to the villager who welcomes tourists but doesn't know what tourism actually is.

Let us listen to the stories that don't make it into policy, but shape the lives of real people.

Until we do all of the above, tourism will remain a beautifully written script with no actors.

A ladder with missing rungs. A dream deferred at the very grassroots that makes it possible.

Let us build a system that doesn't just look at tourism from the top, but grows it from the ground up. Because tourism is not a fantasy. It is a future and it deserves to be real.

A Grounded Call: Towards a Thoughtful, Trained, and Inclusive Tourism Future Tourism in Meghalaya has become something of a paradox spoken of as a major pillar of economic growth, yet still treated with the informality of an afterthought in education and employment. The time has come for us to move beyond intention and embrace action, to bridge the gap between ambition and awareness.

Let us begin with the most evident truth: those working closest to tourism, our local guides and escorts, are often those furthest from formal recognition. They know the land, its stories, its silences. They carry wisdom not found in textbooks. Yet their knowledge is rarely certified, their contribution seldom acknowledged. We must offer them employment not as a favour, but as rightful inclusion in a growing sector. Let us also extend trust to our research scholars. Their dissertations and data are not idle theory; they are blueprints for progress. Why must their ideas remain bound within the walls of academia? Why not grant them the opportunity to initiate tourism-based projects, particularly in rural areas? Let them lead, let them test their learning against real-world soil.

And let us begin earlier still. Tourism must be introduced in the school curriculum from the secondary level not as an ornamental subject, but as an

essential education in culture, hospitality, and livelihood. Students in rural and urban Meghalaya alike must learn that tourism is not just about serving tea or making beds; it is about storytelling, conservation, management, and pride.

We need community campaigns, yes but not just banners and slogans. We need village dialogues, interactive workshops, and immersive learning. The idea of tourism must move from concept to community, from lecture hall to living room. Our youth, particularly those without economic inheritance or access to networks, must be empowered not judged for their inexperience, but trusted for their fresh eyes and daring minds. Give them platforms before demanding résumés. Let them explore, stumble, and innovate. Every expert, after all, began without experience.

Skill development should not be delayed until after graduation. It must begin in our secondary schools. Let us teach hospitality, communication, local guiding, digital booking systems and even basic financial literacy. These are not luxuries; they are lifelines.

And let our scholars walk the path of service. Let them conduct mobile workshops in rural corners of Meghalaya not to speak above, but to speak with. Knowledge is best when it circulates.

Finally, we must be honest about the current practice of hospitality in most rural areas. In guesthouses and restaurants, jobs often go to family by default whether or not they are prepared. Let us honour the profession by requiring at least foundational training or certification. Whether a worker is a relative or a recruit, hospitality deserves knowledge, not guesswork. Because tourism is not merely about economic gain. It is about dignity, about connection, about telling the story of Meghalaya with grace and authenticity.

We have the youth. We have the wisdom. We have the resources.

What we need now is the will to bridge the classroom and the community.

The courage to trust new voices. And the humility to learn even from those we once overlooked.

Let us not merely speak of tourism as a potential. Let us build it thoughtfully, inclusively, and together.

Tourism in Meghalaya is growing, but the foundation remains fragile. Without real education, inclusive training, and grounded strategies, we're building dreams on uneven ground. It's time to move beyond token initiatives and bring real opportunities to the people who live where tourism breathes. Because until the learners are empowered, the practitioners supported, and the systems aligned, tourism will remain just another untapped promise in the mist.

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Honeymoon in Sohra: From tragedy to truth and redemption

By Zaman Eddie Tongper

Raja Raghuvanshi who had gone honeymooning with his wife Sonam Raghuvanshi (married only on May 11, 2025) to the picturesque Sohra were reported to have mysteriously disappeared after the family members of the couple informed that both have remained incommunicado since May 24, 2025. The rescue teams organised by the district administration comprising Meghalaya police, SDRF, NDRF, and later joined by the West Jaintia Hills District Adventure Sports & Mountaineering Club, and the locals of Sohra took up the arduous exercise and swung into action braving the rain and harsh weather to search for the missing couple in the gorges, precipices, waterfalls, jungles, and every conceivable place of Sohra area.

On June 2, 2025 the dead body of Raja Raghuvanshi was recovered from a gorge at Wei-Sawdong. Sonam, however, remained elusive. News of the recovery of Raja's decomposed body immediately spread like wildfire (thanks to social media). In no time theories and speculations started flying thick and fast. To add to this confusion, some national media houses started tarring Sohra with their own analogy calling it "a crime prone area." Even the family members of the couple joined the chorus and accused the locals of Sohra of kidnapping and human trafficking. The mindless and unsubstantiated accusations hurled at the people of Sohra and the state in general spread like wildfire across the country and even abroad thereby casting serious aspersions on the safety of tourists who visit Sohra and Meghalaya. This issue was further compounded when the police apart from the search operation were unable to shed light on the whereabouts of Sonam. Police were actually quietly piecing together evidence. But the Raghuvanshi family started questioning the ability and competence of the state police to solve the case and demanded handing over of the investigation to the CBI.

The news that broke out in the early hours of June 9, 2025 that Sonam and her accomplices were caught, brought great relief to the people of Sohra and Meghalaya. A thousand salutes to Meghalaya Police for not only cracking the case within 7 days but for salvaging the honour, prestige, and pride of Meghalaya. Heartfelt gratitude also goes to all the members of the rescue teams who did an excellent job in retrieving the dead body of Raja. Just imagine had police not been able to nab Sonam on time, who was already at Ghazipur, she could have slipped off to Nepal which is only about 6 hours' drive, following which her arrest would have been a daunting task. In such a scenario what would happen to tourism in Sohra? I shudder to think of the consequences.

Today we can walk with our heads held high as vindicated people. The populace of Sohra can again afford to smile with their good name being redeemed.

Tourists can take solace from the fact that Sohra is a safe place to visit, just as it has always been. On June 10, 2025 the people of Sohra organised a rally with a banner carrying the photo of late Raja Raghuvanshi as a mark of respect to the departed soul, followed with prayers and a candle light vigil in his honour. Such was the heart-touching exhibition of love and compassion demonstrated by the people of Sohra! This action bears testimony to the good nature and amiable character of the people of Sohra.

Meghalaya Police have proved their critics wrong on all counts. As brickbats were hurled at them and they were accused of incompetence in their investigation, they remained cool and unprovoked but silently worked, burning the midnight oil to piece together the evidence collected before going for the jugular. This is absolute professionalism – 'let the action do the talking.' This is a police force that can deliver when it mattered the most. This is a police force that is second to none in

the country, having competent officers like Vivek Syiem, IPS, the SP of East Khasi Hills and others working under the close watch of a no nonsense IPS officer, Ms Idashisha Nongrang, the DGP of Meghalaya.

There was a strong clamour from various quarters including the affected family members to hand over investigation of the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation. But hats off to the Chief Minister of Meghalaya and his Cabinet who stoically stood by the police force. He was right as Meghalaya Police did not let down the people and Government of Meghalaya. Besides, policing is a state subject. The Government knows better what course of action to take in dealing with the affairs of the state.

This unprecedented incident had temporarily unsettled and saddened the people of the Sohra. They feared that their livelihoods would be hit as tourists would be deterred from visiting Sohra but since the air of uncertainty is cleared with the splendid efforts of Meghalaya police, the inflow of visitors will undoubtedly continue and the tourism related business of the people of Sohra will carry on as usual.

That said there is a paramount need to have a robust security arrangement in place henceforth. The issue of security can no longer be taken lightly. It is better to be proactive than to be wise in hindsight. But here is a catch. The security arrangements cannot be too obvious with policemen in full accoutrements present for duty at tourist sites. Such an exercise may be counterproductive, as tourists may harbour thoughts of lurking dangers. This could discourage inflow of tourists to such places.

What is the way forward then when security arrangements cannot be dispensed with?

(a) Deployment of security personnel should be unobtrusive. This means security personnel are to be in civvies. These personnel will mingle with tourists and keep a watch on any suspicious elements present at the tourist spots with intent to commit mischief.

(b) Security arrangements, must be meaningful by earmarking a dedicated strength specifically sanctioned for tourist security. This way the tourist sites will never be left sans security arrangement.

(c) A posse of security policemen may be stationed at vantage points to respond to any emergency calls immediately. Here lessons can be drawn from happened in the tourist spots at Pahalgam in Kashmir recently.

(d) Paul Lyngdoh, the Tourism Minister has candidly stated in a media interview that putting up CCTV's indiscriminately is intrusive. Secondly, while surveillance can enhance security, we must remain cognizant of individuals' right to privacy; hence wholesale installation of CCTV's could be a cause for concern and must be approached with caution. Lyngdoh also mentioned the induction of "tourist buddies," who will be trained both as guides and security facilitators. This is a good step forward. (e) Taking this concept a step further, it would be highly beneficial to integrate this service into a mobile application platform, similar to ride-hailing apps like Ola, Uber, or Rapido. Tourists visiting any part of Meghalaya could use the app to hire a certified local buddy who can offer cultural insights, guide services and basic security. Such a system would ensure both safety and convenience, all while providing employment to trained local youth and enhancing the tourist experience. The ability to access a guide on-demand, in real-time, from any destination in Meghalaya would be a game-changer for tourism in the region.

It's time to act with all seriousness to meaningfully promote the tourism industry in the right direction as a viable means of livelihood for the people.

(The writer is Asstt. Professor, Tourism and Travel Management, Martin Luther Christian University)

Letters to the Editor

Reflections on 100% Domicile- Based Faculty Recruitment at NLU

Editor,

I write this letter with a sense of solemn responsibility, both as a citizen and as a legal academic who served National Law University Meghalaya (NLU Meg) during its formative years. With my tenure nearing its end, and having also submitted my resignation, I still remain aligned with the ideals with which the university was conceived.

It is in this spirit of care and concern that I share a few thoughts on the recent policy developments regarding domicile-based faculty recruitment at NLU Meghalaya. The advertisement (No. NLU/M/09/Est/Adv/2022/894 dated June 9th 2025) indicates that all faculty positions at the university shall be reserved for the State domiciles. This prompts a series of questions – both legal and pedagogical.

As someone who joined this university at a time when its vision was still being shaped, I have closely witnessed the promise it holds for the national legal educational landscape.

The foundational ethos of the university was pluralistic, where excellence meets diversity, and knowledge is shaped through an open dialogue across intellectual traditions. Keeping that in mind, I personally believe that a complete domicile-based recruitment benefits from deeper deliberations on its long-term implications.

In public employment, the Constitution of India has provided a nuanced framework that gives a harmonious interpretation balancing regional representation and national integration. While affirmative action is deeply embedded in our constitutional morality, the Supreme Court of the country has time and again reiterated that it must operate within permissible limits. In landmark cases like *Rajan Purohit v. Rajasthan Public Service Commission* [(2003) 8 SCC 692] and *Chebulu Leela Prasad Rao v. State of Andhra Pradesh* [(2020) 5 SCC 226] the judiciary has emphasized on the demarcations between prioritization of local representation and sheer infringement upon broader principles of justice, equality, and merit. More importantly, the Meghalaya State Reservation Policy of 1972 has beautifully maintained the balance between the rich socio-cultural fabric of the state, vis-à-vis creating a

space for open merit. Having sustained through decades, a stiff departure from this policy, particularly in educational institutions of National repute, may mandate constitutional scrutiny and broader consultation.

Beyond the legal and policy lens, the heart of the matter lies in the academic life of the university: The presence of faculty from different parts of the country often enhances students' learning experiences and helps cultivate critical, empathetic, and well-rounded professionals. It also serves to place the university on the wider national map, allowing for greater collaboration, recognition, and opportunity.

This is not to suggest that local representation should be sidelined far from it. Meghalaya has a rich intellectual tradition, and many talented scholars from the state are already contributing meaningfully to the institution's growth. The question is not one of "either/or," but of "how best" we achieve a blend that honours the state's aspirations while preserving the university's broader academic and constitutional commitments.

This step also contradicts the larger vision articulated by the Hon'ble Education Minister of Meghalaya, who has expressed a desire for the state to emerge as a leader in educational devel-

opment. However, Meghalaya continues to rank low on national educational indicators—a situation that calls for greater inclusivity, capacity-building, and inter-state academic exchange, not insulation or exclusion. This move, instead of projecting progress, may alienate talent, restrict growth, and undermine the very foundation of academic excellence that institutions like NLU Meghalaya are meant to promote.

Moreover, this decision does not merely affect prospective faculty from outside the state. It is also a disservice to the students of Meghalaya, who will be denied the benefit of learning from a nationally diverse and meritorious academic community. Legal education thrives on a blend of perspectives, exposure to diverse jurisprudential traditions, and a faculty that brings experience from varied social, legal, and institutional settings. Such richness cannot be cultivated in an environment of exclusion.

As someone who has lived and worked in Shillong, who has closely collaborated with local students and colleagues, and who has stood by this institution in its critical formative phase, it is painful to witness internal and external factors influencing a policy that threatens to derail the inclusive vision we all once

shared. This is not merely a policy misstep—it is a message that Meghalaya is turning inward at a time when the nation is moving toward collaborative, inclusive education.

It must also be noted with urgency that if this policy is legally challenged in a court of law, it is very likely that the entire recruitment process will be stayed or struck down, thereby stalling faculty appointments altogether. This would have severe consequences for the functioning of the university. Already, seven out of twelve faculty members have resigned or left in recent months, severely affecting the academic strength of the institution. If new faculty are not appointed promptly and lawfully, the university's ability to conduct classes, maintain academic continuity, and ensure regulatory compliance will be in jeopardy. This is not just an administrative crisis—it is an impending academic vacuum that could compromise the credibility of the institution in the eyes of its students, regulatory bodies, and the wider academic community.

In conclusion, I humbly urge the Government of Meghalaya, the Governing Body of NLU Meghalaya, and all stakeholders to reconsider this decision in light of constitutional law, judicial precedent, and the long-

term interest of both the state and the institution. Let us not compromise the future of this National Law University—one that has the potential to bring prestige and opportunity to Meghalaya by adopting exclusionary measures that cannot withstand constitutional scrutiny and erode the confidence of the academic community at large.

I share these reflections not in criticism but in the hope that policy conversations around such matters will remain open, inclusive, and aligned with the larger vision that inspired the establishment of NLU Meghalaya. There is still time to steer this conversation toward a more balanced approach, one that honours both local priorities and constitutional obligations, institutional excellence, and educational inclusivity.

With sincere hope and continued goodwill for the university's success,

Yours etc.,

Dr. Yogesh Mishra
National Law University
Meghalaya
Via email

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Computer simulations reveal birth of the wheel nearly 6,000 years ago

Imagine you're a copper miner in southeastern Europe in the year 3900 B.C.E. Day after day you haul copper ore through the mine's sweltering tunnels.

You've resigned yourself to the gruelling monotony of mining life. Then one afternoon, you witness a fellow worker doing something remarkable.

With an odd-looking contraption, he casually transports the equivalent of three times his body weight on a single trip. As he returns to the mine to fetch another load, it suddenly dawns on you that your chosen profession is about to get far less taxing and much more lucrative.

What you don't realise

You're witnessing something that will change the course of history - not just for your tiny mining community, but for all of humanity.

Despite the wheel's immeasurable impact, no one is certain as to who invented it, or when and where it was first conceived. The hypothetical scenario described above is based on a 2015 theory that miners in the Carpathian Mountains - in present-day Hungary - first invented the wheel nearly 6,000 years ago as a means to transport copper ore.

The theory is supported by the discovery of more than 150 miniaturised wagons by archaeologists working in the region. These pint-sized, four-wheeled models were made from clay, and their outer surfaces were engraved with a wickerwork pattern reminiscent of the baskets used by mining communities at the time. Carbon dating later revealed that these wagons are the earliest known depictions of wheeled transport to date. This theory also raises a question of particular interest to me, an aerospace engineer who studies the science of engineering design. How did an obscure, scientifically naive mining society discover the wheel, when highly advanced civilisations, such as the ancient Egyptians, did not?

A controversial idea

It has long been assumed that wheels evolved from simple wooden



rollers. But until recently no one could explain how or why this transformation took place. What's more, beginning in the 1960s, some researchers started to express strong doubts about the roller-to-wheel theory.

After all, for rollers to be useful, they require flat, firm terrain and a path free of inclines and sharp curves. Furthermore, once the cart passes them, used rollers need to be continually brought around to the front of the line to keep the cargo moving.

For all these reasons, the ancient world used rollers sparingly. According to the sceptics, rollers were too rare and too impractical to have been the starting point for the evolution of the wheel. But a mine - with its enclosed, human-made passageways - would have provided favourable conditions for rollers. This factor, among others, compelled my team to revisit the roller hypothesis.

A turning point

The transition from rollers to wheels requires two key innovations. The first is a modification of the cart that carries the cargo. The cart's base must be outfitted with semicircular sockets, which hold the rollers in place. This way, as the operator pulls the cart, the rollers are pulled along with it.

This innovation may have been motivated by the confined nature of the mine environment, where having to periodically carry used rollers back around to the front of the cart would have been especially onerous.

The discovery of socketed rollers

represented a turning point in the evolution of the wheel and paved the way for the second and most important innovation. This next step involved a change to the rollers themselves. To understand how and why this change occurred, we turned to physics and computer-aided engineering.

Simulating the wheel's evolution

To begin our investigation, we created a computer programme designed to simulate the evolution from a roller to a wheel. Our hypothesis was that this transformation was driven by a phenomenon called "mechanical advantage".

This same principle allows pliers to amplify a user's grip strength by providing added leverage. Similarly, if we could modify the shape of the roller to generate mechanical advantage, this would amplify the user's pushing force, making it easier to advance the cart.

Our algorithm worked by modelling hundreds of potential roller shapes and evaluating how each one performed, both in terms of mechanical advantage and structural strength.

The latter was used to determine whether a given roller would break under the weight of the cargo. As predicted, the algorithm ultimately converged upon the familiar wheel-and-axle shape, which it determined to be optimal.

During the execution of the algorithm, each new design performed slightly better than its predecessor.

We believe a similar evolutionary process played out with the miners 6,000 years ago.

It is unclear what initially prompted the miners to explore alternative roller shapes. One possibility is that friction at the roller-socket interface caused the surrounding wood to wear away, leading to a slight narrowing of the roller at the point of contact.

Another theory is that the miners began thinning out the rollers so that their carts could pass over small obstructions on the ground.

Either way, thanks to mechanical advantage, this narrowing of the axle region made the carts easier to push. As time passed, better-performing designs were repeatedly favoured over the others, and new rollers were crafted to mimic these top performers.

Consequently, the rollers became more and more narrow, until all that remained was a slender bar capped on both ends by large discs. This rudimentary structure marks the birth of what we now refer to as "the wheel".

According to our theory, there was no precise moment at which the wheel was invented. Rather, just like the evolution of species, the wheel emerged gradually from an accumulation of small improvements. This is just one of the many chapters in the wheel's long and ongoing evolution.

More than 5,000 years after the contributions of the Carpathian miners, a Parisian bicycle mechanic invented radial ball bearings, which once again revolutionised wheeled transportation.

Ironically, ball bearings are conceptually identical to rollers, the wheel's evolutionary precursor. Ball bearings form a ring around the axle, creating a rolling interface between the axle and the wheel hub, thereby circumventing friction. With this innovation, the evolution of the wheel came full circle.

This example also shows how the wheel's evolution, much like its iconic shape, traces a circuitous path - one with no clear beginning, no end, and countless quiet revolutions along the way. (*The Conversation*)

Binge drinking brake in mouse's brains may offer path to treat alcohol abuse

Despite the profound human, social and economic costs of alcohol abuse, existing treatments have failed to provide meaningful relief. Excessive alcohol consumption remains a leading cause of death and disability worldwide.

In the US alone, 16.4 million people age 12 and older reported binge drinking on five or more days in the past month. Although there are several drugs available to those seeking to stop or lower their alcohol consumption, their effectiveness is limited, and they often have significant side effects.

Over the past three decades, efforts to treat excessive drinking have focused primarily on developing drugs that target proteins that can control how neurons respond to stimuli.

Because these proteins are present in almost every neuron throughout the brain, the drugs also affect neurons that aren't directly responsible for regulating alcohol's effects. This often leads to unwanted side effects like headache, fatigue, drowsiness or insomnia.

In my work as a neurobiologist, I study the idea that pinpointing the specific brain circuits that play a role in suppressing alcohol consumption is critical to developing targeted treatments with limited side effects. In my newly published research, my team and I identified a small cluster of neurons responsible for suppressing binge drinking.

A map of binge drinking neurons

Researchers have identified several brain regions that play a key role in alcohol abuse. But there has been strong evidence that only a very small number of neurons within these regions underpinned the effects of the drug on brain function.

Small populations of neurons, called neuronal ensembles, have been shown to play a key role in memory formation and experiencing fear.

However, researchers haven't known whether the neuronal en-

sembles activated during binge drinking also influence binge drinking behaviour.

Considering the billions of neurons contained in the brain, the task of identifying these neurons is akin to finding a needle in a haystack.

To solve this challenge, my colleagues and I used a genetically modified mouse model that, upon exposure to alcohol, activates a gene coding for a red fluorescent protein that is selectively expressed in alcohol-sensitive neurons.

By tracing these fluorescent neurons, we were able to make a map of the precise locations of affected neurons.

We identified a discrete number of neurons that respond to binge drinking in a brain region called the medial orbitofrontal cortex.

This area is known for its key role in controlling decision-making and adapting behavior to a changing environment. We also found that turning this neuronal ensemble off resulted in a sharp increase of alcohol consumption in mice.

This means that the brain has, in essence, a built-in regulation system that is activated during alcohol drinking to act as a brake on its consumption. Should these neurons misfire, the regulatory system would fail, possibly leading to uncontrolled drinking.

Future treatments

Although this study advances our understanding of how and where binge drinking modulates brain function in mice, it remains unclear whether human brains are also equipped with the same neuronal ensemble.

If they are, stimulating these neurons may provide a path toward helping people who experience difficulty controlling their alcohol intake.

Although selective control of neuronal activity is a formidable challenge, progress in gene therapy for patients with cancer and other rare diseases offers hope for more effective alcohol use disorder treatments with fewer side effects. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, June 15, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon Square Venus on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year. You will be made to work hard and will be tested to the fullest. Government related work will be done after putting lot of efforts. Tax disputes with authorities may arise and you may settle to pay a huge amount. You will meet new challenges at your workplace. Enemies will have an upper edge for the time being. Bosses will keep putting pressure. But you will come out of all difficult situations that you will face. Tide will turn gradually in your favour. Your financial will get better. You will get full support from life partner and children. Siblings will also remain on your side. Friends will provide financial support. Your faith in God will help you in overcoming all problems you face. You will make plans to buy a new house in some posh locality and will get success.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives. You are likely to see benefits and improvements in the areas of work and health, as well as daily routines. Your ability to handle the details required to do a good job is significantly enhanced and others increasingly become more aware of your skills. Benefits may come through co-workers or employees during this period. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success. There would be cooperation and understanding in professional and relationships. You might pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You would always be willing to work all the more harder to meet your new responsibilities. Your love life has been erratic for some time, and this trend continues. You could find that you invest in real estate. You would also bring a more playful environment to your home. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) The planetary configuration of this phase brings good results. Any type of service that you may provide is likely to go well. You are more successful in hiring people to work for you and improvements in your working environment are likely. You find more enjoyment in the work you do, and it is easier than usual to find employment now. You may get a new job during this period. Others will derive more enjoyment from the current job. Work tends to be very easily accessible to you. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. Practical matters are a large focus and are very strong. More security in your job is likely. You are more willing than usual to work diligently for money, and your natural talents are likely to be utilized more in the work you do and appreciated by others. You would enjoy some time in your family and there you find affection and love. This is altogether a happy and relaxed time for you. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Communication, creativity and authority in professional matters are highlighted as an exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion is possible. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You are ready to perform and express yourself and take charge and responsibilities on your shoulders. This is a very significant period when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. Romance could make you think along serious or practical lines and look to a more committed relationship.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be marked by hard work. Financial success may not

be remarkable, yet it is generally steady, if slow to come by. Matters of personal courage, confidence and independence are emerging. Issues surrounding income from foreign sources could also figure at this time. You should be careful not to over-analyze your relationships. You feel on top of things with good health and positive energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Turning a hobby or favorite pastime into a career could also figure. Partnership ups and downs continue to persist, as you struggle with matters of freedom and dependency. Children may require more discipline or attention. You may also bring more creativity into the work you do. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Good financial returns are on the cards. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You may visit religious places and strong feelings towards religion are enhanced. You learn to look inside of yourself with a newfound clarity and realism and ideally draw up considerable strength from within. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) The planetary combination opens new horizons in your romantic and love life. You would pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds. You are bound to experience your fair share of fun, and good times. Creative projects are likely to fare well, and could possibly even bring some type of recognition. Love and romance may enter your life or is enhanced with good humor and warmth, and social engagements abound. For singles, meeting a special person is highly likely. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or health programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would be more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Investments in stocks and other speculative matters could earn tidy profits, although care should be exercised with any dealings that tie you to other people and others' money. Your creativity and social life are stimulated, and plenty of opportunities to express yourself uniquely and creatively will present themselves. Relationships with your children may be especially fulfilling now. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be strong.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This is a fabulous period in which to take the vacation you have always wanted to take. Those with artistic or athletic talent can be especially prolific and prosperous at this time. You may find great joy and reward in your creative projects and hobbies, and could discover a new hobby or creative talent you never knew you had. Healthy risks are likely to pay off, but be careful of overconfidence in speculative investments. Pleasure-seeking activities, recreation, and amusement are increased. Health is likely to prosper.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You may visit and spend a lot of time in the company of your friends and loved ones. This is also a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. These positive circumstances will not necessarily fall into your lap, and are unlikely to come all at once. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life.

Iconic emperor penguins in more peril as Antarctic sea ice shrinks

When winter comes to Antarctica, seals and Adie penguins leave the freezing shores and head for the edge of the forming sea ice. But emperor penguins stay put.

The existence of emperor penguins seems all but impossible. Their lives revolve around seasons, timing and access to "fast ice" - sea ice connected to the Antarctic coast. Here, the sea ice persists long enough into summer for the penguins to rear their chicks successfully.

But climate change is upending the penguins' carefully tuned biological cycles. The crucial sea ice they depend on is melting too early, plunging the chicks from some colonies into the sea before they are fully fledged.

In the latest bad news for these penguins, research by the British Antarctic Survey examined satellite images from 2009 to 2024 to assess fast-ice conditions at 16 emperor penguin colonies south of South America. They noted an average 22% fall in numbers across these colonies. That translates to a decrease of 1.6% every year.

This rate of loss is staggering. As the paper's lead author Peter Fretwell told the ABC, the rate is about 50% worse than even the most pessimistic estimates.

Breeding while it's freezing

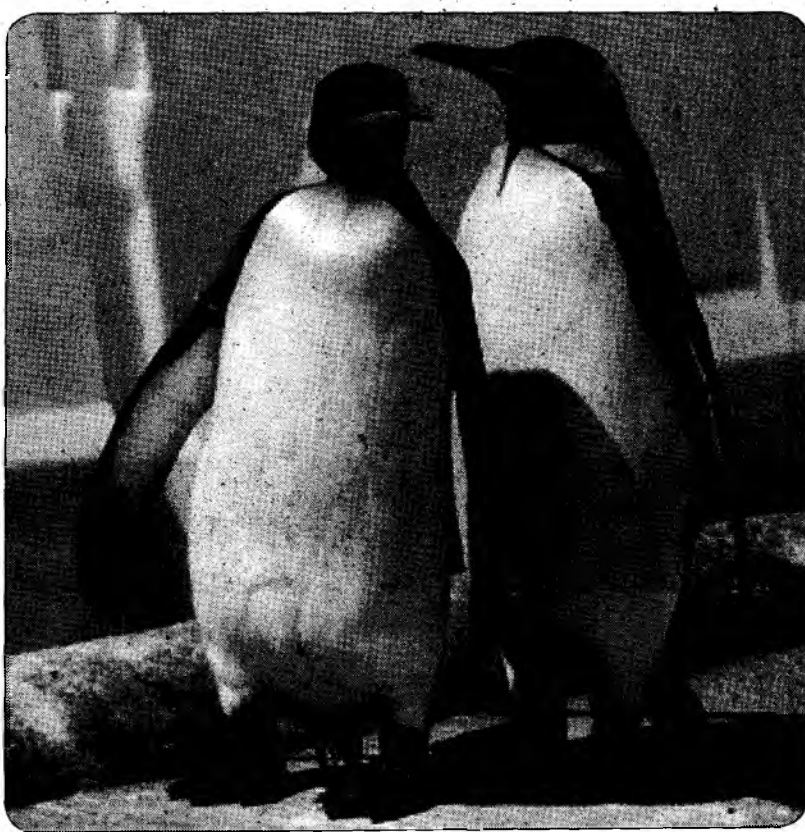
Just like polar bears in the Arctic, emperor penguins are the iconic species threatened by climate change in Antarctica.

Emperor penguins are a highly successful species. They're the tallest and heaviest penguin alive today. They evolved about one million years ago, and are highly adapted to life in one of Earth's harshest environments. As of 2009, the emperor penguin population was estimated at just shy of 600,000 birds.

Unfortunately, they are now in real trouble, because their breeding habitat appears to be reducing.

At the beginning of every Antarctic winter, the surface of the ocean begins to freeze and sea ice forms. Over March and April, emperor penguins aggregate into raucous breeding colonies along the coast of the ice continent. They need about nine months to care for their chicks, until the young penguins can go to sea and look after themselves.

The males frequently huddle to



keep each other warm and their eggs safe. Meanwhile, the females spend months at sea catching krill, squid and fish, returning in July/August to feed their hungry chicks. When summer finally comes in December, the chicks start to shed their down and grow a dense, waterproof plumage - like a feathery armour against the intensely cold seas off the icy continent.

Breeding locations are a kind of "Goldilocks" zone. When choosing a home, the penguins have to find a place that is safe but not too far from the fast ice edge where they go to start hunting.

The greater the distance they have to travel, the longer it takes to return to their offspring, and the chicks may miss out on meals. But if a colony is too close to the edge of the fast ice, the risk increases that the ice breaks up before the chicks are ready to go to sea. Although fast ice can cover vast areas of the ocean surface, its edge is exposed to the swell of the Southern Ocean.

In recent years, the fast ice in different parts of Antarctica has been breaking up early, before the chicks have moulted into their adult plumage.

Without waterproof plumage, chicks perish because the cold water kills quickly. As this happens more often, the size of a colony shrinks.

How bad is it?

We don't yet know if this rate of loss is happening right across Antarctica. The study only covers a part of the continent that includes the Antarctic Peninsula and the Weddell Sea.

What we do know is that Antarctica and its unique biodiversity are not immune to the consequences of still-rising global greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2021, emperor penguins were listed as endangered by the United States, because the risk of extinction by century's end had increased. Australia has not yet listed the emperor penguin as a threatened species.

The new research suggests the future of these iconic birds is not looking good. Until the world gets serious about cutting greenhouse gas emissions, sea ice will retreat - and more chicks will fall into the icy water before they are ready to launch. (*The Conversation*)

"The history of the past is but one long struggle upward to equality."

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 304

SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 16, 2025

War in West Asia

THE West Asia region is back in turmoil with a major military confrontation between long-standing rivals Israel and Iran. Chances of an immediate halt to the destructive engagements from both sides seem remote but with the US present in the middle, the war is unlikely to further escalate. Urgings from President Donald Trump had been rejected by Teheran, which has also pulled itself out of the nuclear-related talks with the US by skipping its sixth round on Sunday. Yet, the intensity of the war can be gauged from the fact that Israel targeted Iran's defence ministry headquarters in Teheran and hit another target — the South Pars gas field in Iran's Bushehr province on Saturday. Apart from a hit on Iran's SPND nuclear facility in an area where Teheran "hid its N-archives," a refinery jointly run by Iran and Qatar bore the brunt. This has the potential to draw more Islamic nations into action mode against Israel. Israel's Operation Rising Lion was aggressively met with Iran's Operation Promise 3. Iranian attacks continued Sunday through Saturday night, with the promise of an escalation on the third day. Israel's energy infra and a jet-fuel production facility came under attack from Iran. Casualties in Israel have been considerable, with some deaths and injuries to over 200 persons. Iran suffered heavier casualties, some 60 deaths in a missile hit on a high-rise residential building alone; nearly half of them children.

Modern warfare is largely about missile strikes from the air and not the army offensives on the ground. This reduces casualties. Even in missile hits on mostly governmental structures, the casualties are reduced to a minimum as these are staged mostly at night. The precision in decimating the targets through remote control is well-noticed in the recent India-Pakistan military engagement too. As President Trump stressed, Israel's concern is mainly on Iran's increased resort to develop its nuclear attack capabilities and that a solution to the present offensive from Tel Aviv lies in addressing this issue.

Iran's mix of fundamentalism in its politics ever since the exit of the then-popular Shah of Iran has been a serious concern to the developed world. While Shah had been close to the West, the succeeding army of Revolutionary Guards extricated Iran from western influences and turned the governance religion-specific. Israel, tied to the US by an umbilical cord, has a larger military might in terms of sophisticated arms of warfare; and Iran is close behind in terms of global military rankings. A fight between them is no small matter. Yet, a larger escalation is unlikely as long as the US remains in the loop even as it has limited bargaining power with the Iranians. America's persuasive power with Israel is strong. Put together, an end to the present conflict might be possible, rather than a continued escalation to deadly scenarios. Yet, Trump has already warned direct involvement in the war if its installations in the region faced any threat from Iran.

Community-led midday meals: NESFAS transforming school nutrition in rural Meghalaya

By H.H. Mohrmen

On April 12, 2025, *The Shillong Times* published a revealing expose that brought to light major loopholes in the implementation of the PM Poshan midday meal scheme in Meghalaya. Using the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the report exposed how government-supplied meals in many schools across the state fall short of providing the nutrition children need to grow and thrive. The expose confirmed what communities in rural areas have long known — that the current system is inadequate and requires urgent reform. It may be mentioned that the report also mentioned the prescribed meal menu curated by the North East Society For Agro-ecology Services (NESFAS) which was in fact the outcome of a project the organization took to improve the food served to the students of the state.

Against this backdrop, has emerged as a vital partner in helping the state improve the delivery and quality of school meals. But NESFAS's work is not simply an act of support — it is the result of several years of hands-on experience, grassroots learning, and pilot testing in some of the state's most under-served rural schools.

Why NESFAS stepped in
Malnutrition remains a pressing issue in India, and although many nutrition studies focus on children under five, school-aged children are often overlooked despite their equally vulnerable condition. In rural areas, access to a balanced diet is especially limited. Recognizing this, NESFAS initiated a community-led school meals program to address not only malnutrition but also to create a more sustainable and inclusive model of midday meal delivery. The aim was to involve communities directly in planning, cooking, and sourcing food for their children.

What NESFAS found on the ground
Before NESFAS's intervention, the midday meals in rural schools of Meghalaya were sporadic and nutritionally poor. Meals typically consisted of rice, lentil/dal, and potatoes — repeated monotonously with very little variation. Due to budget constraints, firewood and vegetables were hard to procure, and food was served only two to three times a week. The conversion cost allotted by the government — Rs 5.45 per child in lower primary and Rs 6.18 in upper primary — was insufficient to meet the nutritional needs of growing children.

The inadequate food quality and irregular supply meant that the midday meal program was not living up to its promise of supporting better health and education outcomes for children.

The NESFAS pilot: Where it all began
On June 26, 2022, NESFAS began piloting its community-led school meal program in 11 schools across 7 villages, with support from The Indigenous Partnership (TIP), Rome, Italy. These schools included Laitsohpliah RCLP School, with 58 students, Subakalai SSA School — 38 students, Dewlieh Government LP School — 41 students, Nongtraw Government LP School — 20 students, Mawmihthied Government LP School — 42 students, and in Garo hills Daribokgre SSA School with 25 students, Darechikgre Government LP School — 25 students and Darechikgre Adhoc UP School — 15 students.

In each school, NESFAS worked with communities, teachers, and cooks to transform the way meals were planned, cooked, and served. Meals were redesigned to include five of the ten essential food groups outlined by the FAO, including staples, pulses, vegetables, dairy, and wild edibles. Examples included rice served with omelet and ja-ud (a local dish), pumpkin stew, and wild edible salads made from plants like jali, along with tomatoes and lemon.

Expanding the reach
The success of the pilot received international recognition. NESFAS was invited to present its model in Rome, and this exposure impressed the Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF-IFAD), which funded the expansion to five more schools. These additional schools included Plasha Presbyterian LP School, Umwang Nongbah RCLP School, Mawstep Presbyterian LP School, St. Anthony's RCLP School and Laityndop RCLP SSA LP/UP School. In total, 221 parents and community members actively participated by contributing vegetables, helping in school gardens, and assisting with cooking.

Community involvement at its core
What makes NESFAS's intervention stand out is its deep integration with the community. Local procurement committees, composed of Agro-ecology Learning Circle (ALC) members and

farmers, were formed to supply vegetables and wild edibles. These groups ensured that all ingredients were sourced locally and were seasonally appropriate.

The Dorbar Shnong (village council) played a central role in mobilizing the community and overseeing the implementation. Teachers and cooks received training on nutrition using the FAO's food group guidelines. NESFAS also supported the project by contributing Rs 10 per child and an additional Rs 2000 for each cook. Moreover, kitchen tools, seeds for school gardens, and utensils were provided.

Training and Government Support
The success of the training sessions conducted by NESFAS led the Directorate of School Education and Literacy to formally recognize the initiative. They subsequently requested NESFAS to help train over 7,159 cooks across Meghalaya on nutrition and local food systems.

NESFAS conducted health assessments, organized cooking competitions, and ensured that both cooks and teachers were actively involved in planning menus and preparing meals.

Nutrition on the plate
Unlike neighbouring schools where students still receive basic meals of rice and dal (sometimes supplemented with soya or potato), the pilot schools now serve meals that are balanced, diverse, and rich in both nutrients and flavour. Wild edibles have become a staple component of the school menu. Importantly, meals are now served regularly throughout the week.

The contrast between the NESFAS-supported schools and others is stark. Children in the pilot schools enjoy colourful, tasty, and healthy meals that contribute to better physical and cognitive development.

Building local economies through food
Beyond improving student nutrition, the community-led school meal model has strengthened local village economies. A local procurement model ensures that food ingredients — especially vegetables — are sourced from farmers within the same village. This eliminates transport costs and ensures freshness. Farmers, many of whom are parents of the students, are assured of a steady market and regular income.

The circular economy

created by this model means that money stays within the village and is reinvested in education. It also makes communities more resilient by reducing dependence on external markets and increasing food sovereignty.

Infrastructure and capacity building
The schools involved in the pilot program were not selected randomly. NESFAS specifically chose schools it had already worked with and where trust had been established. These schools already had some infrastructure in place — such as kitchens and gardens — and NESFAS worked with them to improve facilities, build capacity, and conserve agro-ecological practices.

Each school held multiple consultations with NESFAS before the implementation phase. Initial meetings were held in Shillong, followed by extensive discussions in the villages with teachers, parents, and community leaders.

Lasting Impact
Today, the school meal program in NESFAS-supported schools is a model of what midday meals can be — nourishing, community-led, and sustainable. The involvement of farmers, parents, teachers, and village authorities ensures long-term ownership and sustainability.

Importantly, the model is scalable. With assured government funds for the PM Poshan scheme, this locally driven approach can be replicated in other schools and districts. It also aligns with broader goals of biodiversity conservation, nutrition security, and economic self-reliance.

The recent expose in *The Shillong Times* has served as a wake-up call, but it also points towards the possibility of meaningful reform. NESFAS has shown that change is possible — when communities are empowered, children are prioritized, and systems are built on trust and cooperation.

Conclusion: In a region where systemic failures in the midday meal program have long gone unaddressed, NESFAS has lit a path forward. Its community-led school meals model provides not just food but also dignity, empowerment, and resilience to rural communities in Meghalaya.

By demonstrating that it is possible to serve healthy, diverse, and locally sourced meals through a model that uplifts the community, NESFAS has made a strong case for reimagining public food programs — not just in Meghalaya, but across India.

Does the Indian 'experiment' still continue?

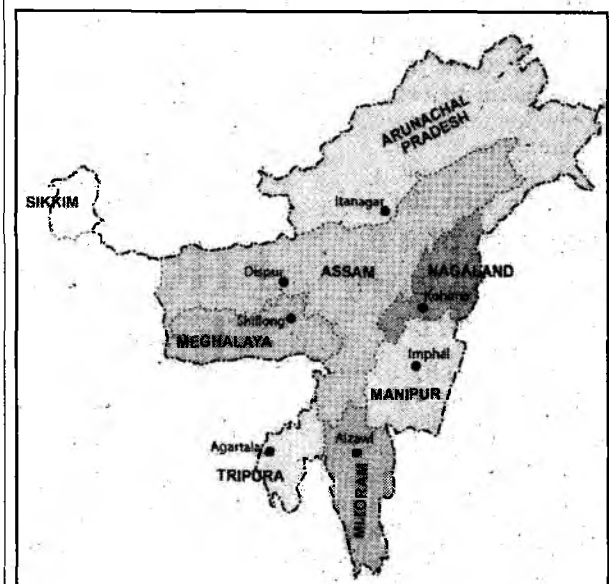
By Ananya Guha

The recent murder of Raja Raghuvanshi in Sohra, shows clearly two or three examples of how bias is embedded in the so called 'mainstream.' One is treating the NE Region as vague peripheries. That is so because the entire region is considered as one single unit. Secondly the region is regarded as an area of darkness, where witchcraft mumbo jumbo is practised. Thirdly, the hills are 'violence prone'. Every part of the country is violence prone in some way or the other. Creating false narratives about the region or the state of Meghalaya is the pastime of many media houses. They glibly assumed that Raja Raghuvanshi was murdered by the locals, without waiting for the investigations to

In the Bangalore instance was it that neither the man or the woman knew Kannada or Hindi or was it feigned? But this can be a conjecture at best.

In India stereotyping linguistic communities have taken place. In our school days all South Indians were known as 'Madrasis'. It was not only a demonstration of ignorance but sheer insensitivity.

Similarly, today North East India is looked upon as a 'dark' region, where atavistic passions prevail. The response of the media to the Sohra murder came at a time, when the police and the local community were on the search for Raja Raghuvanshi, in the midst of inhospitable climate and



be completed. In the process the mainstream media houses created not a dichotomy, but a division, augmented to foster the them and us story, which works in various ways in the country.

The result? Obviously acerbic reactions in the midst of provocation. When will this so-called 'mainland' India, stop creating schisms in our diverse and pluralistic societies? There were angry reactions to the painting of Meghalaya as a land of crime. 'Crime prone hills,' to be precise. Are the entire hills crime prone, or only a part of it? Which part of Sohra, or the entire state?

Some writer decades back, had described India as an experiment. Perhaps some people want the experiment to continue, looking askance

terrain. The response of people of the Sohra region was compassionate. They decided to pay a candlelight and floral tribute to their guest. It was like a Christian response, responding by love not animosity. Again, the people of Sohra have not yet demanded another apology, but have requested 'one, cutting across print, electronic media and social media handles. One apology that will be used in print, electronic and social media handles.

The Sohra incident also exemplifies how the North Eastern Region specifically, Meghalaya has been taken advantage of, so that all blame would point at the local communities. This is mainstream people's way of using the place so that local reputation will be sullied.

The Sohra incident also exemplifies how the North Eastern Region specifically, Meghalaya has been taken advantage of, so that all blame would point at the local communities. This is mainstream people's way of using the place so that local reputation will be sullied.

at the supposed peripheries. That is because the country starts in Delhi and ends in Patna, that is the mentality of some people. What a travesty.

Even today I am shocked to see that many in the mainland do not clearly know about Shillong and Meghalaya. One feels the pinch and it hurts to say the least.

These are lessons we must learn. That quite a few people are not interested to probe into the truth. So when the businessman was murdered, the response was tepid: oh, one of those as usual. It hurts and pains me to see such a response: crime ridden hills, sorcery and ghosts. Rudyard Kipling believed in the white man's burden of educating and perhaps even chastening the natives. But his stories such as "Gunga Din" have a human touch, if not a humane one. Recently two incidents took place in different parts of India, which I am tempted to mention. One was in Calcutta where a lady was speaking in Bengali. Another lady accosted her, and asked her to speak in Hindi. Recently in Bangalore, in a bank a lady, the bank employee, insisted on speaking in Hindi, whereas the man insisted that she should speak in Kannada. Such incidents only create division; cultural recalcitrance.

reputation will be sullied. All this is saddening. There is sadness when people are not sensitive about localisms and local culture. The whole murder was premeditated and planned for quite some time. And was Sohra chosen, because it is a 'crime prone hills'? Stereotyping North East India is nothing new. Worse still is the ignorance. Even in the 1990s a Professor of History, in a central university, thought that Imphal was close to Shillong!

But vitriol should not be answered by vitriol. It should be done as the people of Sohra did — quiet magnanimity with an inner resilience. That is what wins finally.

The attitude of Raja Raghuvanshi's family initially was one of skepticism. They doubted the work of the Meghalaya Police but retracted later, when they saw what a neat job the Meghalaya Police had done. This is again attitudinal, and a superiority complex. In fact Meghalaya Police getting vital clues later on signed off the murder 'mystery' with elan.

INDIA is no longer an 'experiment'. She has withstood the ravages of time and has resolved opposites, conflicts, and antinomies. That is the Indian nation, pluralistic, diverse; yet one.

Letters to the Editor

Between emojis and echo chambers: What happened to real conversations?

Editor,

In the digital age, where opinions are currency and silence can be misread as apathy, society seems to be swinging wildly between two poles of communication: the emoji minimalists and the keyboard maximalists.

On one end, we have the modern-day cavemen: emoji users. These are people who resort to layered thoughts, heartfelt reflections, and sometimes even national debates with a mere 🍌 or 🍌. It's the digital equivalent of a grunt at the dinner table when someone shares news of a personal breakthrough. For those who take time to craft thoughtful posts, this is not just frustrating—it feels like throwing a letter into a well and hearing only a distant splash.

Of course, emojis have their charm. They're fast, universal, and non-confrontational. In a world where attention spans compete with goldfish, a quick heart can say, "I saw this." But does it say, "I understood this"? Or, "I have something to add to this"? Not quite. It saves time, yes, but it also saves people from thinking deeply, or worse, from engaging authentically.

Yet, before we mourn the death of meaningful interaction, let's look at the other extreme: the keyboard warriors.

Here, the silence breaks—but not always for the better. This breed of internet gladiator is the opposite of emoji users. Instead of saying too little, they say far too much. With caps lock as their sword and hashtags as their shields, they charge into the digital battlefield, convinced that their opinion is not just valid, but holy. They rarely listen. They quote half-read articles. They declare moral victory within three comments.

These self-appointed thought leaders rant endlessly online but avoid real conversation like it's a pot-hole on a rainy Shillong day. Challenge them in person, and you'll find their volume drops faster than your mobile network during a thunderstorm. The same person who wrote a 1,000-word take-down on Facebook can't survive a two-minute chai-side debate. It's not courage fueling them—it's the comfort of the backspace button.

So, where does this leave us? We're caught between passive disconnection and performative over-connection. One side has reduced thoughtful engagement to a series of symbols. The other floods our timelines with noise, confusing volume for value.

This polarization is more

than just a digital quirk; it's a mirror to a deeper societal drift: We're slowly losing the art of disagreement. Either we don't speak at all, or we shout until no one wants to stay in the room. We're forgetting that expression is not just a right, but a responsibility. It's not just about having a voice, but about using it with care and clarity.

We're normalizing laziness in reflection and aggression in expression.

As someone once joked, "Everyone has a voice now. Unfortunately, not everyone has a point."

This is not a call to uninstall your emojis or mute your outspoken friends. This is a call to restore balance. To revive the beautiful middle ground of conversation, where emojis are acknowledgments and comments are contributions. Where people can speak boldly but also listen humbly. Where you don't need to be a philosopher to say something meaningful, nor a preacher to hold a strong view.

Let's be people who respond with more than emojis, and argue with more than anger. Let's not be afraid to leave a comment, ask a question, or say, "I don't know, but I want to understand." Because in the end, that is how societies grow—not through echo chambers or reactions, but through conversations.

Yours etc.,
By Paia B,
Via email

Who will protect the brave witness?

Editor, A key witness in the high-profile Raja Raghuvanshi murder case has reportedly expressed concerns about his personal safety after his name and image spread far and wide. According to a recent media report, the witness's mother stated that her son has stopped leading tourists to Nongriat, as he feels that his personal safety could be at risk. A father of two young children, the guide has now given up his livelihood and is possibly living in fear.

While coming forward to state that he saw Raja and Sonam along with three others at Nongriat on May 23, 2025, we believe the guide's identity should have been concealed in the interest of his safety. His statement was crucial, a fact that was even underscored by the police. According to the police, it was following the guide's revelation that the 'mastermind' of the murder, Raj Kushwaha, told Sonam to immediately leave Indore. However, the police quickly arrested Raj and his three accomplices, while Sonam surrendered.

Before and after the murder mystery was unravelled, the media interviewed the guide — publicising his name and image. Unfortunately, revealing the name and iden-

tity of the main witness, especially in a highly sensitive case, can have consequences. While the media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, this influence carries a profound responsibility, particularly when reporting on sensitive cases involving key witnesses. It is the ethical duty of the media to protect these individuals and to maintain a careful balance between the public's right to know and the witness's right to safety and privacy. When media outlets act irresponsibly, it reflects a lack of empathy and professionalism.

In any legal investigation or criminal trial, the main witness often holds crucial information that can determine the outcome of the case. Their testimony may expose criminal activities, identify perpetrators, or clarify key events. Therefore, protecting this individual is critical — not only for the integrity of the case but also for their personal safety and well-being.

Safeguarding a witness's anonymity is not just a legal or professional obligation — it is a moral one. In an age where information spreads rapidly, even a short video clip or headline can have serious repercussions. It is crucial that media outlets adopt and strictly follow guidelines that protect the identities of vulnerable individuals.

Meghalaya has given approval to the Witness Protection Scheme, 2025, as

mandated by Section 398 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023. The approval was given by the Cabinet in April. This scheme provides a structured process for safeguarding witnesses in various cases. It is aimed to help build a safer environment for witnesses to come forward without fear. However, it is imperative that the government ensures this particular witness (guide) is fully protected, which includes his personal safety, and livelihood. Given the circumstances, we urge the concerned authorities to take immediate steps to ensure his safety.

We respectfully urge all media outlets to exercise restraint, discretion, and responsibility in their coverage of this high-profile murder case. The safety and well-being of the witness and his family must remain a top priority. While the public may only see the courtroom drama, it is essential to recognise the extensive efforts that go on behind the scenes to protect witnesses and ensure that justice is carried out without fear or coercion.

Yours etc.,
Replicha Becky Pde,
Via email

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

"Patience and Diligence, like faith, remove mountains."

— William Penn

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 305

SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JUNE 17, 2025

Opposition Silence on Sohra

WHEN the state passes through a period of storm and stress political parties are expected to come together and stand in solidarity for a larger purpose. Meghalaya has passed through a tornado since May 23 when Raja Raghuvanshi and his newly married wife Soman went missing. After what was a manhunt in the deep gorges of Sohra, Raja's decomposed body was found on June 2, but Soman remained untraced until June 5. Naturally the family members especially of Raja Raghuvanshi who were in shock, raved and ranted and called Meghalaya Police, and the Meghalaya Government incompetent and hurled choicest abuses at the state and its people. One of them even spat out that Meghalaya should be thrown out of the Indian Union as it is inhabited by criminals. This statement hurt the most and people of Meghalaya wondered why when the Police, the SDRF, NDRF and even volunteers from West Jaintia Hills had undertaken one of the most dangerous expeditions to recover Raja's body, they were still found wanting. Granted that the couple came in, as tourists and that the state has a duty to ensure their safety but that is provided they were genuine tourists. In this case the motive was a well-planned murder with at least four accomplices in tow.

In all of this the people of Meghalaya stood as one barring the Opposition Congress and VPP. Leader of the Opposition, Dr Mukul Sangma instead of offering to work towards redeeming the stature of Meghalaya after the drubbing it got from sections of the national media, instead went hammer and tongs at blaming the State Government and even brought in the drug angle. This was one time he could have risen above politics and shown himself as a statesman but that was not to be. The VPP too was conspicuous by its silence, quite forgetting its role in a democracy. A significant role of the Opposition apart from keeping the government under check for acts of omission and commission is to present itself as an alternative government. This concept goes beyond mere criticism and involves offering viable solutions and policies that could be implemented if they were in power. By doing so, the Opposition also demonstrates its strength, apart from demonstrating what it would do if it were in the ruling side and governing the state.

The role of the Opposition members is not to be mere critics. They are to provide diverse perspectives and hold the ruling party accountable. The Opposition is a watchdog that is meant to curb government excesses and to scrutinize its actions and policies. A question arises as to whether the Opposition parties had scrutinized the State Tourism Policy and offered alternative suggestions to the Government to strengthen the Policy. The Opposition has a critical role in a democracy because it represents the public. Sadly, in this present conundrum when the people of Meghalaya stood as one with the Government, the Opposition stood aloof. The Opposition must recognize that its role is not merely to find fault and waylay the Government but to assist it to govern ethically.

Meghalaya's Caves: Journey through Time and Legend

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Caves have played an important part in the culture and history of the Khasis. This is not surprising, considering the state has over 1500 caves, and many more await discovery. Tirot Singh and Kiang Nongbah, two of the most well-known Khasi freedom fighters, had used the caves to hide from their enemies and plot their attacks. The founding ancestress of the one of the most powerful Khasi Hima, Hima Shillong, traced her origin to a cave. This is the story of Ka Pah Syntiew, who was a goddess, and the daughter of Lei Shillong, a powerful deity who lived on Shillong Peak.

Legend has it that Ka Pah Syntiew used to dwell in a mystical cave near the village of Pamlakrai. One day, a group of cowherds found her sitting on top of a rock beside the cave. They told the villagers who came to see the sight of a finely dressed beautiful girl sitting all alone. Despite their urging, she refused to come down. It was then that U Mylliem Ngap, a wise chief of the village, lured her by tying a bunch of wildflowers growing near the cave to the end of a bamboo stick. Each time she leaned to get the flower, the chief would lower the pole just slightly, coaxing her to come down inch by inch. Finally, her feet touched the ground and everyone was relieved. U Mylliem Ngap adopted the girl and named her Ka Pah Syntiew, meaning "the flowered one". When she grew up, she married a nobleman named U Kongor Nongiri and her descendants became the Syiems of Hima Shillong (which later got divided into Hima Mylliem and Hima Khyrim). So, in a way, the royal lineage traces their descent to the mystical cave in Pamlakrai.

The cave was also used by Ka Sngi (the Sun Goddess), who went to hide in it, plunging the world into darkness. It was the rooster that was able to bring her out of the cave and restore light to the world, echoing the phrase, "Let there be light!" It is for this reason the rooster is an important animal for the adherents of the indigenous faith. Colonial reports also reveal that till the early 20th century, the area around Lum Sohpetbneng, a present-day

site of pilgrimage for the Khasis, had a lot of caves which were used by bears for shelter.

Although caves have been part of the Khasi culture, they have been present in Meghalaya long before the Khasis arrived in these hills. There are two types of caves found in Meghalaya: sandstone caves and limestone caves. The process of formation of both is a little different. Sandstone caves are formed by the mechanical erosion of water and wind, a process that can take hundreds of thousands to millions of years. Meghalaya, in fact, has the longest sandstone cave in the world, which is estimated to be "three times the height of Mount Everest". People know it as 'Krem Puri', also called the 'Cave of the Fairies,' in Laitsohm Village, an hour's trek from Mawsynram.

A few weeks ago, I visited the cave with a friend, walking along a treacherous path that passed giant ferns and palm trees—known as Dieng Tlai in the local language— which stood over 40 feet tall and were heavy with fruit. The cave was located along the side of a steep sandstone wall, with a large stream flowing through the canyon. When we came upon the cave, we saw it had two passageways. The walls were smooth and round, a telltale sign the action of water had carved the cave over a very long period. While it was hot outside the cave, the temperature inside was much cooler. In fact, when I exhaled, my breath turned into vapour, drifting in front of me like wispy smoke. Since the passageways were narrow and dark, we decided not to take any risk, as we didn't have the proper equipment. We returned after exploring another nearby cave where we found carnivorous worms that had spun sticky threads on the ceiling to trap insects.

Limestone is a special type of rock, formed by the accumulation and compaction of marine organisms. Therefore, any place where limestone is found was once underwater. Mawlyngbna, again in Mawsynram, in fact has fossils of an ancient

species of sea urchins known as dollar fish believed to be around 450 million years old, older than the dinosaurs. The limestone found in the area, formed from fossils of animals like the dollar fish, dates from around 56-58 million years. This is the period which saw the rise of early modern mammals, which included the earliest primates from whom human beings ultimately evolved. The formation of the limestone caves we see today occurred after that time. These were formed when rainwater, slightly acidic and becoming more so as it passes through soil, seeps into cracks and fissures, dissolving the limestone bed. Over time, they created caverns which enlarged over time. The role of rainwater in creating these caves has, in fact, allowed scientists to reconstruct past climates.

In Mawmluh, a village around Sohra, there is a 7 km long cave where researchers started conducting geological surveys starting in 2003. Researchers found oxygen isotopes within the stalactites and stalagmites in the cave that revealed there was a global shift in climate pattern around 4000 years ago. Oxygen has two isotopes — 16-O i.e., the light one with 8 protons and 8 neutrons and 18-O i.e., the heavy one with 8 protons and 10 neutrons. The ratio of oxygen isotope reflects the variation of rainfall: the more rainfall there was, the less 18-O isotope there would be in the sample and vice versa.

In a paper published in 2012, after an analysis of a high-resolution stalagmite oxygen-isotope record from Mawmluh, scientists found that the higher ratio of 18-O in the stalagmite specimens revealed that around 4000 years ago the Monsoon regime had become highly weakened. This resulted in a mega drought across North Africa, the Middle East, the Tibetan Plateau, southern Europe, and North America. This led to the decline of ancient civilizations in Egypt, Greece, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Indus and Yangtze. Since all these cultures were agrarian, they found it difficult to sustain

when water became scarce (a prospect that will repeat itself with climate change). This was a momentous discovery.

Until then, geologists divide geological time periods based on rocks and fossils, with changes in them delineating the different periods. However, in light of the findings from the cave in Mawmluh, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) announced a new division in time to be called the Meghalayan Age. This time period, based on human history, now appears on all official charts depicting Earth's geological past. Modern geological science will now forever remember Meghalaya, the village of Mawmluh, and its Khasi people.

Meghalaya is not part of the Himalayas, but part of Gondwanaland, which is one of the ancient landmass that makes up the continents in the world. This is much before life began on land. Because it lies in the path of the monsoon winds, it receives the highest rainfall in the world. And now, because of its caves, it can shed light on events that happened thousands of years ago, while there are fossils that give a glimpse to a time much older as well, older than humanity itself. It also has the oldest Neolithic sites in the region and served as a connecting link between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Through this corridor moved language, agriculture, and a people—the Khasis—who are the second-oldest community in South Asia. Their matrilineal culture dates back at least 5,000 years, connecting them to groups across South China and Southeast Asia. Meghalaya has been making good progress in attracting tourists. However, to date, the state's focus has been primarily on natural scenery and indigenous culture. Perhaps it is time to also include history, pre-history, and geological heritage in the conversation. If this is done, it will bring many more benefits to the state, and the people will gain a deeper appreciation for the land they call home.

(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)

Discontinuation of Personal Interviews for Group C & D Posts

By M Lyngdoh

The Ministry of Personnel and Administrative Reforms on the 16th November 2015 through its then Minister, Dr Jitendra Singh had asked all states to stop conducting Personal Interview for Group C and Group D posts. In November 2015, 23 out of 28 states of India and all Union Territories (UTs) had agreed to discontinue with the Personal Interview. On December 31, 2015 while addressing a gathering at Noida, Modi had said that with effect from January 1, 2016, all Personal Interviews for Central posts have been discontinued along with the 23 States and all 8 UTs of India which had agreed to do the same as a New Year's present to the youth.

The reasons for discontinuation are: (1). To remove the headache of the family of worrying about the personal interview and having the alleged connects and money thereof, (2). To remove nepotism, favouritism and bribery, (3). The staffs holding Group C and D posts take orders from Group B and Group A officers which is why the mental acumen of only the Groups A and B officers are tested through personal interview since they are in-charge and give orders to the Groups C and D staff, (4). Group C and Group D posts are advertised in droves at the Center and in the States hence the

the Meghalaya 5th Pay Commission. Group C posts can be classified into 2 levels.

Pay Level 2 to Pay Level 4 are known as "Low Level Group C posts".

Pay Level 5 to Pay Level 10 are known as "Medium Level Group C posts".

Using this classification as the basis, the suggestion given is as follows:

(A). Pay Level 1 to Pay Level 4—Minimum Qualification is Under Matric and the Maximum Qualification is Class 12 Passed with or without Diploma/Certificate course if the post is a technical post.

Reasons: Maximum Qualification is taken up to Class 12 passed so as to encourage students NOT to settle for only Under Matric and Below Class 12 but to be Class 12 passed so as to raise the overall educational level and prestige of the state.

(B). Pay Level 5 to Pay Level 10—Minimum Qualification is Class 12 Passed and the Maximum Qualification is Post Graduate.

Reasons: Maximum Qualification is taken up as Post Graduation to encourage students NOT to settle for only Class 12 passed or Graduation. Having a Graduate or Post Graduate degree raises the overall educational level and prestige of the state.

All Technical Tests and Physical Tests for a for Tech-



effect of such a decision to discontinue affects manifold positively for a voluminous number of applicants. From unconfirmed sources, as of now, 27 states have discontinued the Personal Interview. If confirmed, only Meghalaya has not obliged with this central notification request and persuasion.

The Personnel Department reply on July 11, 2023, states that the reason for NOT discontinuing with the Personal Interview is to provide a "fair level playing ground" by filtering the overqualified candidates through Personal Interview. That is why I had suggested having a "Maximum Qualification" for applying for Group D and Group C posts with sub classification from the Pay Matrix Group Levels given below so that the concerns of the Personnel Interview are addressed so that Discontinuation of Personal Interview can be carried out forthright. It has been observed that in the recent Grade 4 post recruitment by the DSCs in the districts that "Overqualified" Graduates, Graduates with Diploma and Post Graduates have been recommended for appointment to these Grade 4 posts. This is antithesis to their reply on 11.07.2023 of filtering through Personal Interviews. What's done is done, we have to respect the recommendation and we can only look forward from here onwards. Employment falls under Article 309 of the Concurrent List; so, the state has the liberty to accept or reject the Ministry of Personnel Notification. Likewise, the state also can put up a Maximum Educational Qualification in addition to the already existing Minimum Educational Qualification since employment and unemployment also falls in the Concurrent List in-order to implement the Discontinuation of Personal Interview for Group C and Group D posts.

Group D is Pay Level 1 only and Group C is from Pay Level 2 to Pay Level 10 from the Pay Level Matrix of

nical /Physical Posts must be "purely" QUALIFYING IN NATURE based on the Central Notification of 16.11.2015****

Over Qualified Candidates: They CANNOT apply for posts from Pay Level 1 to Pay Level 5 for which posts falling under this Pay Level range must have Maximum qualification limit which should be stated in every advertisement by all state recruitment instruments/establishments.

Implementation of fair playing field:

2 (two) ways to ensure a fair playing field to make sure that over qualified candidates do not cheat by applying Group D posts and Group C posts from Pay Level 2 to 4 are as follows:

(a). Their qualifications have to be entered in the MPSC/DSCs/Boards website by uploading their qualifications at the time of their registration and application print out for the particular post that they had passed at the time of Mark Sheets Verification for Low Level Group C and Group D posts,

(b). Another is a "Fore-warning" which will attract the penalty of Cheating law when verified on complaints and found to be true that even if they are appointed, they will be removed.

By strictly following this suggestion, Discontinuation of Personal Interviews for ALL Group C and Group D posts can be implemented by ALL state government establishments/instruments that recruit bar none. The issue of providing a fair playing field has been SOLVED. This Pioneering classification can be followed by the Central and State governments of India in providing a fair playing field just like Meghalaya which at present a Bachelor/Masters/PhD holder applies for Group D and Low-Level Group C posts. A Notification in the Official Gazette or better yet, a Statute in this regard is urgently solicited from the Cabinet. This suggestion is for the benefit and public interest of the state at large.

Letters to the Editor

Mayday! Mayday!

Editor,

In the dynamic realm of aviation, one story stands out: that of Captain Sully Sullenberger and US Airways Flight 1549. On January 15, 2009, Sullenberger masterfully glided an Airbus A320 into the Hudson River after a flock of Canadian geese incapacitated both engines. A research paper from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, titled 'The Hazard Posed to Aircraft by Birds,' reveals that bird strikes represent a staggering cost of approximately 3 billion US dollars every year presenting a credible threat. The paper proposes solutions like the Avian Hazard Advisory System, which, while potentially expensive for countries like India, is a worthy investment. Working with private entities, air traffic control operations, and conducting aviation safety workshops with experienced pilots and environmental experts could significantly reduce the risks posed by wildlife strikes.

Moreover, we cannot overlook the critical issue of software malfunctions during flight. Take, for instance, the unsettling experience of Qantas Flight 72 (QF72) on October 7, 2008, when an air data inertial reference system failure led to uncommanded pitch-down problems. Such incidents underscore the necessity for pilots to learn from the past in order to

ensure safer skies.

As we look ahead, it is essential to acknowledge the alarming increase in turbulence due to climate change, which now affects aircraft performance. Wind shear and thunderstorms can lead to unpredictable flight issues, posing serious challenges towards cabin safety. In the complex landscape of the airline industry, accidents arise from multiple interconnected factors, necessitating thorough investigations in collaboration with agencies like the US National Transportation Safety Board would clear the smoke screen.

Boeing's past struggles with the 737 Max and now the Dreamliner have raised profound questions about the integrity in data segmentation and leadership practices within the company. The tragic crash in Ahmedabad serves as a chilling reminder of the Saudi Flight 763 disaster, where a Boeing 747 collided with Kazakhstan Airlines Flight 1907 over Charkhi Dadri, marking it as one of the deadliest mid-air collisions in history.

In his compelling book, 'Fly! : Life Lessons from the Cockpit of QF32,' by Richard De Crespigny highlights the critical human element in aviation. He articulates that true strength emerges from teamwork, meticulous risk assessment, and an unwavering spirit of resilience. Embracing these lessons to navigate the uncertain skies of the future would be helpful.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Via email

A pot of rice; A world of love: Traditions that bind us

Editor,

In the Pnar culture of the Jaintia Hills, compassion is not just spoken, it is lived. Through the quiet but deeply meaningful traditions of Li e Ja Khonbo and Ja Nam, our people express solidarity in times of both joy and sorrow. "Khonbo" means baby, and "Ja Khonbo" refers to the moment a newborn arrives into the world. During such joyful occasions, relatives, friends, and neighbours come to the family home carrying a small pot of rice often accompanied by Dohseih (pork), eggs, or other dishes. This is not just food; it is love carried in silence, a shared gesture that says, "Your joy is our joy too." In contrast, "Ja Nam" takes place in times of grief when a loved one has passed away. The community again comes together, this time with heavy hearts. With quiet steps and compassionate presence, people offer food to the grieving family not for celebration, but as a way of saying, "You are not alone." There may be no speeches, but this act speaks deeply.

Among the many places where this sacred practice still breathes, Jowai stands out. In its winding lanes and warm households, these

customs remain alive not because they are enforced, but because they are cherished. Even as the world changes, these simple acts of empathy continue to thrive here. These practices are guided by unspoken etiquette rooted in humility and respect. The family bringing the pot may keep a small portion of the food for themselves, but they must not eat it in the home where they offer it, especially if they are invited to dine that day. They can eat it later, at their own home, but not in the place where the rice was given. This quiet rule upholds the sincerity of the gesture.

When the receiving family accepts the food, they wash the pot immediately and return it, wrapped in the same cloth it arrived in. The pot must not remain with them, as doing so would be culturally inappropriate; it would be as if the act of comfort or solidarity were left incomplete. This return is done swiftly, respectfully, and often without words. What makes these practices truly remarkable is their humble spirit, thoughtful, and deeply human. There is no need for grand offerings or loud declarations. What is shared is simple, but the heart behind it is immense. In this way, the Pnar community keeps something sacred alive; a culture of kindness, discipline, and quiet emotional wisdom.

In a world rushing forward, the Pnar walk steadily, carrying old truths in everyday acts. A pot of rice, of-

fered in silence, binds people in ways that even words cannot. It reminds us that in both celebration and mourning, we are never alone.

Yours etc.,
Teinam Dkhar,
Via email

High-voltage bills shock MeECL consumers

Editor,

MeECL is the powerhouse of Meghalaya -- working round the clock to keep our homes and streets lit, come rain or shine. For that, the corporation certainly deserves our appreciation. But let's be honest, a pat on the back doesn't mean it's time to sit back. Reality, as experienced by people, looks very different. Frustration is growing among countless consumers. The complaints are loud and plenty, and they shouldn't be ignored.

Power cuts in certain localities have become all too frequent. Some people are left fuming when the electricity vanishes right in the middle of their children's exams; in some places, there are no lights for weeks or months together. Others feel helpless as their monthly bills skyrocket for no clear reason.

Today I speak out not just as a letter-writer to the editor for the public but as someone directly affected -- a confused consumer. Till last year, our monthly bill

stayed below Rs 600. Now it comes as a shock. Sometimes double. Sometimes triple. After much follow-up, I finally managed to get our meter tested. It was taken away by the lineman and reinstalled after a week -- but no test report has been shared with us to date. Despite this, the bill amount seemingly remains the same. Something doesn't feel right at all.

Here is why it feels even more disappointing. My neighbour, who owns a large house with several tenants and many more electrical points, consistently gets bills between Rs 3,200 and Rs 4,800 -- never Rs 9,000 or Rs12,000 like mine. That's been the case for years. It means there hasn't been a "huge jump" in the electricity tariff over the last two years. So, where's the fault? Is it in the meter? The billing system? Or somewhere deeper?

MeECL must take these concerns seriously. This I say in the greater interest of consumers whose pockets are being drained. Listening to people, fixing the flaws, and being transparent -- that's the only way to rebuild poor public trust. The state cannot shine when its people are left in the dark, both literally and figuratively.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

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

"Every day brings new choices."

— Martha Beck

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Waves of shock

THE aviation sector is in a tizzy in the aftermath of the epic Dreamliner plane crash in Ahmedabad a week ago. The worry over aviation safety has now been heightened also by the abrupt cancellation of two Air India flights of the Dreamliner stable following the detection of snags in pre-flight tests—one for the ill-fated Ahmedabad-London sector and the other the Delhi-Paris route. More flights are bound to be affected also as a detailed technical examination is under way about flight operations across the board and not just about the Dreamliner flights. Pre-flight checks at six levels have been ordered by the Director General of Civil Aviation, all of which must be undertaken with minute details as passenger safety cannot be compromised.

Loss of life cannot be compensated with a generous rollout of cash. Yet, cash matters too. The families of around 270 persons killed in the Ahmedabad crash are entitled to get around 1.50 crore per death, and the Tata Group that currently owns Air India could get insurance entitlement too for the aircraft. All these could involve a sum of over Rs 1,500 crore as per aviation industry estimates and guided as these are by the Montreal Protocols. It will take time for the families to recover from the present shock. Frequent fliers now shaky had once been among the confident ones as plane crashes were rare in recent times. In India itself, the last major airline crash occurred five years ago. The number of flights and airports have increased manifold since the turn of the century. India's steady economic growth created large numbers of wealthy people, who formed the cream of the society. They were among the jet-set. Travel by Indians to destinations within and abroad has become frequent even as the fares steadily went up. More Indians today prefer exotic locations when they plan a journey for leisure. All these people are now left in a state of shock. A fear of the unknown is gripping them. Such sentiments are bound to continue for some time until the dust settles down over the Ahmedabad tragedy. An investigation has been ordered, which is unlikely to throw much light into the actual reasons for the mishap, as had been proven in similar attempts in the past.

It's a pity that such a tragic turnaround has come about at a time when the aviation sector offered a lot of new prospects. Drones, for instance. These tiny flying machines are bound to invade all aspects of life in course of time. Even short-distance travels too could be air-borne, reducing the pressure on the roadways. Come to think of it, however, even road mishaps are one too many as the number of vehicles keep increasing phenomenally on the roads. Life would go on despite such a sense of despair, upsets, off and on. The future of travel is "in the air," so to say.

Letters to the Editor

Tourism in Meghalaya: A tourist's perspective

Editor,
I was privy to the wonderful panel discussion by The Shillong Times titled "Lessons from Sohra Aberation," anchored by the editor herself and featuring the Director, Tourism, CV Diengdoh and renowned tour operators. It was amazing to see Meghalaya feeling strongly about the unfortunate incident. For me, having been to Meghalaya 3-4 times, and also recently, the following thoughts come to mind:

Managing the level of tourism that the state sees now is not easy, especially since the country has started using the informal sector more than institutional tourism chains. The lure of additional (or primary) income is too enticing to let go, which is very fair. The panelists talked about the training aspects of it, the app that is floated - and all other good things.

Unfortunately, we as a country arguably have the worst tourists compared to the rest of the world. Sometimes - we are insensitive to locals, impatient, rude, and ask too much for too little. It is not easy for businesses to be on the other side of it. I felt it myself. Tourists are welcome of course, but the hosts may not go out of their way to make a great experience - which is probably fair.

I believe, as a state, Me-

ghalaya needs to up the ante when it comes to the quality and cost of tourism that it provides. Homestays have to come up to a level where residents have to pay enough for the hosts to ensure a certain quality of experience and a basic level of security. And then that quality should be coming for sure. It is not too hard for hosts to tie up with national and international service providers who can help manage the quality level and service level to certain standards - like AirBNB. I heard the concerns about vacation costs being too high, and people might choose an international destination - but in my heart, given a certain level of service - Meghalaya will open itself to international tourists. Such a market ensures that the right strata of Indian tourists also come in.

Marketing and branding efforts have to ramp up. It is very hard to understand what is a good way to spend 4-5 days in Meghalaya, while it is easy to find all the good tourist spots there. These days, it is easy to hire branding consultants - and many states do it. It is not just a psychological gimmick but a good way to allocate state resources to Tourism based on what can be marketed well. International branding could be an integral part of it.

Shillong (and Meghalaya) has a culture. I love that locals go with it, and have not changed based on what the larger tourist sections want. Certain tourists would like it. But, on the other hand, homestays and informal commercial hosts should be trained for basic social understanding of the

rest of India. Delhi, Punjab, and Northern areas, the south, every part of India has a unique culture. Managing a tourist setup without knowing your clientele (the good and the bad about them) is a Gordian knot. I think from a cultural perspective, this is the biggest task for the administration. And this will slowly evolve into an understanding of international culture in due course. Sadly, we in India do not know each other from different states. Crimes are unavoidable. They occur everywhere. Administration can diminish the instances but never stop them altogether. In a tourism situation, crimes are bound to find more eyeballs, people to judge, influencers to make money, and media frying another fish. Therefore, the security and policing infrastructure in touristy areas needs revamping and requires to be performed without misses. Just registering tourists does not help, and I have seen that in other states, being in the north-east many times over the 7-9 years before COVID.

Electronic interventions like an app are easy to create but hard to have the clientele assimilate. People believe they should make minimum effort for a short period, and downloading and learning a new app is an effort. It is best to tie up with the Airbnbs and the like. They are already on most tourist phones, and any establishment needs to form certain minimum standards to partner with them as a host.

Yours etc.,

Ashootosh Sharma,

Via email

Assam, the most active state in the region, mainly relies on government programs like the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi) and the North East Enterprise Development Scheme (NEEDS) for support, rather than private investors. Other states, such as Nagaland, have experienced a rise in startup registrations—from just one in 2016 to 22 in 2023—but still struggle to attract significant private investment, depending on state programmes instead. This starkly contrasts with major cities that attract thousands of crores in VC funding and host far more startups than the entire Northeast combined.

But not all of it is gloom: the Northeast is a goldmine just waiting to be tapped. Between 2018 and 2023, the region experienced a 12.7-fold increase in recognized startups—the highest growth rate in India! That's a clear sign of entrepreneurial energy ready to explode. Additionally, the Northeast's location makes it a natural gateway to Southeast Asian markets like Myanmar and Bangladesh. With initiatives like the Act East Policy enhancing connectivity, startups here have a unique opportunity to expand beyond India's borders—something their counterparts in other regions cannot even dream of.

The Government of India is sensitive to this issue. They've rolled out programmes like Startup India, with special schemes for the Northeast, including funding and simpler regulations. But here's the thing: government funding can only stretch so far. To thrive, the region needs private investors to step up. Without their confidence and market-driven decisions, nothing much will happen.

Investors are usually interested in startups that can grow fast and reach big markets. The Northeast has a smaller and more spread-out population, which can be a turnoff for businesses focusing on consumers. Many NE startups are based in agriculture, crafts, and eco-tourism, areas that big-time

investors typically overlook, as they lean toward tech and internet companies. This mismatch makes the region less appealing to them. Investor biases also come into play. Most venture capitalists are based in major cities and don't understand the unique challenges of the Northeast. Political issues, border concerns, and a history of unrest add to the idea that the region is riskier, which pushes investors toward safer bets in more established startup areas. There's also a talent shortage. A lot of skilled young people from the Northeast move to bigger cities for better education and jobs, which drains local talent. This means there aren't many experienced founders or mentors around to help new startups with fundraising and growth. On top of that, different states in the Northeast have varying support for startups, and bureaucratic red tape is often tougher compared to friendlier states like Karnataka or Maharashtra. There aren't many local venture funds or angel networks focussed on the Northeast, making it harder for startups to find early money.

This funding gap means that many promising NE startups struggle to survive or scale, despite innovative ideas and strong local relevance. The lack of capital limits their ability to develop and market products, hire skilled talent, expand beyond the region, and attract follow-on investments. As a result, the NE's unique strengths—such as its biodiversity, organic agriculture, and cultural heritage—remain under-leveraged in the national startup narrative.

Here's another piece of the puzzle: what startups in the Northeast are focussing on doesn't always align with what investors are pursuing. In the NE, construction leads at 26%, agriculture at 23%, and IT services at 12%. Compare that to the rest of India, where IT and healthcare startups are the darlings of venture capital. Investors love high-growth, scalable tech companies—think fintech, health tech, or

NER start-ups get only 2% of the VC funds: Why?

By K N Kumar

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edtech. But agriculture and construction? They're crucial for the Northeast's economy, but they often require more time to yield results and don't fit the "unicorn" mould VCs are hunting for.

What can change the game?
(1) First, infrastructure needs a serious upgrade—think better internet, reliable power, and smoother transportation. Northeast connectivity initiatives are a step in the right direction, but they need to move faster.
(2) Building local ecosystems by establishing more incubators and accelerators, and linking NE founders with experienced mentors from across India, can bridge the skills and knowledge gap.
(3) Governments can offer targeted incentives, tax breaks, grants, and easier compliance for NE startups, while also encouraging the creation of NE-focused VC or angel funds to provide much-needed seed and early-stage capital.
(4) Showcasing NE success stories and organizing investor tours and pitch events in the region can help VCs discover untapped opportunities. The NE's strengths in organic products, eco-tourism, and handicrafts also align well with the global rise in sustainability investing, presenting a unique opportunity for VCs interested in ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) ventures.

That the NER gets only 2% of India's venture capital doesn't show its real potential for entrepreneurship. First things first, change the name of the Department of Commerce & Industries of Meghalaya into something more proactive and catalysing, not the sluggish and lethargic relic of the licence-permit raj. Maybe the government should create a Department to promote Private Investment on the lines of the Department for Promotion and Industrial Trade? The only document available on the website of the Department of Commerce and Industries, under 'Reports', is "Small Scale, Village & Cottage Industries" published in 1993. Need I say more?

The writer is a former member of the IAS.

ently the weak Opposition in Meghalaya seems hostile rhetorically and wanting to paralyse progress. Francis Bacon rightly compared critics to brushers of noblemen's clothes, implying that they polish and refine the works of great minds rather than creating original ideas themselves.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Saluting Shillong's silent heroes in blue
Editor,
I write this letter to draw attention to a group of individuals who very often go unnoticed in our daily lives, yet who play one of the most important roles in preserving the health, beauty, and dignity of our beloved city of Shillong—the sanitation workers in blue jackets who sweep our streets morning, afternoon, and evening.

Each and every day, whether the sun is shining or the clouds are pouring rain, these men and women carry out their duties with quiet perseverance and discipline. While many of us are in bed or are rushing to our workplaces, schools or colleges they are already at work—sweeping, cleaning, and ensuring that the waste of the entire city does not become its burden. Their service is consistent, humble, and usually thankless. Yet, without them, the cleanliness we take for granted would

vanish.
I have watched them at work in every corner of the city—from Police Bazar to residential colonies—methodically going about their tasks. And there is dignity in the way they work. They are the invisible backbone of our urban routine.

At a time when Shillong is preparing to welcome the National Games in 2027 and positioning itself as a model for urban cleanliness, we must pause to recognize that these sanitation workers are the true foot soldiers of this vision. Their efforts are not just a matter of civic duty—they reflect pride in the place they live in. That, to me, is real patriotism.

It would be most fitting for our local authorities, schools, and civil society to publicly acknowledge sanitation workers in their events and highlight their stories in the media. Simple gestures—a respectful greeting, a word of thanks, or even basic amenities like refreshments—could mean a great deal to them.

Let us not wait for a World Environment Day or Swachh Bharat event to express our gratitude. Let us make it a daily habit to respect and honour these hardworking individuals who, without complaint, make Shillong the place we are proud to call home.

Yours etc.,
Adrially Mary Lyngdoh
Via email

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

You Can't Be a Part-Time Father...!

Nope, I didn't write this on Father's Day. I waited. Like a real father should. Not for the cards with more glitter than glue. Not for the WhatsApp deluge of music-backed poems playing — "My Dad, My Hero" — forwarded so many times, even the phone gets tired.

I waited till the confetti settled, till the virtual candles stopped flickering, till the sponsored ads gave up on me.

And that's when I heard it. One quiet sentence. A line from a family message, barely whispered into the digital void: "Thank you, Dad, for being present."

Present. Not wrapped in gift paper. Not an iPhone. Not a set of socks. Not the kind that fits inside a box with a ribbon. I mean the other "present" — the one they used to call out in school. "Robert?"

"Present, ma'am!" That one. The word that means you showed up. Not just in the car outside the gate. Not just in the family album. But in real life. Day after exhausting day. Tantrum after tantrum. Tooth after tooth under the pillow.

Being "present" doesn't mean you attended their annual day over Zoom while secretly replying to emails. Or that you sent them a voice note from your quarterly review saying, "Do well in your elocution competition, beta!" Being present means you were there when their courage wobbled. When the math homework attacked. When the school bully struck. When they stood alone at the edge of the football field, looking for their cheer squad — and saw you, the lone clapper with a camera phone and a heart

full of pride. And also as was the case with my daughters, when their hearts were broken, by some smug fellow, whose face I wanted to punch.

But before you play your ace of spades — "But I'm the provider!" — let me slide in my joker. Yes, you bring home the bacon. But are you at the table when it's served? Or are you "on a call"? If your child recognises the sound of your key turning in the lock more than your laugh, then brother, it's time for a recalibration.

Let's talk about you divorcees. (Yes, I said it.) Some of you think two weekends a month and a few summer selfies in Goa is fatherhood. Let me break it gently — that's tourism. Children don't need tourists. They need residents.

Part-time fatherhood may work for tax filing or car rentals, but not for the human soul.

Not when a child's sense of security is being constructed. Not when their blueprint for love, for respect, for family — is under construction. You can't subcontract this one.

"But my child doesn't want to talk to me!" I hear you cry. Let me tell you why. Because the last few times they tried, you had your nose in your phone, your eyes on the stock ticker, and your ears tuned to commentary from an IPL match. Children aren't stupid. They know when they're background noise. You see, being present doesn't mean being perfect.

It means being human. It means putting your ego on silent mode, and your empathy on loudspeaker.

It means you become: The villain in their bedtime story (if required).

The horse during piggyback rides. The voice behind the school project (even

when you glue your fingers to the chart).

The secret investor in their lemonade stand (and sole customer too).

And yes, the fool in their puppet show.

Sometimes it means staying silent when you want to fix everything. It means listening to a 12-minute explanation of why Shreya hates Anaya — without solving it, judging it, or interrupting it. It means realising that their problems may not have tax benefits or strategic value, but in their world, it's DEFCON.

And when they cry? Don't say, "Stop crying, be strong."

Say instead, "I'm here."

Because presence doesn't always solve.

It simply soothes.

Now let me tell you a story.

Years ago, at a school open day, a small boy stood at the gate, looking down the road. All around, children were dragging their fathers to classrooms — "Come see my drawing!" "That's my model of the solar system!" But this one child stood alone. The principal noticed him. "Waiting for someone, beta?"

The boy nodded. "My dad," he said.

"He said he'd come?"

"Yes. He said he'll try."

And that word — try — floated like a helium balloon, losing hope with every second.

The father never came.

'Now listen to the twist — that child became a father.

And every single time his child said, "Papa, will you come?"

He didn't say, "I'll try."

He said, "I'll be there."

And he was.

Because broken promises in childhood become unbro-

BOB'S BANTER



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

ken vows in adulthood — if we learn.

Here's the miracle of presence: it's contagious.

Your child learns to value what you model.

They carry forward what you lived.

And one day, when their own child shouts out "Daddy?", they won't just echo your voice — they'll embody your presence.

That's legacy.

Not the house you built.

Not the bank balance you left.

But the moments you lived.

The effort you gave.

The love you showed.

You don't need to be wealthy to be present. You need to be willing.

You don't need wisdom. You need attention.

Not expensive gifts. But expensive time.

So here's a suggestion — and it doesn't need a calendar alert.

The next time your child walks into the room, don't scroll.

Don't shush.

Don't sigh.

Look up.

Look straight into their eyes.

And with your whole being — not just your voice — say:

"Present!"

Because that one word — that simple roll-call affirmation — is how generations get healed.

And one day, in the crowded classroom of life, when your child's child says,

"Where's Daddy?",

you'll be remembered as the man who answered —

"Present."

If you would like to receive Bob's Banter as a daily column in your WhatsApp

everyday, do send your name and phone number to bob-

sbanter@gmail.com

"The future starts today, not tomorrow."

— Pope John Paul II

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JUNE 19, 2025

ADCs & Environmental Concerns

THE Khasi Hills District Council had passed the Solid Waste Management Act in 2020 but it was notified in the Meghalaya Gazette only in February 2022 and therefore had the force of law a full two years after the Act was passed. The Act defines what solid waste is which is a copy paste of the Solid Waste Management Act of the State and Central Government. Every citizen understands what solid waste is. Essentially solid waste is anything discarded by homes and institutions such as household waste, debris from construction works, hospital waste etc. which is generally termed as "garbage."

Considering that the Autonomous District Councils claim jurisdiction over rivers and forests, it is a matter of grave concern that they show no inclination to exercise their authority over the conservation of these precious resources. The public residing in areas outside the municipal areas now use rivers as their garbage dump leading to wholesale pollution of rivers. Despite clear laws emanating from the State Pollution Control Board prohibiting the washing of vehicles in rivers, car owners continue to flagrantly violate this law and the Dorbar Shnong are complicit in that they do not exercise any control over such illegal activities. On the contrary some Dorbar Shnong are complicit in this. The question therefore is what is the ambit of the Dorbar Shnong. Who are they answerable to? To the District Council or the State Government which recently came up with a stringent piece of law prohibiting the dumping of garbage into rivers. It is this ambiguity that allows the non-compliant Dorbar Shnong to get away without accountability. The Khasi Hills District Council (KHADC), Executive Committee had constituted the Solid Waste Management Cell in early 2024 with a clear mandate of including civil society organisations involved in environment protection. Not a single meeting has been convened to date. This shows that the KHADC lacks seriousness or the newly elected Council members are not adequately sensitised to the issue. The KHADC Act speaks about Dorbar Shnong creating awareness about this Act and its punitive powers but very few Dorbar Shnong have even called a meeting to discuss the matter. Very few Dorbar Shnong if any have constituted the solid waste management cells within their jurisdiction. This reveals the lack of seriousness with which they take any Act passed by the KHADC.

Under this Act the headmen and Dorbar Shnong are expected to oversee the management of solid waste within their jurisdiction. There is a laundry list of do's and don'ts for the shnong and elaka including the right to fine polluters. But all this remains on paper only. The shnong outside the Municipality have no sweepers and hence the garbage is thrown by passers-by in streets and drains and in rivers. The garbage then blocks the passage of storm water, thereby leading to flooding in low lying areas. Something is seriously amiss and disjointed in the system and that requires fixing because too many authorities ultimately lead to blame games where none is accountable even while rivers bear the brunt of massive pollution. Who will fix the system?

The Thomas Jones School of mission as a heritage site

By Rev. Lyndan Syiem

In previous years, my articles on Thomas Jones Day have been on the pioneer Welsh Calvinistic-Methodist missionary, Thomas Jones I, and others who followed him. This year my article will not be on persons or past events but upon buildings and colonial-era architecture, specifically the Thomas Jones School of Mission at Nongsawlia. This is a large, imposing structure, painted post-office red, located just down the road from the historic Nongsawlia Presbyterian Church. In 2014-15, the Sohra Civil Sub-Division had erected a signboard identifying the building as a 'Historical and Religious Site.' This has naturally raised expectations of a formal evaluation by the Government of Meghalaya in order to officially recognize and notify it as a 'Heritage Site.'

This historic 113-year-old building was earlier known as the Cherra Theological College. This institution however was shifted to Mawklot in 1994, and the entire campus and buildings were handed over to the Thomas Jones School of Mission in 2000. As the main academic building is well over a century old, perhaps it is time for the Government to recognize its heritage status, for reasons of history and geographic location, religious and literary significance, as well as for its unique architecture.

First, historically, Sohra is an important place in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, in fact, in the entire North-East India. Here Sohra refers to the plateau-edge region from Khliehshong to Saitsohen. Saitsohen, adjoining Nongsawlia, was the headquarters of the colonial British government in undivided Assam from 1832 to 1866. Sohra is also significant for its long-standing record of the heaviest annual rainfall in the world. Second, the religious reasons: Sohra was where Christian missionaries (English Baptists in 1832 and Welsh Presbyterians in 1841) began their work among the Khasis. Sohra (Nongsawlia) was the mission headquarters till Shillong grew in importance in the latter 19th century. Again, Sohra (Khliehshong) was for a long time the base of the Ramakrishna Mission's work in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

Third, the educational reason: the first schools among the Khasis were established at Sohra, Mawmluh and Mawmsai, first by Alexander Lish in 1832, and again by Thomas Jones in 1842. The Sohra variety became the written form of the Khasi language, making Sohra the

literary centre of the Khasis. Fourth, the religio-cultural reasons: from a traditional Khasi perspective, it was Sohra culture and folk religion that became the archetypal Khasi form. From a Christian perspective, it was converts from Sohra who carried their Khasi Christian culture to Shillong when the capital was shifted in 1866 and the Shillong mission station established in 1871. Fifth, the politico-economic reasons: Sohra had long been the main trading centre between the Khasi hills and the Bangla plains. Consequently, Hima Sohra became the foremost among the various Khasi kingdoms, where the British first established their headquarters.

The above reasons make Sohra the natural location of

earthquake, and the rainy, foggy, soggy climate. It had to protect people from collapsing masonry and books and documents from dampness and fungus.

Robert Jones avoided the old method of piling up stone walls, what the Khasis called 'kynroh maw,' and instead used hardwood posts and bamboo covered with lime mortar, 'ka biar.' The building has a distinctive ultra-high roof that slopes down very low on the verandah all around. The verandah has thousands of glass panes fitted on the upper portions to keep out the fog, while allowing in the sunlight. Robert Jones built thick, double 'biar' walls, especially around the library, to combat the humidity. The structure certainly merits preservation



a Heritage Site. The building itself offers the sixth, architectural, reason: It is one of the oldest buildings in Sohra, actually in the entire Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The claim to being one of the oldest can easily be sustained because all large buildings were destroyed by the Great Earthquake of 1897. The oldest major building, post earthquake, is the neighbouring Nongsawlia Presbyterian Church, which was rebuilt in 1898.

Among the next oldest is the erstwhile Cherra Theological College (CTC), founded by John Roberts in 1887. After the 1897 Earthquake had destroyed the first building, a second building was constructed and dedicated in 1912, during the Assembly held at Nongsawlia. This second building was constructed under the supervision of Robert Jones, the second principal of CTC and a skilful builder. It combined the classrooms, library, chapel, hall and the administrative rooms under one roof, for better protection against the extreme Sohra dampness. It was designed to guard against two hazards: another

as an example of early 20th century colonial architecture in Sohra, amidst the threat of earthquake and the constant fog and rain.

The name "Thomas Jones" is the seventh reason for recognition as a Heritage Site. It was the Rev. Thomas Jones I and his wife, Anne, who established the first permanent mission among the Khasis. They arrived at Sohra on 22 June, 1841, and pioneered the Khasi alphabet, literacy and literature. Thomas Jones taught the Khasis to commercially extract lime by burning limestone with coal; he introduced the saw and other iron tools and improved their agricultural and construction techniques. This pioneer was followed by over 150 missionaries who contributed greatly to the socio-economic development of the Khasi-Jaintia people.

One of those was John Roberts, the founder Principal of CTC, who trained most of the early Khasi pastors. He translated much of the Old Testament and composed many hymns and songs, including the famous

"Ri Khasi, Ri Khasi." He co-founded the first Khasi journal, he wrote many books and poems, and so is honoured as the 'Father of Khasi Literature.' He died in 1908 and was buried at the Nongsawlia cemetery. His towering monument overlooks the sprawling TJSM campus—reason number eight. There is a deep connection between John Roberts and the plot of land where he lived and worked, which is where the Nongsawlia Church and the present TJSM stands.

As years passed, the CTC expanded and added more buildings: missionary bungalows, staff quarters, hostels, a dining hall. These buildings were used not only for religious instruction but also for a teachers' training school; from 1938 till 1983, the CTC housed the 'Normal School,' a government-recognized institution. This notable contribution to education is justifiably the ninth reason for recognition as a Heritage Site. The school shifted to its own building nearby in June 1983, and was renamed the Cherra Teachers' Training Centre.

The CTC has trained generations of pastors, not just Khasis but Mizos, Nagas, Garos, Kukis, Bodos and others; and not just Presbyterians but also Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Church of God and other denominations. It continued to grow and as part of its expansion and upgradation, the college was shifted to Mawklot, near Shillong, in 1994, although the Sohra campus and buildings were still used for junior classes. This arrangement continued until the TJSM was established and inaugurated on 22 June, 2000, to train mission workers of the Church. As the TJSM celebrates its Silver Jubilee in 2025, it serves as a living monument to Thomas Jones and the Welsh missionary legacy in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. That rich legacy continues to inspire our students and graduates to educate, enlighten, uplift and above all to serve others as we ourselves have been served.

Meanwhile, the historic, 113-year-old building at Nongsawlia continues to defy the wind and the lashing rain, and to remind this present generation of the vision, the faithfulness, and the sense of duty of ages past. As a tribute to the courage and determination of the human spirit, this is the tenth and final reason for seeking the Government's official notification of the Thomas Jones School of Mission as a Heritage Site.

The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Chewing

By Ellerine Diengdoh

Disclaimer:

This is not an indictment of all Indians, nor a rejection of a shared identity. It calls out a specific pattern, how mainland media and casual prejudices continue to misrepresent the Northeast. Not all Northeasterners are savages or saints. Not all mainlanders are ignorant or bigoted, but when stories rely on stereotypes, both harm and erasure follow.

If you're offended, ask yourself... is it because you're implicated, or because you're uncomfortable being reminded? To those who know, India's strength lies in its complexity, this is not about you. However, if what you read sounds familiar because you once laughed, nodded, or stayed silent, then yes, it's very much about you. Not everyone gets to belong to the idea of "India," some of us are too busy being explained, excluded, or exoticised by it.

There are only three things I remember, that have ever brought the people of Shillong, to a complete, reverent halt:

1. Amit Paul making it on Indian Idol Season 3.

2. The Shillong Chamber Choir winning India's Got Talent Season 2, and

3. A man named Raja Raghuvanshi being found dead in Sohra, and an entire community immediately being put on trial for the crime. If that sounds extreme, that's because it was.

Mainland media, bless its slowly decaying frontal lobe, did exactly what it always does. It conducted a couple of Google searches, summoned a few "experts," and executed a flawless misreading of anthropology to finally christen an entire state: "Crime-Prone Hills." As if crime is something that naturally occurs at altitude. Like moss.

For seventeen days, the whispers bubbled back up like bad curry. "So they love dogs? Cooked, not cuddled, right?" "Since China's next door, are they all, like...half Chinese?" "With those tiny eyes, how do they even watch TV?" "Why so much mob lynching up there? Is that how they say hello?" "They passed exams outside the North East? What did they do, sacrifice a chicken?" "Bit odd that they wear jeans. Where's the tribal authenticity? You know, feathers, spears, war paint?" "Are they interested in human rights or just human ribs?"

On the early hours of June 9, 2025, when news broke that Sonam Raghuvanshi, Raja's wife, had been found thousands of kilometres away in Ghazipur, and more crucially—was not abducted by a roving band of Khasi head-hunting flesh-eating savages, the collective sigh that rose from Meghalaya brought on a light drizzle. Not because the truth finally came out, but because "we," the "accused," had finally been acquitted. By this point, social media was already overflowing with thoughtful insights like "savages" and "bring the CBI in." One post stood out, from a certain Pia Singh. Whether Pia is a real person or not, only God and Mark Zuckerberg know.

Pia Singh, who, armed with a Facebook account and no particular credentials other than a louder-than-average delusion, claimed, that during a recent visit to Shillong, her "driver" gave her a chilling warning: "Don't walk alone. You might end up in someone's plate."

Now, a reasonable human being might have paused here. Thought, briefly. Is this something an actual person in a functioning democracy says out loud without being dared? But no. No one questioned her (in fact, 54 people liked it). But again, why would they? Pia had the Sacred Trifecta of Indian credibility: a North Indian name, Instagrammable activism, and a blind spot the size of Northeast India.

Meanwhile, here on the ground, we watched as an entire state got put on trial without any of the usual legal formalities, like suspects or evidence. Meghalaya's main offence appeared to be "looking a bit murderous." The rivers were too dangerous, the cliffs too death-defying, the caves too... cave-like. Apparently, this made it the perfect setting for a homicide. Or a shampoo ad. But mostly homicide.

Somewhere between drone shots of majestic cliffs and interviews with people known only as "local resident" (a com-

mon name in these parts, apparently), Meghalaya stopped being a functioning state and became a location in someone else's psychological thriller.

Every waterfall was now a crime scene. Every local, a potential killer. Every local stew, laced with slow-cooked remains of bone that looked suspiciously "mainland".

Then, rather inconveniently, came the truth.

Sonam, it turned out, had not been kidnapped by local savages, sacrificed under a blood moon, or slow-roasted over a ceremonial fire pit. No. She had allegedly planned the murder herself, along with her lover. Like a boring garden-variety mainland criminal, straight out of Delhi Crime, but with terrible planning and no Netflix deal.

At that moment, when it became quite clear that Meghalaya wasn't the villain, a few apologies trickled in. Most of them, of course, had never been the ones shouting in the first place. No follow-ups, no prime-time self-reflection. Just a quiet pivot to the next outrage, because the walk-back is never as theatrical as the accusations.

When someone from the Northeast is attacked or killed, it is an unfortunate detail, like bad weather, regrettable, but not worth adjusting the coverage. When they are accused, it's a case study, a pattern, a long-overdue conversation we suddenly feel qualified to lead.

However, this time, the Meghalaya Police solved the case. In ten days. The savages—how dare they. Where was the chaos? The confusion? The incompetence? Instead, the investigation was clean, professional, precise, inconveniently efficient. But the real insult came after. It was the Chief Minister. The ministers. The guides. The locals. All speaking to the press—clearly, calmly, like people who didn't need to be spoken for. The officers leading the investigation? The most eloquent of the lot. Composed, razor-sharp, fluent...each word spoken with the kind of quiet authority that doesn't raise its voice because it doesn't need to. Almost all of them spoke in English so crisp it could anchor the evening news. What really ruined the national fantasy was that some of them even spoke in Hindi. Not the painful kind we're used to exoticising, but neutral, deliberate Hindi. Polite, even. Which is a betrayal of several long-held stereotypes, and frankly, very rude!

This wasn't the script. What everyone got instead, was a region refusing to perform its designated role in the national imagination. The myth of the mute, ignorant, semi-naked savage North-easterner collapsed under the weight of its own lazy construction. Suddenly, all that righteous noise disappeared.

The Khasi community didn't just dodge a bullet, we dodged a narrative. Which is worse, really, because bullets eventually stop, narratives don't. They cling like lamp damp. They show up in suspicious pauses, in badly pronounced place names, and in questions that start with "No offence, but..." and absolutely always end in offence.

So, we are not angry. Just tired. Tired in that specific way you get when the punchline is always you. Tired of being described like terrain...remote, difficult, dense. We are just trying to get through the week without becoming a genre.

I would like to end with a personal note to Pia Singh, wherever you are, probably sipping organic tea designed to boost moral superiority—thank you. You've managed what centuries of colonial officers, clipboard anthropologists, bored news anchors, badly subtitled documentaries failed to pull off: you proved that in India, the loudest voices belong to those who've seen the least and guessed the most. In trying to unravel the savage tribes of the East, you accidentally unravelled yourself. Which is impressive, really. Most people take years of therapy to do that.

So no, Pia. No one is coming to eat you. But if, by some cosmic accident, you were the last edible thing on Earth? We'd all turn vegetarian. Immediately. Just to be safe.

Letters to the Editor

India's North East must discover its potentials

Editor, Apropos of KN Kumar's article, NER start-ups get only 2% of VC funds: Why (ST June 18, 2025), I have the following points to make:

Don't let the Northeast be the footnote of India's startup journey. Instead it must also be a part of making it the headline of a start-up story. The start-up revolution will be incomplete until it includes every corner of India including the far but fierce Northeast and also away from Metro city clusters.

If the Silicon Valley was born in garages, the Northeast can build its own legacy from its forests, farms, and frontier spirit. From crafts to code, from tea to tech the Northeast must be having stories of start-ups waiting to be told and funded.

Investor bias is India's invisible bottleneck and also is natural! Northeast India needs seed capital exploiting local eco-system and spirit. A 12.7x growth in Northeast startups is not a small spark and it's a signal flare in my view.

Yours etc.,
Dr.C.S.Rao,
Bengaluru.

A balanced approach to regulating two-wheeler rentals in Meghalaya

Editor, The winding roads of Meghalaya, beckoning thrill-seekers and nature lovers alike, have long been synonymous with freedom and adventure. For many young travelers, renting a motorcycle or scooter is not just an economical way to explore the state, but an exhilarating experience that comes with the rush of fresh air and the thrill of the open road. However, a recent incident involving tourists from Indore in Sohra has led to a blanket ban on two-wheeler rental businesses in Meghalaya. While ensuring public safety is crucial, an outright prohibition may inadvertently clip the wings of this thriving industry.

The tourism sector - a significant contributor to Meghalaya's economy, relies partly on two-wheeler rentals. A ban would not only impact these young investors but also affect local employment opportunities, leaving many youths without a source of income. Instead of a blanket ban, I propose introducing targeted

regulations within the Motor Vehicle Act. A consultative approach, involving stakeholders, experts, and local authorities, could help craft balanced policies that address concerns while preserving the industry.

Key considerations could include:

1. Registration and licensing for vehicle rental businesses.
2. Background checks for rental operators to ensure credibility.
3. Mandatory insurance coverage for riders and vehicles.
4. Enhanced monitoring and enforcement to prevent misuse.
5. Rider safety training to promote responsible riding.

Registration and licensing would ensure that only legitimate businesses operate, maintaining standards and accountability. This would also provide a framework for authorities to track and regulate the industry.

By working together, we can find solutions that benefit all parties - ensuring public safety, supporting local businesses, and promoting sustainable tourism.

Let's not let one incident hold us back from exploring possibilities. Let's ride together towards a balanced approach that preserves the joy of riding and the beauty of Meghalaya.

Concern over the behaviour of elders in public spaces

Editor, Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I would like to draw attention to a concerning issue that we experienced quite frequently which is the uncalled-for behavior of some elderly individuals in public.

While elders are often respected for their wisdom and experience, but I was met with a completely different reality today where there was a minor car accident with no scratches or any harm done. However, the situation turned unpleasant due to the attitude of the elderly man driving the other vehicle.

Rather than resolving the matter calmly, he began shouting and hurling slang and inappropriate words in front of my children seated in the car. Such behavior was shocking, uncalled for and deeply disappointing, especially coming from someone we are taught to respect and look up to and I am sure he will have to eat his own filthy words coming out of his mind sooner or later. But,

the fact of the matter is how we are teaching our younger generations with this kind of arrogant attitude and irresponsible behavior.

While age should earn respect, it also comes with the responsibility to set the right example. Sadly, this incident reflects a growing trend of intolerance and aggression, even among the older generation. It is high time we address this issue and promote mutual respect, patience, courteousness and moral responsibilities—qualities that should define us, regardless of age.

I hope this letter helps spark a conversation around the need for responsible behavior in public spaces.

Yours etc.,
S. Lyndang,
Via email

What model of ILP do pressure groups want?

Editor, It is disturbing that in the midst of an investigation on the Raghuvanshi murder case, a conglomerate group under the banner CoMSO had to stage a protest demanding the government's action for implementing the Inner Line Permit. To

attribute that such a heinous crime is linked to the absence of an ILP is hollow since we all know very well that such an incident had never happened in these past several years. And even if we have the ILP how can it become a fool-proof mechanism in preventing more heinous crimes from occurring.

This is a big question, which clearly no one has an answer or a solution for and also on how to implement the ILP because there has been no workable model except what we may recollect is the proposed three-tier card entry system. In an age of technology perhaps the use of sophisticated identification technology aided with actionable data could be utilized but its feasibility will also need to be examined.

Throwing all responsibility upon the state authorities is unrealistic if the MRSSA can be more effectively implemented in letter and spirit and especially with the ADCs along with the local Headmen being more responsible there is no need to misjudge any solution that the state proposes.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

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

"Illusion is the first of all pleasures."

— Voltaire

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2025

Secrecy as strategy

REFUSAL by the authorities here to part with vital information is par for the course. Hiding facts comes naturally to them, for no reason whatsoever. So too with the Dreamliner air crash in Ahmedabad a week ago. Also with the information relating to Operation Sindoor undertaken by the military over a month ago. So too with all matters of the governments at the Centre and in the states. If Right to Information Act came into being in 2015, the scenario of stonewalling vital information under one guise or the other continues without any let-up. Take for instance the reports about the installation of a new engine to the ill-fated Dreamliner aircraft. No authority has confirmed nor denied this. Even the Air India management, run by the highly reputed professional business group - the Tatas, would not speak up - let alone the run-of-the-mill, unprofessional politicians running the affairs of the nation. The lives of over 270 were lost, including those of over 60 foreigners. Yet, the secrecy that surrounds the fallen aircraft would be maintained with all zealotry. The same zealotry might, perhaps, not be evident in the investigations. The investigations, as is their wont here, can go on and on for a couple of years or more. Or, insurance firms might exert pressure and expedite it - which is unlikely as they need to pay the compensations only after the investigation report is submitted and approved.

Curiously, initial reports had said the plane ran the whole length of the runway before take-off. This was unusual for an aircraft, as it would lift off midway through the ground run. If correct, this meant the plane had technical snags, despite which it took off only to crash less than two kilometres away. Another report hinted that the hydraulic system failed, which could be why it could not ascend in a normal manner. Every plane has two engines. If one fails, the other would automatically engage. This is the principal trust that gives confidence to air passengers. This has not happened in the case of the crashed Dreamliner. Facts must be stated, irrespective of whether or not it would lead to questions about insurance claims. If the plane was not in proper condition, the flight should have been cancelled. Now, the Director General of Civil Aviation has ordered eight steps of checks before a flight takes off. Question is, why only now. Standard operation procedures should have been in place in the past, present and future too. Passenger safety is important. The Tatas, who pioneered the aviation push in India, know as much.

The same scenario exists even a month after Operation Sindoor. The chief of defence staff flies to Singapore to make one statement and weeks later he flies to Pune to make another and to Visakhapatnam to make a third now. He would not address the nation directly or through the media. Nor would Prime Minister Modi. The angle of foul play, sabotage, must indeed be investigated, but the need for high secrecy is uncalled for and unwarranted.

The Difficult Choices Meghalaya Must Make to Reform its Schools

By Avner Pariat

The Education system in Meghalaya is in crisis. With the state ranking lowest in India's national Performance Grading Index (PGI), and with indicators for learning outcomes, infrastructure, and governance scoring far below the national average, the message is clear: business as usual is failing. The challenges are structural, long-standing, and deeply political. But unless policy-makers are willing to make hard, unpopular, and sometimes painful decisions, Meghalaya will continue to fall short of its constitutional promise to provide quality education to every child.

This article outlines some difficult but unavoidable choices that the government must face to reform the Education sector. Each decision comes with costs, but postponing them has already exacted an even greater toll on student learning, teacher morale, and public finance.

Merge or Close Under-Enrolled Schools

Meghalaya maintains over 14,000 schools for a population of about 40 lakh. However, as per the Education Department's Discussion Paper 2025, 206 schools have zero enrolment and over 2,200 have fewer than ten students. Many of these are located in the same villages or on the same campus as other institutions. Continuing to operate these schools stretches resources thin, keeps teachers in posts where they have no impact, and prevents the buildup of quality infrastructure and staff in other viable institutions. The government must conduct a rationalization exercise, closing or merging under-enrolled schools and redirecting those resources to institutions with the capacity to serve students effectively. While politically sensitive, particularly in rural constituencies, this reform is necessary to ensure educational investment delivers solid results.

Eliminate Duplication in the UDISE+ Database

Due to opportunistic registration of multiple school levels (LP, UP, Secondary, Higher Secondary) as separate entities, thousands of schools in Meghalaya are double- or triple-counted in the official UDISE+ system. In reality, around 6,700 of the 14,582 listed schools are part of grouped institutions. This artificial inflation distorts infrastructure metrics and

drives down the state's PGI score. Consolidating records to reflect unique school entities will provide accurate data for planning, improve monitoring, and boost the state's national ranking. But this also means withdrawing duplicate grants, which will meet resistance from school management committees accustomed to multiple funding streams.

Phase Out the Patchwork of Grant-in-Aid Schemes

Over ten different Grant-in-Aid (GIA) schemes currently operate in Meghalaya, including deficit, deficit-specific, adhoc, and subject-specific schemes such as the Hindi Grant or Science Grant. Each has its own eligibility, salary structures, and administrative requirements. This complex system absorbs enormous bureaucratic energy and fragments oversight. Consolidating these under a single Meghalaya Education Grant (MEG) will streamline funding and allow for performance-based criteria to guide future increases. However, vested interests that benefit from legacy entitlements and discretionary grants will resist this rationalization. We the Public must fight them, the Government alone will not be able to do this.

Re-balance the Education Budget Towards Infrastructure

More than two-thirds of Meghalaya's education budget is consumed by teacher salaries, with over 65% of that going to private institutions. Very little is left for improving school infrastructure - despite the fact that only 26% of schools have electricity and fewer than half have basic washroom/toilet facilities. To make a visible difference in the learning environment, the state must study salaries, redeploy surplus staff, and earmark a fixed share of education spending for infrastructure upgrades. This fiscal rebalancing might be very unpopular with teacher unions but is essential for long-term benefit of the system.

Link Public Funding to School Performance and Fee Transparency

At present, schools receive government aid regardless of their academic performance, enrollment trends, or the fees they charge. Some institutions continue to receive large grants while per-

forming poorly or imposing heavy financial burdens on parents. A reformed system must tie funding to results: schools should demonstrate improvements in attendance, pass rates, and infrastructure standards. Moreover, a fee regulation authority must ensure that public funds are not used to subsidize profit-making by private schools. This accountability framework will be contested by private operators but is key to ensuring public money delivers public value.

Enforce Teacher Deployment and Pay Equity

The current system creates gross disparities in teacher salaries. Government-paid 'deficit' teachers can earn over Rs 1 lakh per month, while equally qualified peers appointed by school management committees (SMCs) earn just Rs 10,000. In the same institution, such disparities breed resentment and undermine teamwork. Policymakers must move toward standardizing pay scales, rationalizing deployment based on need, and reducing excess staffing in some areas. This would require politically sensitive steps such as offering voluntary retirement or retraining for redeployment. Additionally, the underpaid, overworked oftentimes younger teachers might be more willing to listen and work with the education department.

Invest in Flagship Government Schools to Challenge Private Dominance

One of the reasons private schools dominate is because many parents see no quality alternative in the public sector. To reverse this, the state must build a network of flagship government schools - a Pine Mount for every district - offering strong academics and quality modern facilities. These schools would serve as benchmarks, raise expectations, and put pressure on private institutions to improve. The capital investment required would be significant even for renovations, but the returns in terms of public trust and educational equity would be transformative. I recall one writer lamenting that Meghalaya's Educational System had become privatised. I don't recall a time when it wasn't. For over a hundred years now, Private schools have been allowed to

dominate the landscape but it is time for the state to show that it too can be entrepreneurial. The lesson is clear from the best performers in the country: Education has to be led by the Government. Private can only supplement the effort.

Require Full Financial and Academic Disclosure from Private Grantees

Private schools receiving government grants must be held to the same standards of transparency and reporting as public institutions. This includes audited financial statements, verified enrolment data, teacher attendance records, and academic performance reports. Grants should be contingent on this compliance. Resistance from private school management is expected, but disclosure is a non-negotiable condition for receiving taxpayer funds.

Extend Provident Fund Coverage to All

Currently, only deficit teachers benefit from the Centralized Provident Fund Scheme. However, the law does not exclude others. Extending this benefit to all aided staff would ensure fair and dignified retirement for thousands of teachers. It will require contributions from both employees and employers, and will likely be opposed on cost grounds, but it is a necessary step toward equitable treatment and financial security. This is a low-hanging fruit which the government must pluck.

Finally, I want to add that implementing any of these reforms in a top-down manner will provoke backlash. A structured, inclusive plan for this great transition is essential. This includes consulting with parents, communities and teachers and yes, the school management committees as well. The state must also invest in communication to build public support and explain the long-term benefits of these essential reforms. Meghalaya's education sector will not improve through incrementalism. It demands courageous leadership willing to take hard, politically unpopular decisions in the interest of long-term public good. The state must rationalize its school network, reform its funding structures, enforce accountability, and reinvest in public education. These choices are difficult but necessary.

Aitnar Pool: A Place of Renaissance

By Teinam Dkhar

In the middle of Jowai, hidden behind the noise of everyday life, lies a pool that comes alive just once a year. Aitnar. "Aitnar" comes from the Pnar words "Ait" meaning muddy or unclear area, and "Nar" meaning iron. It symbolizes a sacred place where impurities are cleansed through strength and ritual, especially during Behdienkhlam. To someone passing by, this area may seem like just another muddy body of water. But to us, it is something much more. It is sacred, it is personal, it holds the soul of Niamtre.

There was a time, during the colonial days, when outsiders looked at this muddy pool and laughed. They saw it as dirty, backward, unworthy of admiration. But they did not understand. They did not feel what we feel when we step into that mud. They did not know that we do not dance in Aitnar to impress, we dance to heal.

Every jump, every splash in Aitnar has meaning. We bring our burdens, our illnesses, fears, brokenness, anger, and we leave them in the mud. To dance in clean, polished waters would be easy. But healing is never easy. And neither is letting go. We choose the mud because that is where the real work of cleansing happens.

During Behdienkhlam, women's participation is primarily confined to the household level, where they prepare offerings and observe rituals from home. However, they do not take part in the public processions, including those at Aitnar and other ceremonial spaces, which are traditionally reserved for men.

And what is most beautiful is that no one is left out. It does not matter if you are rich or poor, dark or fair, old or young. Behdienkhlam welcomes everyone. We all come together, dancing, soaked, laughing, shouting, to throw away what holds us back. For a moment, all lines disappear. There is no "them" and "us," just "we."

But Aitnar is not just for Jowai. Every Seimraij, like Mukhlai, Tuber, Ialung, has its own Aitnar, each with its own stories and heartbeat. These sacred pools connect us across the hills, like hidden veins of memory and belief. Each one whispers a version of the same prayer, U khylalh khatai ia i sih i roi, i kjiut i chitom napoh ka Raji ka Chnong. This means, praying to God to drive away

all illnesses, diseases and negativity from the society. What makes Aitnar even more remarkable is the fact that it stood strong through centuries of change, pressure, and misunderstanding. Despite colonial efforts to reshape indigenous beliefs and the widespread wave of religious conversions, the faith of the Niamtre followers remained firm.

These sacred pools, along with the rituals tied to them, are proof of an identity that could not be erased. While the world around shifted, Aitnar remained, quietly holding space for a people whose connection to their ancestors, land, and rituals runs deeper than any outside influence ever could. And then, there is that moment, if you have seen it, you never forget it. The rotts—decorated shrines, are pulled through this pool by hundreds of men. The Kh-nong Blai, sacred tree trunks believed to carry divine force, follow close behind. The sound of drums rises, people lean out of windows, children run, elders watch with pride. And just before the rotts reach Aitnar, time almost feels like it pauses. It is as if everything, our history, our faith, our future, moving together in that one breath. This is Behdienkhlam, not just a ritual, but a living memory that returns to us each year, reminding us who we are.

In recent years, the government has begun to see what we have always known, that these Aitnars are not just religious spaces, but living heritage sites. Funds have been introduced to preserve them, promote them, and welcome visitors from around the world. Tourists may come to see the spectacle, but if they stay a little longer, they will feel the soul behind it too.

And now, the time has come again. You can feel it, the streets of Jowai are waking up, drums are being tuned, families are preparing. From 11th to 14th July, the muddy waters of Aitnar will be ready. We will gather again, not because we are stuck in old traditions, but because we know they carry something deeper. We dance in the mud not to show where we have come from, but to remember what we must leave behind. And this year, like every year, we step into the water together, uncertain, hopeful, human, and come out whole.

Why blame elders?

Editor

I take strong objection to the letter written by Mr/Ms S. Lyngdoh that appeared in The Shillong Times on June 19, 2025 titled "Concern over the behaviour of elders in public spaces."

For the misbehaviour of one elderly person, the entire generation of elders have been vilified in the title of the letter. The letter also includes phrases like "growing trend of intolerance and aggression, even among the older generation" and "uncalled-for behaviour of some elderly individuals." No evidence has been provided of other examples of bad behaviour by elders, nor have any statistics been provided showing the "growing trend".

This is irresponsible writing and defamatory to elders like myself. There are other uncalled for sentences in the letter. Like "While age should earn respect, it also comes with the responsibility to set the right example." Who says so? This is merely the writer's opinion. Every adult should earn respect and set good examples irrespective of age. Why do we reinforce age stereotypes in this manner?

I'm not sure what the writer's age is but he/she is showing disrespect to all of us elders by branding us

in this manner. Perhaps an apology is called for. Just using one phrase, "regardless of age", does not cover this slur on the elderly. The writer seems to want a public debate on this. That's fine, as long it covers all adults in a balanced way, and not biased against one generation.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Call for equal justice & responsible reporting in Meghalaya

Editor,

Through the columns of your respected newspaper, I wish to express my growing concern over the unequal response of law enforcement agencies, especially in cases involving non-tribal (non-indigenous) victims.

First and foremost, the swift action by the Meghalaya Police in the Raja Raghuvanshi murder case must be appreciated. Cracking such a heinous crime within a week shows what the department is capable of when they act with intent and focus. The officers and its team involved have done a commendable job.

It is also worth highlighting the stellar role played not only by the Police Department but also by the Government of Meghalaya, particularly the Chief Minister. His timely involvement and assurance to the family of the deceased showed a strong commitment to justice. The coordinated effort between the administration and police in this case has set an example of swift and responsible governance, this is the kind of leadership that builds trust among the citizens and upholds the rule of law.

However, this also highlights a painful truth - when it comes to stabbing or murder of non-tribals, the same urgency and seriousness is often missing from the same law enforcement agencies. Let us not forget the incident of stabbing that happened on January 20, 2022 just opposite the Lumdingjiri police station in which not a single person was arrested.

Another incident in which two persons were killed at Ichamati on March 28, 2024 and assault of three non-tribal (non-indigenous) construction workers with rods on April 10, 2024 at Mawlai-Mawroh in which one person died. In these cases, despite the gravity of the crimes, the accused were granted bail, and till date, justice has not been delivered. These incidents have raised legitimate concerns about selective approach and unequal justice in our state. Adding to this, in a recent incident in Bara Bazar,

where extortion slips were openly distributed - a matter that was even reported by your esteemed newspaper, till date no arrests have been made, and none of the pressure groups have been questioned. Why this silence when such actions directly threaten the safety and economy of Shillong's business community?

Another unfortunate aspect is the role of certain national media outlets, which irresponsibly reported on the Raja Raghuvanshi murder case without verifying facts. They wrongly accused the Meghalaya Government and Police Department of inaction, even as the investigation was actively ongoing. Such baseless national coverage not only spreads fear but also damages the image of Meghalaya - a state that heavily depends on tourism.

Take Sohra for example - a world-famous tourist destination known for its beauty and hospitality. Today, hundreds of locals, including women and youth, run homestays, restaurants, and small businesses there. Tourism is their main source of livelihood. Irresponsible national media reporting that portrays Meghalaya as unsafe can seriously harm these innocent people, affecting the state's economy and leading to job losses in these peaceful communities.

Therefore, I humbly appeal to the Meghalaya

Government and Police to ensure justice is delivered equally, regardless of the victim's background. To all pressure groups and civil society, please speak out and act against all violence, not selectively. To the national media I say - report facts responsibly, as your words directly impact the lives of everyday people. Only then, will the State of Meghalaya truly live up to its spirit of unity, justice, and peace for all its people.

Yours etc.,
Homnath Gautam,
Shillong-2

Banks should respond to public queries in the media

Editor,

It's intriguing that my last letter, 'Why is Aadhaar compulsory for opening bank accounts?' (ST May 16th, 2025) which incidentally appeared in these columns did not elicit any response from the banking sector. Aren't banks supposed to be customer friendly and responsive? In that letter I had requested the concerned bank officials to enlighten the public as to why a new client who intends to open a savings bank account is being asked to mandatorily produce their Aadhaar biometric documents, failing

which they are shown the door, thereby denying them their right to open bank accounts. More importantly, in the month of April, this year, a Meghalaya unit of the Awaken India Movement with the support of the North Shillong MLA, A. Nongrum had held a public protest against the compulsory Aadhaar Card registration of all citizens in order to access any public welfare scheme designed by the government. From this public demonstration one gathered that the protesters are solely against the government's denial of societal benefits for non-possession of Aadhaar registration, inferring that the question of banks vis-a-vis Aadhaar question does not figure at all in this tussle!

However, to date, it seems that no semblance of a rejoinder has come from the banking sector against the letter in question if only for the sake of enlightening the general public. This non-responsive attitude of the banks means that the hoi polloi have the inalienable right to open their bank accounts sans Aadhaar seeding/linking against their respective names. Henceforth, if no rebuttal is forthcoming to this critique, the victims concerned may perhaps produce this write-up before the banking functionaries as a stark case in point.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Public safety hazard from low-hanging utility pole wires in Shillong

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authorities and the public to an increasing safety hazard that continues to go unnoticed—the dangerously low-hanging cable wires from utility poles across several localities in Shillong.

In various areas of the city—such as Laitumkhrak, Dhankheti, Moti Nagar, Nongthymmai, Rynjah, and parts of Polo—multiple overhead wires, particularly those belonging to internet and cable TV providers, are observed drooping so low that they are almost within reach of pedestrians. In some cases, these cables hang barely six feet from the ground, brushing past heads and almost tangling with the houses of people.

This situation poses serious public safety risks:

- There is potential for electric shock or trip-and-fall accidents.
- The wires obstruct visibility for drivers, especially

during low-light hours or rainfall.

- In case of heavy winds or storms, these cables may bring down electric poles or cause sparks and fires.

Despite repeated warnings issued by the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) regarding unauthorized cabling on electric poles, the problem continues, either due to a lack of enforcement or negligence by private service providers.

I urge the local municipal bodies to:

- Immediately survey and identify dangerous cable droops.
- Direct all telecom and internet companies to regularize their installations or face penalties.
- Raise public awareness and establish a helpline or reporting mechanism for such safety hazards.

As Shillong continues to grow and modernize, public safety should not be compromised. A coordinated effort between utility companies, government departments, and citizens is urgently needed to address this potentially life-threatening issue.

Yours etc.,
Maphishisha Khryiem,
Via email

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"Childhood is a short season."

— Helen Hayes

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Educational Governance a Priority
THE Performance Grading Index (PGI) for the year 2023-2024 places Meghalaya at the bottom of the heap. It is the only state in the 10th and lowest grade. Naturally the Education Minister has tried to run for cover and apportioned blame to the grading system, stating that they are not up to date. But what really is the PGI? It is an evidence-based assessment tool measuring the performance of school education across States and Union Territories. No one is particularly interested in putting Meghalaya in the docks. The PGI is aligned with the National Education Policy 2020 and also the Sustainable Development Goals developed by the United Nations which aims at equity in educational access. The PGI covers 6 important domains and uses 73 indicators so that it accurately measures what it seeks to. The 6 domains are Learning Outcomes, Access, Infrastructure & Facilities, Equity, Governance Processes, Teacher Education and Training. The problem with Meghalaya is that teachers in rural areas are churned out by the very same defective system that continues to feed the young brains of today's smart world. There is a huge student-teacher disconnect. Just because the teacher has taught does not mean that every student in the class has understood the lesson. Our classrooms are not designed for asking questions. Asking a question is considered impudent. It was so in the past; it still is today. Without asking questions, where's the scope to clear doubts and get over a mathematical obstacle?

Meghalaya's score of 417 points indicates persistent challenges in access and learning outcomes. But much of that is also related to inability to make full use of their cognitive domains due to malnutrition. Whether this constituted one of the PGI measurements is debatable since they only measure learning outcomes and quality of such learning. The dilapidated school buildings in the rural areas of the state indicate that the Government is nonchalant about children having to sit inside such buildings for 6 hours every day. This is where school governance comes in. Was the Education Department ever a priority Department? Never! In Meghalaya the priority departments are those with big allocations such as PWD, PHE and now Tourism. Since the state was created, no minister ever willingly accepted the Education portfolio. That continues to date. Rakkam Sangma could not have been a willing candidate for this post. The reason is because educational governance is a mess. There are no regular inspections. Officers are more tied to their tables than doing their field work.

The very fact that there is a huge drop-out rate at every transition level should have worried successive governments including those that are now in the Opposition criticising what they have themselves failed to do. Retention is a challenge because of stark poverty and if this and successive governments do not tackle this economic hurdle Meghalaya will continue to make news for the wrong reasons. There is no equity in this society. The affluent can afford education; the poor cannot. There is also no stakeholder-ship in education. Parents are poor and hence voiceless and diffident to ask why their child/children failed. A revolution in Education is imperative!

Letters to the Editor

Exempting Mathematics/ Arithmetic in recruitment exams of LDAs in Govt Service

Editor,

In her write up in The Shillong Times, dated 15th Sep. 2023, Patricia Mukhim queried, 'Are tribal students incapable of learning Mathematics and Science?' This has struck the right note on why generally most of the students in the State opt for Arts stream in their educational journeys. The reason, as Mukhim has rightly pointed out, is the system of education in the State that has allowed students to treat mathematics as an optional paper, despite the universal fact that mathematics is the most important subject that sharpens the brain, allows students to be more analytical and troubleshoot problems amongst other benefits.

In light of the above observations, it would not be out of place to mention here that in the past, almost all the various category of posts in the Government of Meghalaya, recruited through MPSC (including the post of LDA to Secretariat Service) required the applicants to sit for a written exam that has English, General awareness & Aptitude Test and Arithmetic/ Mathematics as compulsory subjects. Applicants, including those of LDA to Secretariat Service levels had to pass in all these subjects before they are declared qualified to

sit for the personal interview and ultimately to be recruited for the advertised posts. A case in point is the MPSC advertisements issued vide circular No. MPSC/ADVT-39/1/2018-19/21, dated 13.04.2018 and No. MPSC/ADVT-54/1/2020-21/45, dated 22.12.2021 respectively.

However, it may be noted here, that for the recently concluded exams (successful candidates have already been given appointment) and the currently advertised LDA exams to Secretariat Services advertised vide circular No. MPSC/ADVT-54/1/2023-24/127, dated 13.10.2023. (Para-9, 9.1) and Advt. No.08/2025, dated 8th May 2025 (Para-6, 6.3) respectively, the LDA candidates had/have been asked to appear in the exams for only the following subjects:

Screening Test consisting of the following subjects in MCQ pattern.
1). General English - 150 marks
2). General awareness and Aptitude - 150 marks
Mathematic/Arithmetic has been excluded

The issue of the non-inclusion of Arithmetic/Mathematics is that personnel recruited as LDA to the Secretariat Service, amongst other government departments, are employed in various technical departments like Finance, Planning, works departments viz PWD, PHE, Power, etc of the State Government, where the nature of work requires that personnel recruited to these departments and offices have to have some basic knowledge of Arithmetic/Mathematics. Besides this, all LDA personnel once recruited are liable to be posted/ transferred to any

The future is Science and Technology & we are not ready for it

By Heirtami Paswet

I recently had the pleasure of interacting with science students at a local government higher secondary school in my town. My first interaction was with the Class 11 students, and I was elated to see the hunger in their eyes for knowledge and their hopes for a bright future. As a Physicist, I encouraged them to maintain this spirit as it would help them do well in their future studies in science and technology. I was also delighted to see them answer my questions with excitement—their enthusiasm was contagious. This "visit" happened

of science students. I was shown the answer scripts of previous Physics examinations and lost count of the number of zeros and single digit scores that appeared. This revelation has left me feeling uneasy. I fear for the future of our students. My mind then flashed back to those joyful Class 11 students. It became apparent that they too might share the fate of their Class 12 counterparts. Within a few months or weeks, they too will lose interest, making their future in science uncertain. I do

tulutes to create models, hypotheses and theorems. Each theorem or model is built on the last and hence it becomes vital to learn basic models, theorems and hypotheses before moving to complex ones. If one desires to understand the chapter, it is essential to understand the chapter just before it, i.e., the chapter. To my shock, lessons are taught randomly. But why? Well, the syllabus is distributed among two or three teachers and each teaches random chapters of their own choosing. This

consequences. To add to this, most of the students I talked to come from poor backgrounds and cannot afford additional help from private tutors. Having been a student myself, I can sympathize with students who have to go through this. These are only a few reasons that I have identified. There could be more. So, it is clear that someone in authority must step forward and fix this most basic of all issues. Once again, as with any hypothesis, I could very well be wrong. One thing, however, is indisputable: Bad performance among science students (at least in



to coincide with the commencement of the academic session for the fresh Class 11 batch, which explains the enthusiasm among these students. I then paid another visit to their Class 12 counterparts. These students had been there for over a year, so I naturally expected their enthusiasm to be even more contagious, as science is an interesting subject. But I was utterly shocked by the unresponsiveness and lack of interest in the classroom. It was as if the whole class was mute. Their eyes did not have the sparkle that was palpable in their Class 11 counterparts. They were also unable to answer the most basic of questions, which they should have mastered by now. I continued interacting although most students were not interested at all.

I then had a conversation with the faculty members and was appalled to learn about the examination performance

not want to generalize, but I assume that this is prevalent throughout the state (sans a few good private schools), judging from the recent PGI score for Meghalaya.

So then, what is the cause behind this abysmal performance of science students? During my education at IIT Bombay, I scored A's, B's, published a scientific paper and even received C's and D's. Like Schrödinger's cat, I simultaneously know what it feels like to do well and what it feels like not to do well. After seeing the enthusiasm among the freshers, I personally absolve all the students—so, the blame lies elsewhere. I do not want to make assumptions, so I tried to talk to some students and faculty members including the headmaster. From these conversations, I came up with a hypothesis.

As we know that the hard sciences and mathematics are built on axioms and pos-

practice undermines students' ability to understand and can confuse even the brightest among them. Surely, teachers are accomplished individuals who recognize that this practice does not produce positive learning outcomes. So, then why does this practice persist?

The reason behind this may be bad administrative policies. The government assigns multiple teachers to the same subject, possibly to ease individual burdens and to create more jobs for its citizens. Additionally, teachers in different categories are paid differently. This salary disparity among equally qualified peers can foster resentment and prevent any meaningful cooperation, ultimately harming learning outcomes.

In the end, while teachers complete the syllabus and pat themselves on the back, it is the students and their parents who bear the real

my region) is a reality, and an evaluation is necessary. We must hold someone accountable for this bad performance which has persisted for years.

At this point, it is clear that Science and Technology are the future (always have been) and if we want our state to have a share in this economic pie, we must develop a skilled workforce. This will not happen if we have students who lack basic skills in Science and Technology. It is not an exaggeration to say that Meghalaya needs a huge kick to realize its potential. A lot of work needs to be put in to overhaul our education system. This is a hard problem and a recent article by Avner Pariat ("The Difficult Choices Meghalaya Must Make to Reform its Schools", ST 20-6-25) highlighted the difficult reforms our policy makers must take to revamp our education department.

Northeast India at the Crossroads: From Conflict to Connectivity

By Akhil Ramesh & Mmholumo Kikon

Over the last few years, the Northeast Region (NER) has frequently made headlines for troubling reasons—from civil unrest to inflammatory comments by foreign leaders. The region's strategic and cultural importance has often been overshadowed by narratives centered on conflict, instability, and national security concerns. This was especially ironic, given that successive governments in Delhi had made the Northeast a developmental and diplomatic priority. Significant gains were made—many insurgent groups laid down arms, and there was a perceptible decline in violence.

However, recent developments in parts of the region have brought to light persistent challenges that demand deeper attention. These events have, at times, shifted the national and international focus away from the Northeast's strides in development and connectivity, toward concerns around governance, social cohesion, and human security. Heightened media scrutiny—both domestic and international—has contributed to a complex and often polarized discourse. In this context, reaffirming a developmental agenda grounded in peace, stability, and inclusive dialogue becomes all the more vital.

In such a sensitive context, the Rising Northeast 2025 Summit came as a much-needed corrective—a platform to reclaim the narrative and reaffirm the region's transformative potential.

The Summit: A Turning Point

Held in New Delhi at Bharat Mandapam, the Rising Northeast 2025 Summit emerged as a watershed moment for the region. Organized by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDNER), the summit was the first of its kind in scale and ambition, drawing Rs 4.3 lakh crore in investment proposals and the participation of over 80 countries.

This event brought the national and international spotlight back to the Northeast's strategic, economic, and technological promise. It anchored India's Act East Policy and repositioned the NER as a key player in the Indo-Pacific vision. The summit's tagline—"Empower, Act, Strengthen, Transform (EAST)"—summed up both intent and aspiration.

From Periphery to Priority

Indian corporate heavyweights made bold pledges. Reliance announced Rs 75,000 crore, Adani Rs 50,000 crore, and Tata committed Rs 27,000 crore for a semiconductor facility in Assam—a signal that the region was ready to leap into advanced manufacturing and critical technologies. In tandem, Rs 21,000 crore in public investment over the last decade—spanning schools, AIIMS, IITs, and skill development—has laid the groundwork for a skilled workforce ready for Industry 4.0.

While Assam took the lead with its robust manufacturing and infrastructure ecosystem, states like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya stood out for their commitment to sustainability, organic farming, and green energy. Tripura and Mizoram are poised to become vital gateways for cross-border trade with Bangladesh and Myanmar, enhancing India's connectivity with ASEAN.

A New Milestone: Railway Reaches Aizawl

The recent extension of the railway network to Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, marks a historic turning point—not just for the state but for the entire region's connectivity blueprint. Long perceived as a remote and landlocked state, Mizoram's integration into

the Indian Railways network is emblematic of a broader infrastructural renaissance unfolding across the Northeast. This development holds more than just logistical significance; it represents a strategic leap in India's Act East vision.

Beyond enhancing local mobility and economic activity, the railway to Aizawl unlocks new pathways for regional trade, especially with neighbouring Myanmar and onward to Southeast Asia. It also strengthens India's ability to project soft power, humanitarian access, and economic outreach through the Northeast—positioning the region as a keystone in the Indo-Pacific connectivity corridor.

In a region where terrain has historically dictated the pace of progress, this achievement signals India's renewed commitment to bridging geographical divides with transformative intent. For Mizoram—often overshadowed in policy discourse—the railway serves as both symbol and substance of inclusion, development, and strategic foresight.

The Geopolitical Edge

India's Northeast shares a 5,300 km international border with countries like China, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, making it a geostrategic linchpin in South and Southeast Asia. As China expands its influence via the Belt and Road Initiative and large-scale infrastructure diplomacy, India must respond by strengthening connectivity and commercial ties with ASEAN.

Through MDNER's nine international roadshows, six state roundtables, and 95-country diplomatic engagement, the summit laid a comprehensive roadmap for long-term international partnerships. East Asian nations, especially Japan and Korea, have shown readiness to train professionals from the region in advanced technologies, strengthening India's Indo-Pacific partnerships through the Northeast.

The Rising Northeast 2025 Summit has redefined the Northeast Region from a zone of conflict to a frontier of opportunity. The Rs 4.3 lakh crore in investment proposals reflects growing global confidence in the region's potential. With its strategic location, youthful population, and natural resources, the NER stands poised to become India's bridge to Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific.

The summit's EAST (Empower, Act, Strengthen, Transform) vision sets the direction for regional development and global engagement. States like Assam, Sikkim, and Tripura showcased sectoral readiness in manufacturing, sustainability, and cross-border trade, while others reinforced their cultural, ecological, and energy assets.

To sustain this momentum, challenges such as infrastructure bottlenecks, regulatory hurdles, and security concerns—especially in states like Manipur—must be addressed through transparent governance and inclusive development models. The emphasis on skill development, green economy, and digital infrastructure provides a foundation for inclusive growth and resilience.

As global geopolitics intensifies in the Indo-Pacific, Northeast India must be treated not as a distant periphery but as a national and international priority. The Rising Northeast 2025 Summit has laid the groundwork. The task now is implementation—with urgency, equity, and vision.

(Akhil Ramesh is Director, India Programme at Pacific Forum, USA; Mmholumo Kikon is author & Fellow of the India Tech Policy at the Pacific Forum)

government department during the course of their service by way of transfer/promotion. This non-inclusion of mathematics/arithmetic is bound to affect efficiency.

In view of the above and as Patricia Mukhim has rightly pointed out, regarding the significance of Arithmetic/mathematics, for interest of ensuring efficient and better delivery of service by government servants, the State Government and MPSC are humbly requested to ensure that appropriate level of mathematics is objectively incorporated for various category of government posts advertised by the MPSC.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

A Path to Improve Performance Grading Index

Editor,
Meghalaya currently ranks at the bottom of the Performance Grading Index (PGI), a damning indicator of the deep-rooted challenges in its education system. While the state has recently emerged as one of the top 5 states in India in terms of literacy rate, this statistical achievement masks a harsher reality: a struggling government school system plagued by infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and most notably, a shocking neglect of libraries.

In 2021, our Chief Minister himself acknowledged the crisis in the state's education sector. Despite a literate population, the

lack of investment in core educational tools, especially school libraries, continues to drag down Meghalaya's real educational outcomes.

The Crisis: Libraries in Ruin. At the heart of this educational failure lies the abandonment of libraries in government schools. Libraries are not simply buildings with books, they are centres of knowledge, imagination, and lifelong learning. Yet in Meghalaya, the absence of libraries is widespread, and in cases where they do exist, they are under-resourced, understaffed, or inaccessible.

This isn't just a planning issue; it's a systemic and moral failure. Students, especially from marginalized and tribal communities, are being denied access to basic educational resources. In the absence of libraries, they rely solely on outdated textbooks and overburdened teachers, severely limiting their learning potential.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Libraries as a Mandate. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, under Clauses 7.5, 21.6, and 21.9, emphasizes the development of school libraries as a strategic priority for improving education. It encourages:

- Setting up well-resourced libraries in every school.
- Promoting access to digital and print learning materials.
- Appointing trained library professionals.

While progressive states have begun acting on this, like Tripura, for example, recently announced the recruitment of 125 school librarians, Meghalaya has shown no comparable ini-

tiative.

High Literacy, Low Quality: A Paradox

It is ironic that despite being one of the top five states in literacy, Meghalaya's students are not equipped with the basic tools for real learning. Literacy should not be confused with educational quality. The state's consistently poor PGI performance reflects that students may know how to read and write, but lack access to environments that nurture comprehension, exploration, and critical thinking—functions that libraries uniquely provide.

Solutions to Improve PGI by Strengthening Libraries

- Mandate Library Infrastructure in All Schools:** Provide every government school with a dedicated, functional library, even if modest in size.
- Recruit and Train School Librarians:** Establish official posts for trained librarians, in partnership with LIS (Library and Information Science) institutions.
- Upgrade to Digital Libraries:** Use tools like e-Granthala, the National Digital Library of India, and curated offline e-resources to enable hybrid learning.
- Library Integration in Curriculum:** Include library hours in the school timetable and use library activities to support curriculum learning.
- Allocate Budget and Monitor Progress:** Provide a dedicated fund per school for library development and track library effectiveness as part of the PGI evaluation.
- Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):** Collaborate with NGOs, and publishers to donate books, equipment,

and training support.

g) Awareness and Capacity Building: Conduct orientation for school heads and teachers on how to use libraries effectively for student engagement and enrichment.

The Road Ahead

Meghalaya has a literate population ready to learn, but without access to libraries, learning remains superficial and limited. The Performance Grading Index evaluates not just enrolment and basic metrics, but also the depth and quality of learning infrastructure. Strengthening libraries directly impacts indicators like:

- Infrastructure & Facilities
- Equity
- Learning Outcomes
- Governance Processes

To conclude, Meghalaya's poor PGI ranking isn't just an administrative concern; it's a signal that thousands of young lives are being shortchanged. If the state truly believes in "education for all," then libraries must be at the core of that mission. With a clear policy, targeted investment, and community participation, Meghalaya can turn its high literacy into high-quality education, enabling its children not only to read but to think, question, create, and lead.

It's time to stop seeing libraries as a luxury and start treating them as the engine of educational transformation that they truly are.

Yours etc.,
Tiplot Wann,
Via email

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

G20 countries could produce renewable energy for whole world

The world's most developed economies have also burnt the most oil and coal (fossil fuels) over the years, causing the most climate change damage. Preventing further climate change means a global fossil fuel phase-out must happen by 2050. Climate change mitigation scientists Sven Teske and Saori Miyake analysed the potential for renewable energy in each of the G20 countries. They concluded that the G20 is in a position to generate enough renewable energy to supply the world. For African countries to benefit, they must adopt long term renewable energy plans and policies and secure finance from G20 countries to set up renewable energy systems.

Why is the G20 so important in efforts to limit global warming?

The G20 group accounts for 67% of the world's population, 85% of global gross domestic product, and 75% of global trade. The member states are the G7 (the US, Japan, Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Canada), plus Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Russia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina.

We wanted to find out how G20 member states could limit global warming. Our study examined the solar and wind potential for each of G20 member countries (the available land and solar and wind conditions). We then compared this with projected electricity demands for 2050. This is, to our knowledge, the first research of its kind.

We found that the potential for renewable energy in G20 countries is very high – enough to supply the projected 2050 electricity demand for the whole world. They have 33.6 million km² of land on which solar energy projects could be set up, or 31.1 million km² of land on which wind energy projects could be set up.

This potential varies by geography. Not all G20 countries have the same conditions for generating solar and wind energy, but collectively, the G20 countries have enough renewable energy potential to supply the world's energy needs.

But for the G20 countries to limit global warming, they also need to stop emitting greenhouse gases. Recent figures show that the G20 countries were responsible for generating 87% of all energy-related carbon dioxide emissions that cause global warming.



On the other hand, African Union countries (apart from South Africa, which is a high greenhouse gas emitter), were responsible for only 1.2% of the global total historical emissions until 2020.

The G20 countries with the highest renewable energy potential (especially Australia and Canada) are major exporters of the fossil fuels that cause global warming. Along with every other country in the world, the G20 nations will need to end their human-caused carbon emissions by 2050 to prevent further climate change.

Where does Africa fit into the picture?

African countries cannot set up new

electricity plants based on burning fossil fuels, like coal. If they do that, the world will never end human-caused greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The continent must generate electricity for the 600 million Africans who do not currently have it but will need to move straight past fossil fuels and into renewable energy.

For this, Africa will need finance. The African Union hosts the G20 summit later this year. This meeting begins just after the world's annual climate change conference (now in its 30th year and known as COP30). These two summits will give Africa the chance to lobby for renewable energy funding from wealthier nations.

Africa already has the conditions

needed to move straight into renewable energy. The continent could be generating an amount of solar and wind power that far exceeds its projected demand for electricity between now and 2050.

We are launching an additional analysis of the solar and wind potential of the entire African continent in Bonn, Germany on 19 June 2025 at a United Nations conference. This shows that only 3% of Africa's solar and wind potential needs to be converted to real projects to supply Africa's future electricity demand.

This means that Africa has great untapped potential to supply the required energy for its transition to a middle-income continent – one of

the African Union's goals in Agenda 2063, its 50 year plan.

But to secure enough finance for the continent to build renewable energy systems, African countries need long-term energy policies. These are currently lacking.

So what needs to be done?

The countries who signed up to the 2015 international climate change treaty (the Paris Agreement) have committed to replacing polluting forms of energy such as coal, fuelwood and oil with renewable energy.

South Africa, through its G20 presidency, must encourage G20 nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and support renewable energy invest-

ment in Africa.

Because financing the global energy transition is already high on the priority list of most countries, South Africa should push for change on three fronts: finance, sound regulations and manufacturing capacity for renewable technologies. These are the among the main obstacles for renewables, particularly in Africa.

Finance: Financing the energy transition is among the highest priorities for COP30. Therefore, the COP30 meeting will be an opportunity for the African Union to negotiate finance for its renewable energy infrastructure needs.

For this, fair and just carbon budgets are vital. A carbon budget sets out how much carbon dioxide can still be emitted in order for the global temperature not to rise more than 2°C higher than it was before the 1760 industrial revolution.

A global carbon budget (the amount of emissions the whole world is allowed) has been calculated, but it needs to be divided up fairly so that countries that have polluted most are compelled to limit this.

To divide the global carbon budget fairly, energy pathways need to be developed urgently that consider: future developments of population and economic growth; current energy supply systems; transition times for decarbonisation; and local renewable energy resources.

The G20 platform should be used to lobby for fair and just carbon budgets. Sound regulations that support the setting up of new factories: Governments must put policies in place to support African solar and wind companies. These are needed to win the trust of investors to invest in a future multi-billion dollar industry. Long-term, transparent regulations are needed too.

These regulations should: say exactly how building permits for solar and wind power plants will be granted; prioritise linking renewable energy plants to national electricity grids; and release standard technical specifications for stand-alone grids to make sure they're all of the same quality.

Taking steps now to speed up big renewable energy industries could mean that African countries end up with more energy than they need. This can be exported and increase financial income for countries. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, June 22, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon perigee on your solar return chart and it will give favorable results. Your enemies will try to tarnish your image but will not get much success. Your legal disputes will get resolved. You will also come in contact with influential persons. At work an important project might be handed over to you. You will also complete your work with full dedication and sincerity. You will come face to face with challenges this year. This year will be very good from the angle of work and business. But high cost of things and the impact of the recession will not leave you untouched. New romantic ties leading to marriage look certain. Student will perform well. You will feel the need of your relatives and family on many occasions. They will help you a lot. You will also get benefit from professional contacts.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) People and friends look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You are likely to be more strategic in your actions during this period, as you become aware of the subtleties of human interaction. This is a time when your best course of action is to recognize that you need, or rely on, others for support. Efforts at self-promotion might be made now. This is the time when you're noticed for what you've done or haven't done. Do your best to be in top form, make career adjustments if needed, and don't be afraid to show others exactly what you're made of.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would move towards a more positive and objective approach to your professional and personal life this week. You have a great desire to expand your work and knowledge. You might further your education and it's a fabulous time to do so, or you could broaden your knowledge in a more informal manner. Confidence is the key of success and faith in the universe and in your ability to do the right thing will get you everywhere now. This is the best time for realizing the positive potential you have. You would have a feeling of unrest or dissatisfaction with your environment.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to be more spiritual or idealistic this week. You are sober and serious in professional and personal relationships. You are getting serious about loved ones, family relationships and children. You are likely to take your hobbies more seriously. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness in professional aspects. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. It is a period to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This week's planetary configuration brings communication, traveling and meeting new people. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are working. Your ideas are higher as teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases this week. Pouring your heart and soul into your efforts comes naturally now. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business this week with good energy and support. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are expected to be involved in lectures, debates, and discussions. With your enhanced communication skills you can convey your ideas powerfully to others, and you may be invited to speak in front of many people. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. It's an excellent time in which you make a lifestyle change, as your ability to concentrate on what really matters to you is enhanced. A short vacation allows you to enjoy natural surroundings with a loved one.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There is perfection and beauty in emotional and personal relationships with your loved one. Mental pursuits, new learning, and all forms of intellectual activity are favored. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. You are more inclined to put your ideas into action than usual. Your position of power and

authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You should maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way otherwise you will become frustrated and dull. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored this week.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A business partnership is lucrative and supportive this week. Good planning and management lead to be more progressive and productive in professional ventures. Good luck in financial opportunities is encouraging. You are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with a compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility this week. Your personal charm and attractiveness has a positive effect on your personal and professional relationships. It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and siblings. Responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual this week, so set a target and make a proper schedule so meet the desired goal. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender, love and care. Children look up to you for love and affection. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused this week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) During this week, elders are supportive and children are loving. It would be in your favor to make new beginnings and forget all old wounds, hurts and past patterns. It is best to let go of negative feelings about relationships and situations gone by. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It is time to come back to your inner center to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Issues of sharing of power and authority with others in personal and professional relationships come to the fore this week. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. Events and circumstances are such that you learn about your own personal strength. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition this week. You may discover a new direction in your career. Watch out for jealousies and manipulative behavior of people around. You could have problems staying calm, cool, and collected at times this week.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are in touch with dynamic, forceful and assertive energies. Professional power and authority is vested in you to organize and achieve important targets and goals. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise others in the professional area. Your warrior-like qualities of energy, action, swiftness, strength and pride come to the fore this week. You need to value and respect established relationships and business partnerships as they stand by you in times of stress and trouble.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is time to breakthrough restrictions and emotional patterns as you are ripe and ready for major professional changes. Do not forget about the long-term commitments while you are dealing with short-term contracts. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event is celebrated. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. You are physically fit and it is important to keep a handle on and maintain balance in relationships, finances and new business ventures.

Is AI sparking cognitive revolution inducing mediocrity, conformity?

Artificial Intelligence began as a quest to simulate the human brain.

Is it now in the process of transforming the human brain's role in daily life? The Industrial Revolution diminished the need for manual labour. As someone who researches the application of AI in international business, I can't help but wonder whether it is spurring a cognitive revolution, obviating the need for certain cognitive processes as it reshapes how students, workers and artists write, design and decide.

Graphic designers use AI to quickly create a slate of potential logos for their clients. Marketers test how AI-generated customer profiles will respond to ad campaigns. Software engineers deploy AI coding assistants. Students wield AI to draft essays in record time - and teachers use similar tools to provide feedback.

The economic and cultural implications are profound. What happens to the writer who no longer struggles with the perfect phrase, or the designer who no longer sketches dozens of variations before finding the right one? Will they become increasingly dependent on these cognitive prosthetics, similar to how using GPS diminishes navigation skills? And how can human creativity and critical thinking be preserved in an age of algorithmic abundance?

Echoes of the Industrial Revolution

We've been here before. The Industrial Revolution replaced artisanal craftsmanship with mechanised production, enabling goods to be replicated and manufactured on a mass scale.

Shoes, cars and crops could be produced efficiently and uniformly. But products also became more bland, predictable and stripped of individuality. Craftsmanship retreated to the margins, as a luxury or a form of resistance.

Today, there's a similar risk with the automation of thought. Generative AI tempts users to conflate speed with quality, productivity with originality.

The danger is not that AI will fail us, but that people will accept the mediocrity of its outputs as the norm. When everything is fast, frictionless and "good enough," there's the risk of

losing the depth, nuance and intellectual richness that define exceptional human work.

The rise of algorithmic mediocrity

Despite the name, AI doesn't actually think.

Tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini process massive volumes of human-created content, often scraped from the internet without context or permission. Their outputs are statistical predictions of what word or pixel is likely to follow based on patterns in data they have processed.

They are, in essence, mirrors that reflect collective human creative output back to users - rearranged and recombined, but fundamentally derivative.

And this, in many ways, is precisely why they work so well.

Consider the countless emails people write, the slide decks strategy consultants prepare and the advertisements that suffuse social media feeds. Much of this content follows predictable patterns and established formulas. It has been there before, in one form or the other.

Generative AI excels at producing competent-sounding content - lists, summaries, press releases, advertisements - that bears the signs of human creation without that spark of ingenuity. It thrives in contexts where the demand for originality is low and when "good enough" is, well, good enough.

When AI sparks — and stifles — creativity

Yet, even in a world of formulaic content, AI can be surprisingly helpful.

In one set of experiments, researchers tasked people with completing various creative challenges. They found that those who used generative AI produced ideas that were, on average, more creative, outperforming participants who used web searches or no aids at all. In other words, AI can, in fact, elevate baseline creative performance. However, further analysis revealed a critical trade-off: Reliance on AI systems for brainstorming significantly reduced the diversity of ideas produced, which is a crucial element for creative breakthroughs. The systems tend to converge toward a predictable middle rather than exploring unconventional possibilities

at the edges.

I wasn't surprised by these findings. My students and I have found that the outputs of generative AI systems are most closely aligned with the values and world views of wealthy, English-speaking nations. This inherent bias quite naturally constrains the diversity of ideas these systems can generate. More troubling still, brief interactions with AI systems can subtly reshape how people approach problems and imagine solutions.

Navigating the cognitive revolution

True creativity, innovation and research are not just probabilistic recombinations of past data. They require conceptual leaps, cross-disciplinary thinking and real-world experience. These are qualities AI cannot replicate. It cannot invent the future. It can only remix the past.

What AI generates may satisfy a short-term need: a quick summary, a plausible design, a passable script. But it rarely transforms, and genuine originality risks being drowned in a sea of algorithmic sameness.

The challenge, then, isn't just technological. It's cultural.

How can the irreplaceable value of human creativity be preserved amid this flood of synthetic content?

The historical parallel with industrialisation offers both caution and hope. Mechanisation displaced many workers but also gave rise to new forms of labour, education and prosperity.

Similarly, while AI systems may automate some cognitive tasks, they may also open up new intellectual frontiers by simulating intellectual abilities. In doing so, they may take on creative responsibilities, such as inventing novel processes or developing criteria to evaluate their own outputs.

This transformation is only at its early stages. Each new generation of AI models will produce outputs that once seemed like the purview of science fiction.

The responsibility lies with professionals, educators and policymakers to shape this cognitive revolution with intention.

Will it lead to intellectual flourishing or dependency? To a renaissance of human creativity or its gradual obsolescence? The answer, for now, is up in the air. (*The Conversation*)

"We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge."

—John Naisbitt

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, MONDAY, JUNE 23, 2025

Pride and Prejudice

INDIA is a grand mosaic of races, cultures, religions, languages and much else. This also makes it difficult for any one set to dominate the whole. The nation boasts of having 22 languages as scheduled under the Constitution, with Hindi occupying a lead role and 43 per cent of the population bracketed in it. States were formed mostly on linguistic basis, but the nation adopted a three-language formula for education and other purposes in 1968, which is held in good stead. The entire South India, comprising five major states and the North-Eastern states as well as Bengal, Odisha, Maharashtra and Gujarat communicate in their own languages. The Congress party is committed to the three-language formula, but ever since the BJP assumed power, its attempts both overt and covert are to "make" Hindi the dominant language.

The nation's need to have a common language for communication is well-appreciated, but the three-language formula continues to have its merits; more so in a more interdependent world, where migration is the norm today and globalization the reigning theme. Hindi limits itself to some of the northern states while English is universal. Remittances by NRIs total around \$150 billion or more a year, thanks to India's educated workforce spread around the world, and who mostly communicate in English. With due regard to all these, a statement by home minister Amit Shah this week that "one would in future feel ashamed of speaking in English here," was uncalled for and unacceptable. Shah is not a blabber-mouth. He's a performer, unlike the prime minister who revels in public discourses. Shah's mindset against English demonstrates a prejudice that rebels against the ground realities that demand a continued stress on English if only to enable more and more Indians to spread out, explore the world and live a better life. Tens of thousands of Indian students study and graduate from universities abroad in Medicine, MBA etc, saddled as they are with a proficiency in English. Their number keeps growing. The educated youth in India, uncomfortable as they are with what ageing, old-fashioned politicians are define, are increasingly seeking and finding a better life elsewhere. For all such, English helps.

The problem with the present crop of semi-literate leaders is that they can neither speak nor write in English. This speaks volumes about their lack of proper schooling, where the three-language formula enables all a familiarity with English. To brand it a language of the colonizers, as Shah did, is also to ignore a reality of Hindi being an Indo-Aryan language. Rather, Shah and his ilk should try learning English even at this late hour. It would do a lot of good for all in governing this nation. On the other hand, semi-literates running governments is a sad scenario. The image they project of India before the wider world is that of a regressive India. We have gone back a long way away from the Nehru era.

The Khasi Mawbyrsiew and Meghalaya Politi – a critique

By Toki Blah

This strategic discourse on Meghalaya is looks at how for the last 50 years, and immediately after attaining statehood, the Jaitbynriw Politics took over the politics of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Jaitbynriw Politics is a political pronouncement that calls for saving the Jaitbynriw. What sort, type and kind of danger we need to be saved from has really never been clarified. Nor has anybody questioned the fact that if the Khasi Pnar as a tribe have managed to survive for thousands of years on their own; have managed to emerge unscathed as they are today; then from where and to whom do we owe this sudden discovery of unknown threats? The only hint is that it is coming from outside and that the Jaitbynriw is in need of saviors. The call however seems to strike a sympathetic and emotional chord with the electorate and people get elected based on how articulately they are able to advocate their own persona as that "Savior" of the Jaitbynriw. The irony is that the electoral victories of such candidates or the political parties that subscribe to such views has led the Khasi Pnar people nowhere, but downhill. Like the Israelites of old, our Messiah is expectantly awaited, but seems to be mysteriously delayed somewhere. To put it in its correct perspective – as a Jaitbynriw, we are well and truly stuck!

This writer contends that it is high time we start looking for answers to get us out of the quagmire we find ourselves in. This obsession for Jaitbynriw politics has simply produced a leadership with a very restricted world view, one that is unable to absorb the governance bandwidth that Meghalaya statehood demands. Time to realise that with the overall development of the state, the growth and prospects of the Jaitbynriw also prosper not the other way round. If that makes sense then can the wholesome governance of Meghalaya be compared to that of a well cooked nutritious meal that provides nourishment to all members of the family?

Our ancients were of the view that a well cooked meal is consequent on the constitution of the hearth over which the meal is prepared. The traditional Khasi hearth (the dpei) has to be properly constructed; the flow of air into the fire skillfully directed; the heat evenly distributed while the pot itself is well balanced without tilting to either side. All of the above depends on the positioning of the all important Mawbyrsiew (the three corner stones) erected round the hearth. Even if

one corner stone were to tilt; or is not evenly placed or is incompatible with the other two stones, the meal cooked would spoil. For a change, lets consider the all encompassing inclusive development of Meghalaya as the composite wholesome meal that the family of our Three Tribes require. So with what do we correlate the three Mawbyrsiew that this family depends on? Parochial, narrow tunnel vision, ethnic based politics has not worked. Time to try other inclusive and comprehensive political options. Lets try and see if we can come up with a sensible alternative roadmap for our future.

What then are the three Mawbyrsiew that our state needs for survival? One glance will easily convince us that it is (a) Efficacious Electoral Democracy (the system of government where enlightened elected representatives govern – not RULE!) (b) An electorate with aptitude for democratic fundamentals (that enabling voter ability to think and vote for a political entity who has Leadership Qualities) and (c) the understanding of Survival Economics (the equitable system of production, distribution and consumption of wealth in an egalitarian Tribal society). So are the Meghalayan Mawbyrsiew mentioned above in equilibrium with each other for the balanced development of Meghalaya? I think not. Lets start with Efficacious Electoral Democracy and its impact on governance. We have elected MLAs that make up the ruling and the opposition. So how do these guys go about the serious business of legislating? In 2024 the Assembly sat for only 13 days out of 365! 13 short days only to do the work you were principally elected and paid for – to Legislate! God only knows on what the rest 352 days were wasted on. Again, how many Bills in the interest of the state, can you introduce, debate upon and pass in 13 days? This simply enforces the image of a 'I don't – give – a – damn' approach to the all important issue for Efficacious Legislation. Here is where Accountability to the public is on call but never ever given. Or were these fleeting Legislative sessions deliberate; caused by unavoidable, scandalous reasons?

To the common man in the street, who watches the House proceedings on TV, its scandalous to note that 70% of the MLAs never open their mouths throughout their 5 year tenure! The wonder is not how they became MLAs, but the danger lies in the belief that the interest of the state is best served through their silence! It's a 50 year old scam of Silence! Dr Martin Luther Jr said "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." We Khasis have a better proverb. We sneeringly label them as "Ki Ksan Rympei, Rem Dorbar". (Loudmouths at Home, Silent mice on the Dorbar floor). Tragedy is we then go and elect them!

So on what basis do we cast our votes? It forms the second Mawbyrsiew- the educational aptitude of the electorate for democratic fundamentals. Is it because of the money lavishly distributed during elections; the emotional appeal of an election lyric or is it because of the candidate's ability to govern? I'm afraid the last is considered least and the reason for the proliferation of "constituency devoted" MLAs whose entire 5 year focus is constituency development than in idea contribution towards the overall growth of Meghalaya. This is the worst type of MLA to elect! As an electorate, we are yet to identify the ballot box as the opportunity to elect persons capable of leading the state. Instead we use it to come up with a slightly better version of a Rangbah Shnong! Oops, so sorry to have let out the secret!

Then we come to the 3rd Mawbyrsiew, Survival Economics mentioned above. It's the most crucial but the least understood. Jaitbynriw politics believes in exclusivity as the best survival tool for the Jaitbynriw. History teaches us otherwise. A society with a strong and balanced economic grounding (u saipan ba khlain) has little to fear. It's the economically weak, poverty stricken that are socially unstable and insecure. So lets look at Meghalaya's economic scene. Niti Aayog figures say Meghalaya is the 3rd poorest state in the country. As per 2024 Meghalaya's total population stood at 34 lakh out of which 28% (9.5 lakh approximately) were bracketed as poor. Now lets be liberal and claim that we have 5% (1.70 lakh) who can be classed as rich; 15% (5.1 lakh approximately) who can be classed as middle income (Govt servants, small businesses etc) and we still find 52% (about 17.7 lakh) of LIG (Lower Income Group) inclusive of small and marginal farmers, daily wage earners etc) who just manage to exist above the poverty line. So 28% + 52% = 80%

a staggering 27.2 lakh of the states population, mostly in the rural areas, literally living as Bhogtoram Mawroh puts it in "Highly vulnerable conditions". Vulnerable to any negative change, however small, in their socio-economic status. Vulnerable because the possibility of starvation is ever present. The idea of an equitable egalitarian tribal society, today exists only in our minds. For most, poverty is the determinant between life and death. Now you decide from where the deadliest threat to our people comes from? From an imagined threat or from fact based data that clearly indicates that unless our economic condition improves, our very survival as a Jaitbynriw is shaky!

The analogy of the Mawbyrsiew as pointed out above, cannot be more pertinent than it is today. If flaws to individual corner stones exist they need to be set right. First correction priority is educating our electorate on the type of persons they elect as leaders. The concept of a good person (u ka brieu ba bha) as your elected representative has failed. It needs to be replaced with the concept of a competent person (u ka brieu ba shemphang ia ka synshar khadar bad ba lah ban kyntiew ia ka ioh ka ko). How this enabling process is to be done needs a more intense public discourse than is possible within the limited space of an op-ed page.

Secondly our MLAs must understand that being elected means being endowed with power, to govern, not to rule! But power also comes with the need for accountability. 50 years has shown that our MLAs love power but shun accountability! The uneducated public never asks for accountability. Meghalaya is thus left with only the print, electronic and social media to enforce this mandatory accountability from our leaders. Question is whether the media is prepared for this responsibility?

The third Mawbyrsiew demanding urgent repair is our economy. Legislators, both ruling and opposition, need to sit down and plan how and where the economy is to be directed. If Meghalaya is to survive, its poverty levels must be drastically brought down. On this particular aspect, the pressure groups must re-strategize their usual approach, from that of confronting to that of engaging with the Government. The idea is for everyone to work in tandem; together, unitedly for the economic upliftment of the state. Only then will Meghalaya and its people regain hope, confidence and growth and with it the survival of the Jaitbynriw.

Nation should know – gratitude and hospitality run deep in the hearts of Meghalayans

By Salil Gewali

Long before the investigation into Raja Raghuvanshi's death reached any conclusion, the shocking news of his murder had already gripped the nation. Meghalaya faced merciless criticism as major media outlets began tarnishing the image of the entire Northeast. Social media was quickly filled with anger and sadness, many users mindlessly going on a rampage of speculation and accusing people of Meghalaya. When the real details of the case emerged that Raja's wife, Sonum Raghuvanshi, herself had orchestrated the murder, the whole nation was left stunned. No matter how sincere the apology may be now, it cannot undo the hurt they've caused to every citizen of Meghalaya. One can only hope now that these brutally speculative media houses take this as a lifelong lesson in responsible reporting. Hopefully, from now on, they will pause and think 100 times before letting their tongues loose. They should know that the sensational headlines may sell fast, but they "injure" the soul of ethical journalism.

However, amidst this tragedy, what truly warmed the hearts of many was the response of the Sohra community. Despite such a heartbreaking event, people gathered for a candlelight march and sang a "tribute song" in memory of Raja Raghuvanshi, thanks to the

to give away all the partly damaged or soiled exercise copies. He decided to offer them in small bundles, half a dozen to a dozen at a time, as gifts to customers he believed were in need, or to any underprivileged students. He did it quietly. This quiet act of generosity didn't last a week or a month --- it continued for over a year.

What unfolded after a few weeks was something unbelievable; something we never expected. Many villagers started arriving at our shop with humble gifts: fresh vegetables like beans, spinach, tomatoes, peas, potatoes, carrots, ginger, and tamarind, and a myriad of lentils. Some would also present us with firewood and brooms. It was incredibly heart-touching. I still remember clearly that one day, a man from a remote village in Ri-Bhoi came with a pot filled with freshly caught fish. I was overjoyed as I was very fond of fish. These kinds of gifts kept coming. Receiving such gifts regularly from poor villagers, my father would become emotional and would often shed tears of gratitude. I could figure out how it was difficult for him to accept so many gifts from such humble people.

Well, all these facts later inspired me more than anything else in life. My father would often tell me and my

"My father was a self-taught writer as well. He believed in the silent power of educating oneself. He always loved school-going children. At that time, not all children went to school. So, my father, with genuine empathy for others, never missed an opportunity to encourage people around him to send their children to school. Perhaps for those reasons, his conscience led him to give away all the partly damaged or soiled exercise copies."

graceful and generous singer F. Myliemngap.

Well, honestly, the compassion, resilience, and humility displayed by the people of the state "reminded" me of a series of cherished memories from my early childhood. They are, in fact, heartfelt stories and touching anecdotes. I witnessed them all with my own eyes -- lived them, felt them. Even in my times of gloom and dilemma, they continue to inspire me and bring out the joy of gratitude and inner strength. One such story goes like this:

My father had a small bookshop in Lewduh. Earning a living was very hard for us during those days. Once, in the late '70s, my father got a rare business opportunity. I was probably less than 10 years old. Mahavir Goenka, the proprietor of Anjalee Cinema Hall, was also a well-known wholesale dealer of Titagarh "Hattimar exercise copies." But Goenka had decided to quit the copy business entirely. These green-coloured notebooks with an elephant on the cover were a very popular brand during those days. To clear out his remaining stock, the late Goenka offered my father the chance to purchase the entire inventory at a heavily discounted price. My father grabbed the opportunity. He bought the full lot on credit. The good part was that Goenka also gave him a very large quantity of partly soiled or "slightly damaged" copies, completely free of charge. We were thrilled.

My father was a self-taught writer as well. He believed in the silent power of educating oneself. He always loved school-going children. At that time, not all children went to school. So, my father, with genuine empathy for others, never missed an opportunity to encourage people around him to send their children to school. Perhaps for those reasons, his conscience led him

elder brother that doing good for others is our highest duty, and expecting something in return only diminishes the act. "Give, but never tally," he would insist, a wisdom that made complete sense only as I grew older. Perhaps for these reasons, he hardly accepted gifts from those poor folks, unless they accepted other items of utility from him as gifts again.

If anyone doubts the anecdote mentioned above, I have a simple suggestion for them: Just smile at the poor vendors/hawkers or villagers on the street; if possible, buy their product with compassion, and give just 10-20 rupees extra, which they may not accept. Hardly anyone will remain unmoved or fail to "reciprocate" with gratitude. Try it. At least a few times. They'll respond with a depth of emotion and gratitude that you may have never experienced in your lifetime from anyone else. Yes, I have a "treasure of such anecdotes" that have changed the way I look at life and the people around me. Sometimes, I do feel that God chooses to show us glimpses of His marvel through these humble souls, far removed from worldly showmanship and ostentation!

Coincidentally, for the past three weeks, I have often been gently forced to accept bananas, bayberries or mangoes by an old lady from Sohiong village who displays her fruit items in baskets at the Jeep Stand, Lewduh. It was only because I smiled at her, talked to her, and gave her grandchildren toffees and.....! These humble village folks may not know the language of marketing, but they're fluent in the dialect of kindness, gratitude and hospitality -- something woven deep into their genes. God loves those who are rich in these virtues, not those who are rich in money alone.

Letters to the Editor

Response to an elder with sincere apologies

Editor,
I am writing in response to a letter published in The Shillong Times on June 20, 2025 by one of our elders, Glenn C Kharkongor which is in response to my letter to the Shillong Times dated June 19, 2025. I read his words with great care and reflection, and I truly appreciate the candor and sincerity with which he addressed the issue.

First and foremost, I wish to tender my sincere apologies to him and any other respected elders who may have felt hurt or disrespected by the concerns I raised in my previous letter. My intention was never to cause offense or dishonour, but rather to express a personal concern as a parent of young children under 12 years who are still learning from the world around them. I reacted emotionally in a moment of concern, seeing them exposed to language I felt was not appropriate in public spaces. On hindsight, I realize that I could have addressed the matter more carefully and privately, rather than in a way that may have been interpreted as blaming or generalizing.

It is true that we may look at the same situation and interpret it differently—like seeing a glass either half full or half empty. I fully understand and respect that others may have different perspectives,

and I deeply regret if my words suggested a lack of appreciation for the wisdom and value our elders bring to the community.

Once again, my heartfelt apologies to our elder, Bah Glenn Kharkongor and moving forward, I hope we can continue to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and care in our society.

With deep respect,

Yours etc.,
S.Lyngdoh
Via Email

Sleepwalking in the Middle East

Editor,
The Jerusalem Municipality, located on Jaffa Road, boasts a remarkable seal design featuring the Lion of Judah. Whether this emblem signifies a religious conflict as embodied by Operation Rising Lion is a matter open to scholarly debate. Nonetheless, Samuel Huntington's seminal work, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," serves as an essential lens through which to understand these intricate dynamics.

Notably, global military suppliers such as Elbit Systems, Rafael, and IAI highlight the escalating fervour of military interventions, from the longstanding Gaza conflict to the unfolding crises in Ukraine and now Iran.

Understanding the complexities of the Middle East often begins with Israel and

no place encapsulates this narrative better than Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. This profound institution houses museums and memorial sites that pay tribute to the enduring legacy of the Holocaust—a tragedy deeply ingrained in the Israeli consciousness and a driving factor behind their resolute commitment to confronting threats to their very existence.

In a pivotal article dated April 14, 2016, from War on the Rocks, "Meir Dagan: The Spy Who Learned the Limits of Power," the late Mossad director Meir Dagan articulated his opposition to a unilateral strike against Iran, cautioning that such an action could irrevocably damage Israel's strategic interests and empower Iran through its alliances with Hezbollah and other terrorist proxies.

The present situation is fluid and fraught with peril; Netanyahu, commonly known as Bibi, finds himself precariously balanced on a tightrope alongside his unwavering ally, Donald Trump. The historical echoes of the Iranian hostage crisis, which commenced on November 4, 1979, when Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage for 444 harrowing days, serve as a stark reminder of the severe repercussions that accompany diplomatic miscalculations.

David Crist's "The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran" provides a meticulously detailed account

of the complex and often contentious US-Iranian relationship since the 1979 revolution. This work is invaluable for anyone seeking to grasp the nuances of ongoing tensions and the factors that continue to define this critical geopolitical struggle.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

Yoga is rooted in religion

Editor:
International Yoga Day has just gone by. In the light of this event, and the popularity of what is loosely called Yoga, it helps to remember that Yoga is and always was tied to religion. Hatha Yoga was a means of preparing the body for meditative union (which is what "yoga" means) with God. The industrial complex of the west has appropriated Yoga as a type of therapy, dissociating it from religion and India. It is sad that yoga has now reached India via the west. An American once asked an RKM monk if India had any Yoga! Yoga cannot and should not be delinked to its religion of origin, which is Hinduism.

But worse still is the west's appropriation of meditation, delinking it from religion and degrading it to yet another kind of therapy. True meditation is not even possible without adequate faith, and without a prior discipline of the body, through rigorous

practice of the virtue of bodily and mental chastity. What most people call meditation is ordinary mindfulness. In fact, meditation without adequate moral and spiritual preparation, and without the guiding hand of a true Guru can be dangerous for the mind.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Tribute to a true educator

Editor,
TS Elliot said, "To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man's life." I have but one person in mind when I think of the Elliot's words. Sir Monotosh Chakravarty who we lovingly called Sir MC. He exemplifies each word in the above quotation. A towering personality, an example of discipline and an embodiment of compassion and kindness. Yes! That's what Sir MC was! When I contemplate upon the quote, it seems as if the line was written to highlight the kind of person Sir MC was.

As a teacher and as a colleague, Sir MC had always imparted the best that we must be by doing things that will make us productive. As a colleague I learnt that from him the day I became a part of the English Department. He showed us by example to do the things that will make our lives productive and valuable to our students and

to all who come our way. Sir had never been a man who fears but rather a man who is feared until the time meet him personally and realise the gem that he was. He was full of compassion and kindness and spoke without fear for the good of others. He was a visionary of the greatest kind.

When he took over as the Vice-Principal, Sir MC championed the need to get the students together and provide them platforms to exhibit their potential. Thus, many Clubs and Societies were born not only on paper but in letter and spirit. His presence, positive spirit and guidance helped shape many lives. One such Society is The Literary and Dramatic Society (TLDS) that I can proudly say has always had the blessings of Sir. No event, no participation, no competition would happen without Sir MC's best wishes and blessings. He was but just a phone call or a WhatsApp message away. Sir MC may no longer be with us in person but we are certain that his spirit will guide us his students, his colleagues in every nook and corner of St. Edmund's College. TLDS family bids adieu to you Sir with a heavy heart while your legacy lives on. Rest in peace! Rest easy dear Sir MC.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer DKhar,
Via email

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"Great artists have no country."

— Alfred de Musset

The Shillong Times

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When CM Connects

IN terms of public outreach only the very belligerent can fault Conrad Sangma. From wading into lewdah (Shillong's business hub) to travelling into the villages, Meghalaya's sitting Chief Minister now into his seventh year in office has been relentlessly pursuing his public outreach programmes, spanning the many Blocks in the State, to have one on one meetings with the public and as he says, "to listen and not to speak." In these meetings the public speak; the officers take note of public grievances and answer their queries as to what is hindering their access to regular water supply; why they continue to suffer from bad or non-existent roads; why power supply is erratic among many other public concerns. If there is any initiative that has brought governance closer to the people then CM Connect is that vital link between those sitting in the Secretariat and District headquarters and the people.

For the longest time, people would come with diffidence, hardly able to articulate their genuine concerns in terms of access to health services or assistance to farmers, especially given the unpredictable weather conditions exacerbated by climate change. For too long governance has been Shillong-centric; now it is moving beyond the city lights to where the heart of Meghalaya beats — its rural and unvisited spaces where people languish in poverty and struggle to bring their products to the markets — products grown with much sweat and tears. The CM's visit to these peripheries gives him a first hand account of the problems faced by the rural populace and they are legion. Considering that there are a plethora of schemes from the central government such as the Pradhan Mantri Awasz Yojna (PMAY) where the poor who own a plot of land are given assistance to build a home besides many other schemes. These schemes are created keeping in view the needs of people in the plains. A sum of Rs 1.25 lakh may be sufficient for those residing in the rest of India but not for residents of the hill states where transportation of building materials etc., involves a higher cost. Such problems are articulated by the village leaders and therefore help the CM to understand their genuine problems and to either take up such matters in Delhi or to provide gap funding from state funds. Unless the CM hears such logistical problems upfront from those who suffer first hand he can never understand what it means to be a common man.

Perhaps the only problem with such programmes is that women's voices are muted. Those who speak for the community are the village elders. Would they actually understand the problems faced by pregnant and lactating mothers who have to traverse over spaces where no roads exist in their state of pregnancy to reach the nearest public health centre? It is also true that at such programmes those who speak are performative — they are playing to the gallery. This needs to be addressed with sensitivity, so that people genuinely benefit from the CM Connect programme.

Letters to the Editor

Appreciation for Jiwat Vaswani!

Editor,
I am writing to express my heartfelt appreciation for Jiwat Vaswani, whose remarkable efforts have transformed the Police Bazar area and beyond, making Shillong even more vibrant and beautiful. His initiative to beautify the surroundings with a variety of seasonal flowers has added a touch of charm and serenity to this bustling hub, delighting residents and visitors alike.

Equally commendable is his dedication to cleaning the rivers around Shillong, a crucial step toward preserving our city's natural heritage.

As a local resident, I am truly inspired by Mr. Vaswani's ability to balance his business endeavours with such impactful social causes. His example serves as a powerful reminder that one can contribute meaningfully to society while pursuing professional goals. He has motivated individuals like me to take small but consistent steps toward community welfare.

I hope The Shillong Times will highlight Mr. Vaswani's contributions to inspire more citizens to follow in his footsteps. His work is a beacon of hope for a cleaner, greener, and more united Shillong.

Yours etc.,
Shekhar Singh,
Via email

Diplomatic blow for Pakistan

Editor,
What seemed to have been a walk in the park for Asif Munir the so-called Field Marshal General of Pakistan by advocating a Nobel Peace Prize for the US President Donald Trump has now backfired. This entire proposal and diplomatic maneuver has blown up on Pakistan's face. Some media sources have stated to point fingers at Pakistan for allowing the US to target a senior military General of the Iranian forces. This exposes the duplicity and hypocrisy of the Pakistani establishment which is playing games on both sides. This diplomatic meeting between the US and Pakistan shows how the Americans continue to use Pakistan as a rented state to further their interests while sidelining the civilian authority. Days before striking Iran it was ironic of the US President to have disagreed with his National Intelligence Director, Tulsi Gabbard on Iran's move to weaponise its uranium stockpile. It just goes to show the deep disagreement and rifts within the current US administration when it comes to addressing security issues in the Middle East. There is a fear that just as George W. Bush failed to provide

NEP 2020: An Education Policy for Our Times and for Our People

By Glenn C. Kharkongor

No policy is perfect and no policy can fit all communities. This aphorism pertains to the National Education Policy (NEP) and the People's Education Policy (PEP) alike. What one must look for in any policy is whether it meets the needs of the times and the community for which it is meant for.

Given the abysmal indices of school education in Meghalaya and the sad levels of learning outcomes, starkly pointed out by annual reports such as the Annual Survey of Education Rural (ASER) and the Performing Grade Index (PGI) means that we need to look beyond conventional models of learning. In higher education, even the top Indian universities still languish at the bottom of world rankings.

A new education policy was long overdue and NEP 2020 filled the void. A group of knowledgeable scientists and academicians came together under the widely respected K. Kasturirangan, former chairman, ISRO. The drafting committee of four persons included Manjul Bhargava, professor of mathematics, Princeton University, USA, and Anurag Behar, Vice Chancellor, Azim Premji University. I am unable to find any 'Hindutva ideologues' lurking in this august list.

The consultation process to formulate the draft policy included the sifting of over two lakh suggestions from 2.5 lakh gram panchayats, 6,600 blocks, 6,000 Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in 676 districts. This was a bottom-up exercise. I, along with many other academicians, also submitted suggestions via the portal.

Those who are against the political dispensation at the Centre, imagine certain demons between the lines of NEP 2020 and regard the entire document as a shady conspiracy. Amongst this group there is little attempt for discernment and nuance, or to find anything of value in NEP 2020. This broad-brush approach demonstrates bias and loses out on the valuable concepts and models inherent in the NEP.

The value of NEP
Knowledge and life itself are interdisciplinary. The integration of silo departments into learning is an important feature of the NEP. Interdisciplinary means the fusion of subjects to engender ana-

lytical and critical thinking so as to solve problems and promote creativity and innovation. The NEP promotes a liberal arts curriculum which produces well-rounded graduates. Individualised learning is made feasible instead of one-size-fits-all syllabi.

The Academic Bank of Credits promotes mobility of students. Examination reforms facilitate formative assessment, and multiple assessment tools. The various levels of the National Skills Qualifications Framework, identical to international models, provides upward mobility outside of the rigid Indian systems of eligibility and examinations which stifle academic movement up the ladder of academic aspirations.

Recognition of Prior Learning, a UNESCO initiative to which India is a signatory, enables all kinds of non-formal learning including traditional and experiential learning experiences that count towards formal qualifications such as diplomas and degrees.

Tribal aspects in the NEP 2020

The section on Indian Knowledge Systems, far from valorising a particular religion or ideology includes provisions such as, "tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning, will be covered and included in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, yoga, architecture, medicine, agriculture, engineering, linguistics, literature, sports, games, as well as in governance, polity, conservation. Specific courses in tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional (organic) crop cultivation, natural farming, etc. will also be made available." What could be more inclusive and reassuring?

The NEP uses the word 'tribal' 13 times and contains passages like, "accurate inclusion of traditional Indian knowledge including tribal and other local knowledge throughout into the curriculum, across humanities, sciences, arts, crafts, and sports... Teachers must be grounded in Indian values, languages, knowledge, ethos, and traditions including tribal traditions... Efforts to preserve and promote all Indian languages including

classical, tribal and endangered languages will be taken on with new vigour."

The NEP prioritises learning in one's mother tongue. Section 4.11 states that "the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/ mother tongue". The rest of the section elaborates strategies for this recommendation including preparation of learning materials in the mother tongue.

People's Education Policy

The PEP has several free recommendations, especially the increase in the education budget. Free education up to Std 12 is beneficial as school education is a public good compared to higher education. The PEP proposes at least 10% of the central budget and 20-25% of the state budget for education. The first is a much-needed recommendation but to expect the states to allot such a large percentage is quite impractical.

The PEP states that "The government should take total financial responsibility for education." This is fine as long as the government ensures high quality education. Even if it does, a plural educational model in which there is a mix of private and public education adds to the diversity and overall quality of education, as seen in most developed countries. When the state takes over all social sectors as did the erstwhile Soviet bloc countries, we have seen the stark deterioration of quality and democratic values.

The recommendations to do away with national selection examinations like CUET and NEET are also sound. Accessibility of education in rural and remote areas will increase inclusivity and opportunity.

Unfortunately for all its lofty ideals, the PEP is caught in a time warp, hanging on to outdated precepts and practices. It recommends continuation of the 3-year UG program, and is against the 4-year degree with its entry and exit options, and cafeteria system of selection of courses. It regards the multi-disciplinary approach of the NEP as "unscientific". There are several other examples of this obscurantist mindset, the most glaring of

which are the rigid continuation of annual examinations, and formal class room teaching as against hybrid modes of teaching introduced by the NEP. No supportive data is presented.

Insistence on fixed number of years for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and the retention of MPhil are long outdated, and reeks of obscurantism. It is only with flexible curricula, innovative frames of learning, and the use of blended learning that we can guard against obsolescence of knowledge and better enable students to keep abreast of emerging knowledge and its applications.

The accusation that the NEP is permeated with a certain ideology is to miss the wood for the trees. No where are the words Hindu or Vedic mentioned. In fact, where Sanskrit is mentioned, it is compared to the classical languages like Greek and Latin. It is only cited as an option. The same section (4.17) recommends "story-telling... written by people of various religions as well as non-religious people, and by people from all walks of life and a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds over thousands of years." This broad basis for the NEP is reassuring.

NEP 2020 is ideal for India

The NEP 2020 is truly a visionary policy which will enable India to soon rank alongside the best universities in the world yet retain national, regional, and local cultural flavour and relevance. The best universities, especially those with a social agenda, have adopted the provisions of NEP 2020 with verve and enthusiasm.

Economic liberalization in India started in 1991 with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by the Narasimha Rao government. The New Education Policy will have the same rejuvenating effect. Even the normally rigid and retrograde UGC has issued its recent notifications mostly as guidelines, rather than regulations. University autonomy is being emphasised, freeing higher education from the stranglehold of a permit raj.

A refreshing wind is blowing over Indian education.

(The writer is Chancellor, Martin Luther Christian University)

The fundamentals of reservation system

By Melarbor L Thabrah

Reservation refers to reserving seats in government educational institutions, universities and workplaces for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. While the Job Reservation document submitted by the Expert Committee is under study by the Chief Secretary, I beg to submit this important suggestion. The Father of Reservation was Chatrapati Shahu, the Maharaja of the princely state of Kolhapur who introduced reservation in favour of Non-Brahmin and Backward classes which came into effect in 1902. He provided free education and several hostels to make it easier for Non-Brahmins to access these benefits.

The Father of the Indian Constitution, Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar had agreed that equality of opportunity is a must which must be made with a provision to facilitate entry of those communities who had been historically disenfranchised to gain entry into public employment. Both the Father of Reservation and the Father of the Constitution recognized and understood the basic fundamental premise that reservation be it for jobs or education is to rectify the past and historical injustices against the backward class or left-outs in India. Thus, to ensure equal representation and provide an equal platform for everyone irrespective of their caste in education and job services in India, reservation was introduced with the sole purpose of uplifting the backward people to the status of the uplifted people.

My suggestion is to have 48% Reservation for the Middle Class, Upper Middle Class, Rich and Super Rich in the Creamy Layer for indigenous tribals of the state from their given reservation and to have 53% Reservation for the poor and below poverty line in the Non Creamy layer for indigenous tribals of the state living in the urban areas and the majority of whom inhabit the rural especially in the remote rural inter-state and international border areas of Meghalaya from their given reservation. The reason for a 53:48% ratio is for a 5% difference just as the difference in age relaxation for a tribal is 37 years and that of a non-tribal is 32 years. Hence, the same can be adopted for the Creamy/ Non-creamy layer indigenous tribal reservation from their recommended reservation by the Expert Committee.

In the case of the majoritarian tribal state of Meghalaya, a question that arises frequently is how can the children of politicians, business people, bureaucrats, both of whose parents are government employees, coal barons etc., be accorded the same privileges with those children coming from poor and below poverty line families? Up to now the majority of indigenous tribals who had benefited from job and educational reservation came from a range starting from Middle class to Super Rich class Scheduled Tribe families' majority of whom reside in the state capital, regional capital, to a lesser extent from the district headquarters and the least from the blocks.

Hence, reservation without having a Creamy/Non-creamy Layer has "TOTALLY FAILED" its intended purpose of the basic premise and core issue of reservation. Whether the Expert Committee has recommended having a Creamy/Non-creamy layer is not known even though the Committee had received suggestions from an honourable MLA about the need to have a creamy-non creamy layer with his example.

It is most humbly urged and that the Chief Secretary along with his officers and the Cabinet should work as a single cohesive unit to "Endeavour" to introduce and subsequently implement the Creamy/Non-creamy layer category for the benefit of the left out, marginalized — disenfranchised sections of the indigenous populace. By doing so, it will help realise the vision and the true spirit of the job and education reservation policy. It is hoped that our Chief Secretary will make this recommendation when he submits them to the Cabinet on August 31, 2025.

Time is against us when we bear in mind that the Supreme Court had stated that reservation cannot go on forever. It is anticipated that on August 15, 2047 when, as per what the Prime Minister had said, India will be a developed country, reservations too will be totally abrogated by the Supreme Court. During this window period from 2025-47, intensified, inclusive, vigorous efforts must be initiated, conceptualised and launched by the Centre, States and Union Territories to uplift the very poor, the marginalised, ostracized sections of the Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes and Other Backward Classes to bring them at par with the range of middle class to super rich Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. 22 years is more than sufficient a time to uplift the disenfranchised such as the rural poor and to bring them at par in terms of job and education parity with the uplifted. This can be attained by classing, reclassing and sub-classing ST, SC and OBC categories into sub-categories if need be in-order to really get the true picture and identify the real groups which are at present, still marginalised, left out and under-developed since they had been deprived of reaping the rewards of the job and education reservation policy. It is important for the ruling dispensation at the centre and in the states not to vacillate in its implementation of quotas.

It has been talked about and it's also the news that certain clans in India by sheer force of intimidation, money, power and influence have got bogus ST, SC and OBC certificates. In-order to avoid the same quagmire in our state, a three tier system of checking must be set up that requires verification based on the national census - socio-economic caste census, the BDO's office and both the BDO and DC's office for those who live in the district headquarters and to a certain extent the Village Durbars.

The decision of classifying as Non Creamy Layer by the above "3 tier system" must be based on the socio economic-national census. Besides these, their income, occupation of spouse(s) and residence must be also taken into consideration. Politicians must be best avoided in signing off income, residence and occupation since probable favouritism might come in the way and even Dorbar Shnong to a certain extent though they are supposed to be apolitical.

The most important factor whilst deciding to set up a Creamy/ Non Creamy layer system is for the state to send officers to at least two advanced states of India such as Gujarat and Tamil Nadu for example, to learn and incorporate the method(s) used for classifying the Creamy/Non Creamy layer amongst SC, ST, OBC and implement it in our state in addition to the above "three tier checking system" which is utilitarian. This suggestion is in public interest in-order to reap the benefits of inclusive governance and holistic development of the state.

evidence of WMDs in Iraq the same story seems to have created the current volatile situation in the Gulf region. Hope peace is restored soon unless destiny has its own definition in the complex world of geo-politics.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar,
Via email

Amit Shah's comment on English language speakers starts new controversy

Editor,
A new controversy has started on the statement of Amit Shah on English language speakers. This issue is sensitive in India as the states had come into existence on the basis of language which is also evident from Maharashtra state where controversy is already going on the adoption of Hindi.

Speaking at the launch of a book by a former civil servant, the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, predicted that the day is not far off when speakers of the English language in India would feel ashamed. Now the question arises why such a statement was even made. This, in fact, is a shameful

statement from a leader of Mr Shah's stature. It is reductive and reeks of prejudice and myopia - elements that knowledgeable politicians ought to shun. English's centrality to the Indian context is undeniable.

Mr. Shah further said that, "our culture, our history, and our religion cannot be understood in foreign languages. With self-respect, we will run our country on our own languages and lead the world too." Invoking the 'Panch Pran' (five pledges) envisioned by PM Modi for Amrit Kaal, Mr. Shah said it has now become the resolve of 130 crore people. During the Independence Day speech in 2022, when India was celebrating its 75 years of Independence, Mr. Modi spelled out five pledges — a resolve of a developed India; removing any trace of the colonial mindset; taking pride in our legacy; our strength in unity; and fulfilling the duties of citizens with honesty.

Earlier this month, Mr. Shah launched the Bharatiya Bhasha Anubhag (BBA), or Indian Languages Section, to provide an organised platform for all Indian languages to move towards "freeing the administration from the influence of foreign languages." Non-Hindi-speaking States, such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, have witnessed protests against the imposition of Hindi. The Tamil Nadu Government opposed

the three-language formula in the National Educational Policy (NEP), claiming it was only to bring Hindi in the State "through the backdoor."

In a country that speaks in many tongues and where linguistic tensions are quite common, English has served as the veritable lingua franca, bridging segments of the population. There is more. In this globalised world, English is the bridge that connects India to the world and its economy. The Indian economy cannot survive as an insular entity in an interconnected and competitive financial ecosystem. The fundamentals of the Indian engagement with international communication, business, trade and investment revolve around its proficiency in English. Certain critical industries in the country services and, in it, Information Technology - are especially reliant on this language.

What is true for the national economy is also true for its people: a hold on English opens up the frontiers of employment for the common Indian. Moreover, this language is also the shared global currency when it comes to India's ties with the world of ideas and knowledge. India's contribution to and gains from innovation, research and development, collaborations, discoveries in the global production of knowledge are inconceivable

without English.

Mr Shah's demonisation of English needs to be located within a broader ideological and epistemic thrust. It is also rooted in a problematic understanding of what constitutes the idea of India. The minister sought to underline the importance of Indian languages by dismissing English: a foreign language, Mr Shah asserted, does not suffice when it comes to understanding India and its culture. But the spirit of the idea of India - linguistically or otherwise - advocates exactly the opposite. It is a celebration of pluralism and accommodation. English, with its many virtues and uses, thus has a firm place in the Indian ethos. Mr Shah needs to know that the flourishing of Indian languages is not contingent upon the marginalisation of English. Such a totalitarian attitude is consistent with the majoritarian impulses that are associated with Mr Shah and his party.

It is expected that the Government will look at all the pros and cons before implementing any policy that seeks to demonise English. Such sensitive issues could lead to serious consequences.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Rathnan,
Via email

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"The only journey is the one within."

— Rainer Maria Rilke

The Shillong Times

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Trumping it again

A ceasefire is in force in the Middle East, thanks again to President Donald Trump, though hits continued selectively from both sides in its immediate aftermath on Tuesday. Indications were that the truce would hold for a while as both Israel and Iran have "suffered" enough out of the 12-day war and that the leaderships on both sides are now a chastened lot. Iranian missile strikes on a US base in Qatar on Monday night could have added a new and lethal dimension to the war. With advance warning to Qatar from Tehran, the US could save precious lives at the base. The massive destruction and deaths caused by rival sides exemplified the lethality of modern warfare mainly through missile strikes from long distances. Israel managed to eliminate several top military figures and a top nuclear scientist of Iran and stopped short of targeting supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It also hit the strategically significant Evin prison in Tehran. Iran decimated Israel's key defence installations; and in a parting kick, its missiles pounded Israel six times in a matter of one hour, causing massive destruction before the ceasefire took hold. Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi maintains that it would halt the war if Israel stopped its aggression. Trump has cried a halt to further bombings by Israel. All these should bode well for a slow but steady restoration of peace in the Middle East region.

Since the US stepped in with its huge military might to pound Iran's three prominent nuclear installations, the Israelis claim these joint offensives have achieved their objective of thwarting the "dual existential threat" of Tehran's nuclear programme and ballistic missiles. Iran having taken a heavy hit especially after the direct US involvement in the war, Khamenei feared his days were numbered. He manages to have a reprieve, but might not find it easy regaining his long-held, unassailable stature in the Iranian governance structure. Continuation of the war for a longer period could have resulted in serious consequences for all. Iranians have approached Russian president Vladimir Putin and won his support against the US-Israeli aggression. America's stated position has been that Iran should come back to the negotiation table to curtail its nuclear activities. There's no clear word yet from Tehran on this principal demand. Meanwhile, the disappearance of some 400kg of uranium that's enough to make 10 N-bombs from Iran's stock piles, raises a fresh question mark.

Curiously, a gainer from this war might be Pakistan, which has cozied up to the US and apparently offered some assistance to Trump to execute his Middle-East agenda. There's more to Pakistan military chief Asif Munir's infamous lunch with Trump at the White House than what meets the eye. Like it or not, such alliances could continue as long as Pakistan remains ever-ready to do the US's bidding unlike a cautious India that "mostly" charts its own course – the last month's ceasefire notwithstanding. Both strategies have their pros and cons.

Bottom of the Class: Meghalaya's Education System

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A few days ago, the Ministry of Education, Department of School Education & Literacy released the Performance Grading Index 2.0 for States/UTs, 2022-23 & 2023-24. This report caused a lot of commotion in the state because the state ranked among the worst performing nationwide. Understandably, this has led to the critics of the government to label it as a total failure of the Conrad Sangma-led MDA Government. The Education Minister, Rakkam Sangma, on his part, tried to defend the government by pointing at technical issues which lead to faulty analysis. For example, according to him, the "PGI still penalises primary schools in Shillong for not having electric fans or power connections, even though they operate from a single building". So, what he's basically saying is that the indicators chosen are not appropriate for conducting the assessment. This argument is flawed because the assessment uses the chosen indicators for all states. So, if it penalises Meghalaya, it should penalise other states as well. If this indicator has resulted in the state losing 20 points, others should also lose similar points. So, the final scores will still result in Meghalaya having the same or similar points, thus essentially changing nothing. So, it's not a very convincing argument. Still, it is important to actually look at the actual report and see the process of assessment and where Meghalaya didn't do well, which resulted in the low ranking they got.

The PGI 2.0 is based on 73 indicators across 2 categories, viz., Outcome and Governance & Management, containing 6 domains, viz., Learning Outcomes, Access, Infrastructure and Facilities, Equity, Governance Processes, and Teachers and Education Training. Using Meghalaya's lowest score (417.9) as a basis, the report divided the states into ten groups of equal intervals. So, as much as it is about the actual score a state receives, it is more important to look at the change as well, i.e., has the score increased from the last assessment and by how much compared to other states. This will be a much more accurate assessment rather than just the score per se.

The report interestingly shows that the first four groups (Daskh, Utkarsh, Atti-Utam, and Uttam) contained no states, while only Chandigarh appeared in the next group. Akanshi-1 (521-580), the 3rd to last group, includes

a maximum of 14 states. The second last group, i.e., Akanshi-2 (461-520), has 10 states and all the North-East states, except Sikkim, are in this group. Meghalaya is the lone member of the bottom-most group, Akanshi-3 and the gap between it and the state with the least point in the Akanshi-2 group is just over 50 points. What this shows is that the gap between Meghalaya and the other states at least till Akanshi-1, is not very high and it is possible to bridge in the next four years, provided the state grows by at least 40-50 points every assessment year. But is the state improving or regressing? Now, that is the most important question.

When one looks at the progress at PGI scores between 2022-2023 vis-à-vis 2023-2024, something very interesting is being noticed. The PGI score for Meghalaya in 2022-2023 was 410, which increased to almost 418 in 2023-2024, an increase of 16 points, making them the 15th among the 24 states that register a positive gain from the previous assessment. This increase, though much less than 40-50 points, still exceeds that of Tripura, Assam, Manipur, and Sikkim. So, actually Meghalaya has seen an improvement while states like Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Ladakh, Mizoram, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Karnataka, West Bengal, Lakshadweep, Chhattisgarh and Andaman and Nicobar Islands have seen a drop in their scores. So, comparatively, the situation could have been much worse. But there is a caveat.

In 2022-2023, Meghalaya along with Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland were the three states that were in the bottom category, i.e., Akanshi-3. The latter two, like Meghalaya, saw an increase in their scores; but because they already had comparatively higher scores, and they saw an over 20 points increase (as against Meghalaya's 16 points increase), they could get out of the bottom and become part of the second last category, i.e., Akanshi-2. So, the problem for Meghalaya was the low base from which they were starting and they

would have to accumulate over 50 points to show any discernible improvement in their rankings. It is important to keep in mind that Delhi with 44 points achieved the highest gain in points. So, it was always going to be very difficult for Meghalaya to show drastic improvement in such a short period. This is not an excuse for the low point's tally, especially when the NPP-led MDA government is now in its second term. Whatever legacy issues may have plagued the sector, there should have been some progress till now. To achieve true improvement, we need to determine precisely where the state has improved and declined since the last assessment, thus identifying the critical areas demanding urgent action.

The country comprises 36 geographical units (states and union territories), and they are each assessed in terms of score increases or decreases since the 2022-2023 assessment period. Of the six domains, there is no new data for Learning Outcomes (LO), so there has been no change in it, and of the remaining five, Meghalaya saw an increase in their score in four of the five domains. The domain where the state saw a decline in score is equity, which is concerned with parity in educational attainment between different social, economic and gender groups. Meghalaya is a state where over 80% of its population is indigenous with a similar figure of people living in the rural areas. So, to find that the gap between the different categories has increased is a shocking finding. Although I don't have access to the raw data of the individual indicators, this means that students belonging to marginalized groups, like ST, SC, female, and those staying in rural areas are actually doing much worse than the previous assessment period.

As for the domains where Meghalaya has seen an increase in the scores, the state ranks 22nd out of the 30 states in Infrastructure & Facilities (IF), 24th out of 32 in Teacher Education & Training (TE&T), which are not very encouraging.

This means they have just basically scrapped through. The Education Minister has cited the inappropriateness of the indicators under Infrastructure & Facilities (IF) as an excuse for blaming the low scores. But actually, according to the data, the state has seen an improvement in this domain. So, it's very confusing how this can be the reason for the low scores. The Teacher Education & Training (TE&T) is concerned with the quality of teachers and although we do see a slight increase in the scores under this domain, we can agree that there's a lot of effort which is required to improve the training of teachers. We should connect this to job security, but predictably, the neo-liberal mindset running the country's and state's education systems will not allow it.

The domains where one can appreciate the improvement are Access (A) (9th out of 12 states) and Governance Processes (GP) (6th out of 21 states). The first is about retaining children in schools and considering the high-dropout rate being a historical problem for the state, it is an enormous achievement. The domain of Governance Processes (GP) has a lot of indicators which range from student-teacher ratio, availability of key officials in the school and funding, among others. If one were to be objective about the data, except these two domains, the state is seriously lagging in the other three domains, especially on equity which is very disconcerting because it hints at the rising inequality in the state which will have serious political implications for the state.

The state has to gain at least 40-50 points every year for the next few years to get out of the bottom. This appears to be a hard task considering that it faces challenges in more than half of the domains which are used to measure the performance of the states. But behind the scores, there is also a human cost which the poor and the marginalized are already paying. If things don't improve soon and fast, it may lead to serious problems in the future, because you will have many people who are unprepared for the job market and many of them will be those who belong to the marginalized groups in the state, who incidentally are the majority. So, it's a dangerous situation.

(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

Mocked for Speaking English...

So, there I was, outside my favourite tea stall—chai steaming, bun maska crumbling—and all was right with the world. The monsoon clouds had taken a lunch break, the air smelled like hope (and diesel), and I was at peace with humanity. That is, until I heard it.

Not a political promise, not a pot-hole cover being stolen, but a snort. "Angrez ban raha hai!" said a voice, dripping with ridicule. I turned to see a young man sheepishly backing away from a group, having made the cardinal sin of saying "Thank you" instead of "Dhanyavaad." For this, he was mocked. For this, he was laughed at. And I thought, not for the first time, we Indians are a strange lot.

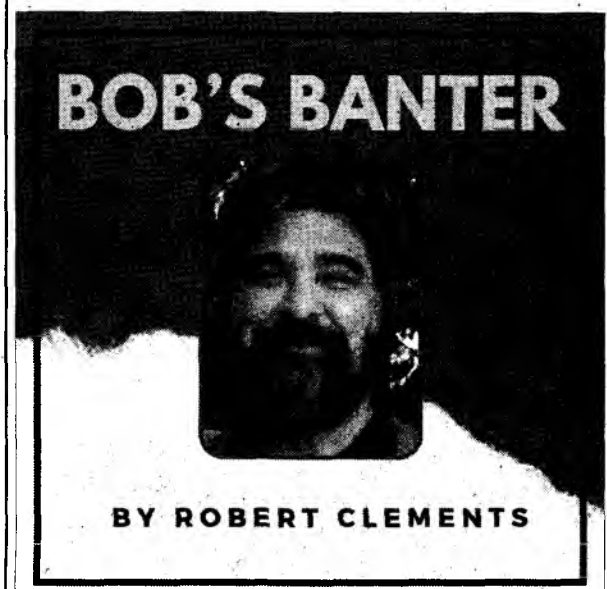
You see, we'll pray for our children to go to Harvard, but mock the neighbour's child for saying "excuse me" instead of "hat jaal!" We dream of our startups being acquired by Silicon Valley giants, but roll our eyes when someone quotes Shakespeare. We

plane story? Remember that? Pushpak Viman zipping through the clouds while Wright Brothers tinkered with wood. Or the one about Lord Ganesh being the first plastic surgery patient. It's a fun fireside story till your medical student cousin actually quotes it in an anatomy exam.

And so, we continue to lull ourselves into this dangerous dream—where we are already great, already global, already there. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is not dreaming—they're doing. Updating their apps while we chant about our ancient operating systems. Publishing scientific papers while we dig up mythology as empirical evidence.

Now, before I'm misquoted or misjudged, let me be clear. I love our languages. Every syllable, every nuance. Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, Khasi, Punjabi—they are the soul of India. But pride should never come with prejudice. Language should open doors, not shut them on others.

You can wear your dhoti and recite Shakespeare. You can sing a bhajan and submit



send WhatsApp forwards in Hinglish, and then frown when someone uses proper grammar. Irony, thy name is subconscient.

And in this curious circus of contradictions, along comes our Honourable Home Minister and drops a little linguistic grenade: "One day, people in India will laugh at those who speak English."

Bravo, sir. Not for the sentiment, but for the sheer entertainment value. Because that one statement summed up perfectly our collective Everest delusion.

Ah yes, Everest. Let me take you back to that imaginary base camp I often speak of. There's a group of amateur climbers—dressed in brand-new gear, not a drop of sweat between them. "We'll train hard!" says one. "We'll tackle the ice head-on!" says another. But then one fellow, probably with a PhD in Positivity from WhatsApp University, stands up and says, "But you're already at the top!"

Cheers erupt. Laddoos are distributed. Campfires are lit. And not one of them takes a step. Why bother climbing when you've already convinced yourself you're there?

And that, my dear readers, is what happens every time someone tells us we don't need English.

We are not on top. We haven't even left base camp. This isn't about colonial hangovers or linguistic elitism. I love my vada pav more than my vanilla sponge cake. But English isn't just a language—it's a key. A tool. A bridge. It's how we talk to the world. It's how we trade, negotiate, research, heal, code, teach, and yes, even flirt on dating apps.

Want to be a pilot? Speak English. Want to attend an international science conference? Speak English. Want to understand the warranty terms of your newly imported washing machine? You guessed it—English.

And yet, we're being told to laugh at it. As if mockery is a national growth strategy.

You know what's worse? It's not even new. We've been fed these fairytales before. The ancient Vedic

a research paper to Oxford. The two are not mutually exclusive.

But when a leader mocks a language, what he's really doing is mocking aspiration. Telling millions, "You don't need that key." And the poor believe it. Because it's always the poor who pay the price. The leader's son will still study in London. The minister's daughter will still intern in New York. But the rickshaw driver's child, who once dreamt of being a global citizen, now wonders if he's less Indian for wanting to learn English.

We forget, language isn't just words. It's access. It's inclusion. It's mobility. And in a world that is becoming one giant Zoom meeting, refusing to learn the common language is like joining the call without unmuting yourself—and then blaming the host. There's a joke going around in international circles that India is the land where talent is abundant, but translation is missing. Our engineers build code for NASA, but can't present their work without a translator. Our scientists conduct cutting-edge research but struggle with global publication because their English isn't "polished." Is that the fault of the child, or of the system that laughed when he said "How are you?" instead of "Kaise ho?"

So yes, dear reader, speak your mother tongue with pride. It is your identity, your root. But also learn the world's language.

And to those who mock English speakers—here's a gentle truth bomb: Abroad, no one laughs at them.

They hire them. Because while we sit here laughing at an accent, the world is climbing their Everest. And every now and then, they look down at us and wonder why we're still pitching tents at base camp.

So the next time someone says, "Angrez ban raha hai!" just smile, sip your chai, and say, "Thank you."

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

Letters to the Editor

Concern over proposed memorial viewpoint in Sohra

Editor,

As a resident of Guwahati and a frequent visitor to Meghalaya, I wish to express my concern over the proposal by James Syiemiong—Guinness World Record holder and local BJP leader—to establish a viewpoint in Sohra in memory of Raja Raghuvanshi, the victim of the recent honeymoon tragedy.

While the incident was undeniably tragic and merits empathy from all quarters, the idea of commemorating it through a public viewpoint in Meghalaya seems inappropriate. Meghalaya is a state that thrives on tourism—people come here seeking natural beauty, peace, and healing. A memorial associated with a brutal crime risks casting a permanent shadow over that spirit of respite and joy.

It is also important to recall that, in the immediate aftermath of the incident, sections of the national media unfairly blamed the state and its people. This

caused hurt and damage to Meghalaya's reputation—something its residents are still working to overcome. Installing a memorial here might inadvertently revive those memories, doing more harm than good.

Memorials serve as reminders. And while remembrance is important, it must be rooted in context. Raja Raghuvanshi's hometown—or the communities personally connected to him—would be more suitable places for such a tribute. Meghalaya, which had no direct connection to the victim or the accused beyond the location of the crime, should not bear the weight of this memory.

I respectfully urge James Syiemiong to reconsider the proposal in light of its broader impact on public sentiment and tourism.

Yours etc.,
Prashant Goswami
Guwahati

A preposterous suggestion!

Editor,

While saluting the Meghalaya Police for their efficiency with which they handled the murder case of Raja Raghuvanshi, one is equally appreciative of the fact that the Government

is working to upgrade and enhance the feasibility of the Meghalaya Tourism Service Provider App, an online portal to provide safety and security to the tourists and the local community as well. It was indeed unfortunate that Raja met with his end on our home ground and succumbed to the cold blooded murder scripted by his wife and her accomplices but to come up with a suggestion to establish the Raja Memorial Viewpoint at the site is preposterous and fanciful. Granted that the incident gained national momentum and the authorities worked diligently but do we really need to name it after the victim and historicise it and keep the event alive for posterity?

Rather this incident must make us more vigilant and alert. Thus the need of the hour is to monitor the entry and exit of the tourists, provide reliable transport, monitor their place of stay, mandatory engagement of certified, verified and uniformed tourist guides; implementation of safety guidelines, promoting ethical tourism to safeguard tourists as well local communities and protocols for handling emergencies, etc. One feels it would be more productive if the Government sets its priorities right and channelises its time and

exchequer on more crucial matters since our state has huge tourism potential.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Publicity stunt or temporary insanity

Editor,

The suggestion by a BJP office bearer that a view point in Sohra be named after Raja Raghuvanshi reflects only one thing—the BJP in Meghalaya has too much time on its hands and has nothing of substance to offer by way of good governance so it wants to create news by suggesting something outrageous. Why should any tourist coming to Meghalaya want to be reminded about a murder most foul committed by hardcore contract killers? That this murder happened in Meghalaya is bad enough but to create a memorial to remind us of the dastardly murder is nothing short of insanity. It has been correctly stated by Mark Twain, "If you have nothing to say, say nothing." This statement is appropriate here and on many other occasions when people speak out of turn or hold forth without actually saying anything of

substance. But as a reader of your daily I am appalled that you would even consider giving this piece of rubbish front page coverage. Is there nothing of consequence to report about? Truly this calls for introspection on the part of the media as to what actually constitutes news and that the opinion of one person holding some position in the BJP is not necessarily news.

Yours etc.,
Marybell Nongrum,
Via email

An article that touched me

Editor,

I am writing in response to the article titled, "Nation Should Know: Gratitude and Hospitality Run Deep in the Hearts of Meghalayans" by Salil Gwal. I just had to share my appreciation, as the article deeply touched me. At a time when so much of what we hear and read is filled with negativity and division, this piece felt like a ray of hope. It reminded us that a sense of gratitude and humanity still exists, no matter what language we speak or what beliefs we hold.

Gewali's story offered a beautiful glimpse into the

goodness of everyday people in Meghalaya, especially those from farming communities. I was particularly moved by the story of his father, who gave notebooks to children from poor families, even though he himself had very little. In return those families, out of gratitude, offered him whatever they could such as fruits, vegetables, firewood, or fish. That is the true picture of village life, so simple, sincere, and full of empathy.

Thank you for publishing such a touching and meaningful piece. It is a reminder that there is still so much goodness in our state. Unfortunately, many people outside do not see this, especially when some national media and TV channels portray our region unfairly following Raja Raghuvanshi's murder orchestrated by his wife. Articles like this deserve to be disseminated outside the state also to help to correct those misconceptions and highlight the simplicity, hospitality and gratitude of our people.

Yours etc.,
Marbud Pyrbot,
Via email

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

*"Courageous people do not fear
forgiving, for the sake of peace."*

—Nelson Mandela

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PGI Rankings: A Reality Check

THE first step towards addressing a problem is to admit there is one. Unlike Education Minister Rakkam Sangma who tried to bail himself out of a difficult situation by blaming the quality of research which ranked Meghalaya the lowest in the country on the Performance Grading Index (PGI) in education, Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma is grappling with the problem and agrees that the State needs to dissect why it consistently scores the lowest on PGI ranking. The PGI assesses the education scenario across states on several important parameters such as access to education, infrastructure and facilities, equity and governance. What flows from this study is that if all of the broad parameters are met there are better learning outcomes. The architecture of the PGI emanates from the rationale that an efficient, inclusive and equitable school education system is contingent upon the regular monitoring of interconnected matrices of inputs, outputs and outcomes related to school education indicators, and the development of a quick response system for course correction in the entire system.

The fact of the matter is that education in Meghalaya's villages leaves much to be desired. Pictures of some of the schools in Garo Hills are deeply distressing. Classes are held in single-roomed, ramshackle structures which are prone to floods in the monsoons. That such schools continue to function without the MLA making an issue of it also shows that for most politicians education is not a priority and has never been one. If MLAs had made education a priority they would have raised the issue of poor school infrastructure; the quality of teachers appointed and the difficulty that many kids encounter to access even such schools, no matter how dilapidated they are. In all these years we have hardly heard legislators draw attention to the educational outcomes in the state even when the pass percentage for the Senior School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) was abysmal. It's only when the matter became the topic of public scorn that the Chief Minister decided to take action and came up with the CM Impact guide books that were distributed across the state and which resulted in better SSLC results. Whether the book actually measures a student's overall comprehension of the subject matter taught or is only learning by rote to reproduce what is memorised in the examination, is subject to further research.

The best way for students to grasp what is taught in the classroom is when interactive learning is encouraged and students feel free to ask questions and clear their doubts. Such a learning environment unfortunately does not exist in most of our schools. Students hardly dare pick up a conversation with teachers. The pedagogy adopted even today is a one way street. The teacher speaks/lectures; the students listen and whether the communication is complete is decided only during the examinations when the teacher assesses the answer scripts and finds that the answers have no relevance to the question and the student is completely off the mark. This has happened for far too long with no attempt to address the gaps and do a course correction. Hopefully this course correction will start now!

My Nature, My Earth: A Village Girl's Reflection in a Changing World

By Dapbianglin Sohkhlet

I have always found it strange when people say that we own nature; that we are its masters; that we hold dominion over land, water, and sky. I cannot relate to this notion, not because I think less of humanity, but because I know better. I was raised in a village, close to the earth, and closer still to the truth that we are not above nature. We are part of it. From a very young age, I felt that nature was never something to control, but something to understand. Something to revere. A gift, not a possession. I often ask myself:

Why are we always in such a hurry? Why do we chase power and superiority so desperately?

Why do we treat life as a race when it was meant to be lived slowly, thoughtfully, gratefully?

We seem to have forgotten that nature does not exist to serve us. It exists because it was created just as we were. And yet, we cut down forests, tear through mountains, and dig into the very lungs of the Earth to build roads, towers, and monuments to further our ambition. We silence the wild, then complain when the world feels empty, and tell ourselves that time is moving so fast nowadays.

If nature could speak, I believe it would cry, not with the tears we know, but through landslides, through rising heat, through drying rivers and fading forests. I've seen it crumble, under the weight of our greed, and it breaks my heart. Nature suffers just like we do, but its pain is far more extreme and far more silent.

Is this how we pay back the very being that provides us with breath, food, and shelter?

I have cried helplessly as I watched familiar waterfalls dry up, the soil split with heat, and the green hills turn to dust. I cried because I remembered what my grandmother told me, that the Khasis of earlier times were people deeply rooted in simplicity and innocence, closely tied to the natural world around them. They didn't just live beside nature; they lived with it, in step with its rhythms, finding peace in its quiet and joy in its beauty. There was no need for complication, no chaos, no noise, just a deep, peaceful harmony.

Nature, to them, wasn't just a backdrop; it was a teacher - a guide. It revealed

its wisdom not all at once, but slowly, to those who paid attention. And in that space, they learned values that ran deeper than mere knowledge, honour, integrity, and a sense of shared responsibility. These weren't things they picked up from books; they were absorbed from life itself, from the world that spoke to them in silence and symbol. I realise now that nature shaped their understanding, not just of the world, but of how to live well within it, with care, with awareness, and with a heart open to learning.

She used to speak of a time when everything they ate was pure and untouched: yams, sweet potatoes, wild greens, millet, and organic rice. There was no wealth, but there was strong, enduring, natural health. Their bodies bore the strength of clean living, and their hearts the calm of a simpler life. And now, here we are surrounded by abundance, yet gasping for air just ten miles into a walk.

We call ourselves advanced, but what have we truly gained?

Our ancestors, with limited knowledge, achieved more than we do now with all our books and machines. They were scientists long before science had a name. They were doctors before modern medicine existed. They were engineers building homes that lasted generations, crafted from earth, bamboo, and stone, in harmony with the land. They were environmentalists before we turned nature into a subject taught in classrooms.

And what are we now? We read. We write. We speak of nature and balance. But we act like strangers to the very soil that feeds us.

We are gatherers of knowledge, yes, but gatherers only. We collect facts, but rarely implement them. We've learned to value information over wisdom, and comfort over connection. Somewhere along the way, we forgot that nature is not just something to be studied; it is something to be lived with, protected, and loved.

I remember a recent journey that made this even clearer to me. I was travelling from my village to Shillong, and along the way, I witnessed severe landslides, massive, heart-wrenching

scars on the hillsides. The land had crumbled, collapsed under the pressure of roads and machines. I sat in silence, staring out the window, and I asked myself, "Is it just and fair that, for us to reach 'on time,' we destroy what has been standing strong for generations? Is it right that, in the name of fast delivery and personal comfort, we sacrifice hills that have watched over us longer than any clock or calendar ever has?"

That day, I saw not just rocks falling I saw dignity falling. I saw our choices, our speed, our craving for efficiency, crushing the very earth that once fed and sheltered us. And I wondered, how long before the Earth decides it has had enough?

As a girl raised in a village, I had the privilege of breathing air so clean, I could tell the changing seasons just by its scent. I remember telling my mother, "Winter is coming. I can smell the cold in the air, the burnt leaves, and the dal cooking in the evening breeze."

Autumn brought nostalgia, family walks, dipping in waterfalls, and collecting leaves. Spring smelled like beginnings. Summer came with drama, thunderstorms shaking the skies, and us children playing syiem-pulit with laughter in our pockets. My grandmother would turn pomelo skins into dolls with her wise, wrinkled hands.

We had little. And yet we had everything. Now, we chase peace in possessions, mistake price for value, and live life in numbers, bank balances, likes, and square feet. But is it worth it? Ask your heart, not your wallet. A man who earns ₹300 and receives ₹500 feels joy in every limb. But the one who owns crores feels nothing, because nothing is ever enough. We have become so used to wanting more, we've forgotten how to be thankful for enough.

There's a Khasi saying I've heard since childhood: "Da slap kwah sngi, da shiit sngi kwah slap." ("When it rains, we want sunshine. When the sun shines, we want rain.") It sounds simple, but it speaks to our entire existence. We are never satisfied. We're always longing for what we don't have. This restlessness, this ungrateful-

ness has become our greatest weakness. And it is the root of the damage we inflict not only on ourselves, but on the very Earth that sustains us.

Being human is not about being the strongest, the richest, or the most powerful. It is about being grateful, responsible, and kind. Yet we use our superiority not to protect what is weaker, but to exploit it. But if we are all creations of the same source, if we all belong to this Earth, then shouldn't we be equal by nature? Shouldn't our strength be measured by how we care for what sustains us?

My nature, my Earth, it is not mine to own. It is mine to protect. And if I must be the voice that reminds others, then I will speak. I will speak for the trees, for the rivers, for the air that has no language but breath. Because when the Earth finally answers it may be too late to listen.

"Ha peit mynta mariang ka ong/ Kylla bamut kylla jinglong/ To phai sha nga sa shisien pat/

Da dier ka por ioh nga sympat/Haba ianga phi ieh jyndat/Kynjri jingiet nga hap ban bihat.

Ha kaba kut ngim iaid ryngkat."

(Look at me now, says mother earth/ Repent and mend your ways/Return to me yet again/For if you delay I shall revenge/When you suddenly abandon me/I have to break those bonds of love/ For in the end we are not travelling together)

And after saying all this, after writing from a place of deep love and deep concern, I must remind myself: I am also human. I speak not from a place of judgment, but from a place of belonging. I am one among billions, and I share in our flaws, our confusion, our longings.

But I was given a voice and a pair of hands. So I will use them, not to point fingers, but to raise them in honesty. I speak not to offend, but to awaken, first and foremost, myself. Because if I hope for change, then I must first be the change. And if even one heart listens, then perhaps, nature will too.

I am no environmentalist to speak on environmental degradation, but I am a person who respects and loves nature.

(The writer is a research scholar in Department of Tourism, NEHU. Email: dapbiangkisohkhlet@gmail.com)

How does India stand in the West Asia Crisis?

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

Approximately 12 days after hostilities erupted in West Asia, when Israel abruptly opted to attack Iran's nuclear facilities and remove its top leadership, the cross-fire has ceased, equally abruptly, with US President Donald Trump again appearing in the role of peacemaker. Shortly after his announcement of a cease-fire, on social media, both Iran and Israel appeared to have accepted the cessation of hostilities, much like India and Pakistan did six weeks ago.

However, the circumstances are strange, as Trump himself joined in the attacks, announcing barely 48 hours ago that US bombers had struck three of Iran's primary nuclear sites and decimated them, and then threatening massive retaliation if Iran attacked US assets. Last night, Iran did attack a US base in Qatar, albeit with prior notice and reportedly no casualties, while Bahrain, where the US 5th fleet has a base, closed off its air space. But Trump responded early Tuesday by announcing that both Iran and Israel had accepted a "respectful" cease-fire.

It is unclear what actually transpired to arrive at this outcome, however welcome, and exactly how long the cease-fire may hold. Tehran's threat to restrict traffic through the Straits of Hormuz could have played a part. However, having said it would be the party to call an end to hostilities, Iran

telephonic conversation, for "immediate de-escalation" of hostilities, he has neither condemned the US strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities nor has he asked his close friend Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu to cease the attacks on Iran, which launched the possibility of engulfing the entire region in a conflagration with disastrous consequences across the globe.

In fact, it fell to Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi to hold up a mirror to the government, in an op-ed for The Hindu newspaper. Questioning what she called the government's "silence on the devastation in Gaza and the hostilities against Iran," Gandhi said the silence was "a disturbing departure" from India's traditional moral diplomatic stance and "represents not just a loss of voice but also a surrender of values."

Condemning Israel for its "deeply troubling and unlawful strike against Iran and its sovereignty," Gandhi said, "As with so many of Israel's recent actions, including its brutal and disproportionate campaign in Gaza, this operation was executed with utter disregard for civilian lives and regional stability. These actions will only deepen instability and sow the seeds of further conflict."

India depends on imports for over 80% of its energy requirements. Despite diver-

"New Delhi is caught in a bind. There are close to eight million Indian diaspora in the region. India has successfully evacuated over 1700 of its citizens so far from the conflict afflicted zones in 'Operation Sindhu'. Trying to revive its credibility in the neighbourhood, New Delhi has offered to evacuate Nepali and Bangladeshi citizens from the conflict zone."

has breached the cease-fire, leaving open the prospect of further Israeli retaliation.

Even if, as Trump has announced, the hostilities are placed on hold, what is unclear is what these air strikes, raining missiles, and drone attacks causing panic and some havoc, actually achieved. If the purpose was to take out Iran's nuclear bomb-making capability, it is extremely unlikely Tehran will stop its efforts. On the contrary, it is more than likely to opt out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), restricting efforts by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor its nuclear programme and stop the bomb.

According to analysts, it is unlikely that crippling damage has been inflicted on Iran's nuclear enrichment sites, at Natanz, Fordow, Arak and Isfahan, although the strikes and killing of top nuclear scientists will have set the Iranian nuclear project back. Estimates suggest that Iran already possesses around 400kg of highly enriched (60%) bomb-grade uranium and there will be little incentive for them to hold back on crossing the rubicon. The direct attack on their nuclear facilities, by both Israel and the US, has provided them the strategic and even moral sanction to break their restraints. The possibility of a regime change in Tehran, under threat, appears even less likely.

In all this, where does India stand? India, which aims to be a global voice of authority in a multi-polar world, has major stakes in ensuring a cessation of hostilities, given that its energy supplies are primarily dependent on maritime lanes of the West Asian region, where it also has a vast diaspora, has chosen to remain silent.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi again reiterated, this time in Croatia, that this was not an era of war. However, beyond expressing "deep concern" and asking the Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, in a

sifying imports from beyond West Asia and despite its oil marketing companies having several weeks of crude supplies in stock, a drastic rise in prices of crude and gas could create havoc to the economy, which is already strained from the recent India-Pakistan hostilities and the long lasting Russia-Ukraine war.

New Delhi is caught in a bind. There are close to eight million Indian diaspora in the region. India has successfully evacuated over 1700 of its citizens so far from the conflict afflicted zones in 'Operation Sindhu'. Trying to revive its credibility in the neighbourhood, New Delhi has offered to evacuate Nepali and Bangladeshi citizens from the conflict zone.

The Indian government has close defence, strategic and even ideological ties with the Israeli government, which has emerged as a staunch supporter, most recently witnessed during the India - Pakistan hostilities last month. With Iran, the ties are more civilizational and geo-economic. While India depends less now on energy supplies from Iran, its larger trade, transport and connectivity issues, including the INSTC (International North South Transport Corridor), the IMEC (India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor) and, more recently, the Chabahar port are closely intertwined with Iran.

How the situation in West Asia continues to evolve, as Trump threatens both Iran and Israel for continuing cease-fire violations and how India navigates this situation remains to be seen. However, what this conflict has amply demonstrated is the emancipation of Russia, which is so embroiled in its quagmire in Ukraine that it has been unable to come to the support of a close ally which even supplied it with drones in that conflict. This will likely lead to significant changes in the global geo-strategic landscape.

Letters to the Editor

De-siltation of Ward's Lake

Editor,
In February 2008, the Union Ministry for Environment & Forest, put Pushkar Lake, which existed since the 4th Century in Ajmer, Rajasthan, on the list of the National Lake Conservation Project (NLCP). Tetra Tech India Limited, prepared a DPR for de-siltation after which Rs. 48.3 crore was sanctioned. Water and Power Consultancy Services of India completed the de-siltation work. Report published by the Times of India, dated October 24, 2009, says that when work started, the lake had 4 feet of water and the people of Pushkar were hopeful that they would soon have a cleaner, deeper lake, which has been desilted. When the District Administration started desilting work, the lake became wider and deeper and as a result could not conserve rain water for even a week. Rainwater has become the primary source of water for the lake, during the monsoons. The proposal was opposed by Geologists of the State Department. Twelve bore holes were drilled but some bore wells became dysfunctional as the 'aquifer zone' could not augment the water supply, as the recharge is from the monsoon rains only.

Thirty three years ago a DPR was prepared for de-siltation of Umiam Lake.

The boundary of Umiam Lake running from Toyota, Mahindra and Tata showroom, Mawiong, is a 'fault plane' (defined as a crack with displacement). Millions of years ago, Mawiong was at the same level with the bottom of the Umiam Lake. The 'Fault' down-thrown the level of Umiam Lake to its present day height. Cracks developed, tremendous heat was generated in the process. The burnt and crushed rocks on both sides were removed. The crack was 'sealed' by a proportionately prepared mixture of cement. Cementing materials tend to decay. The Umiam Lake cementing material was given a life span of 50 years as we are all aware of. 'Silt' (geologically defined as the finest disintegration of quartz), brought by water flow and current, enters through the decayed cracks and fissures and block and reduces the leakage of water. Removing the 'silt' will cause leakage, as in Pushkar Lake.

The cementing material of Umiam Lake had already completed more than half of its life span 33 years ago. When the authorities of the Government were made aware of the above facts, they used their wisdom and abandoned the project.

In November 2022, a Consultant, unaware of the geological, structure and tectonic history of Umiam Lake, prepared a DPR proposing a bridge from Army boat house to Nehru Park, to

ease the load of the Umiam Dam. An article- 'Umiam Hydrel Project- a Geological Marvel'- was published in The Shillong Times on November 6, 2022. The project was abandoned, and shifted downstream as recommended. The bridge is now under construction.

Ward's Lake was built in 1894. It was razed to the ground due to the impact of the Shillong earthquake of 1897. A photo of Hopkinson's Tank or Nan Pollock as it was called at that time, before the earthquake shows the level of Ward's Lake and the Botanical Gardens at the same level. The fault caused by the earthquake down-thrown the Botanical Garden to its present height, destroying the foundation. The floor of Ward's Lake became a fault plane, prone to leakage. 16 years ago, Ward's Lake was leaking heavily. The water level dropped by 4 feet. The Ward's Lake dam was reconstructed post the 1897 earthquake, using sandstone. The cementing material was 'mortar,' a mixture of sand and lime. The 'mortar' decayed, after more than hundred years thereby causing leakage. Decayed mortar was removed and filled with 'Epoxy Resin' by compressed air. The leakage remains sealed till date.

The colour of the water of Ward's Lake is quite murky, due to the presence of sediments, algae and pollution. De-siltation changes the colour of the water, to

a brighter shade. The phenomenon of 'light absorption' is directly proportional to depth. The deeper the Lake, the brighter the colour. But this phenomenon works in fast flowing water bodies (24x7 flow), where there are no sediments, algae or polluting medium. Most of the fast-flowing rivers in Meghalaya exhibit this phenomenon of light absorption, crystal clear, most notably and explicitly the Umngot River, a major tourist attraction.

Some rivers in our State turn 'blue' in winter, because they become stagnant during the winter months. Ward's Lake is a stagnant water body. A greater risk for de-siltation of Ward's Lake is the leakage of the lake's floor after removing the 'silt', which has been the mainstay of the Lake. The Tourism Department should tread with caution.

Yours etc.,
Dr Eladbor Laloo,
Via e-mail

Respect is earned, not demanded

Editor

I have been following with great interest the exchange of letters in your esteemed paper - on whether we owe respect to the elderly. The letter from S. Lyngdoh in TST, June 23, 2025 was most courteous. I wish I had as much faith in the elderly. As someone who now belongs to this cohort,

and as a person who lives in a death-denying hedonistic culture that worships youth for purely carnal reasons, the Indian and "third world" tradition of respect for the elderly has long intrigued me. Here in the US we are looked at with thinly disguised pity - for our physical frailties, for the fact that we can no longer produce economically, for what is perceived as our lack of physical beauty (this last is a relief), and for the fact that we are closer to death. The lip service to the elderly here comes in typical capitalist fashion - with monetary discounts for "senior citizens." At least in academic circles, not only is there no love for wisdom, but wisdom is sometimes disdained - even by philosophy professionals!

Compared to this, it is a joy to be in Indian culture, where the elderly are still venerated for their purported wisdom. But do all older folks deserve respect? With age, the body grows older. But does the mind necessarily mature? Of course not. Not all persons grow older the same way. All depends on the moral efforts we put in to purge our souls, so we can come out shining, at the other end of life. Those who do not exert such effort, emerge as "old rogues" - a term coined by the great Swami Vivekananda. Indeed, some old folks are old rogues. Why? Because our passions and iniquities, if left unchecked, only worsen with age. To

respect an old rogue, simply on account of physical age, makes no sense. Our respect for the elderly is really meant for what they supposedly represent - namely, wisdom. Old rogues not only lack wisdom, but can be harmful to others, especially to the youth.

Moreover, sometimes younger folks are far more self-controlled and wiser than old rogues. Finally, undeserved respect is the root cause of authoritarianism. So, respecting the elderly, when practiced as a blind creed, with no discernment between the deserving and the undeserving, can be a gateway to authoritarianism. Among the many forms of authoritarianism that rule India today, one is the iron hand of the elderly. This, despite the fact that the elderly are also sadly neglected, these days.

So, my counsel to the youth of Meghalaya is as follows: while you should generally be respectful of all persons, making special allowances for the frail and the vulnerable, you should also be discerning, with respect to character. Respect should be earned. An old rogue does not deserve your respect.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

Scripting history

IN a proud moment for India, Subhanshu Shukla becomes the first Indian astronaut to script history with the International Space Station (ISS), where he along with three other nationals intend to carry out some 60 experiments before their return to earth two weeks hence. Private entities facilitated this mission – with the Texas-based Axiom partnering with Elon Musk’s SpaceX venture, and the lifting off having taken place on Wednesday from NASA’s Kennedy Space Centre. After a long gap, Shukla followed up in the footsteps of Rakesh Sharma, who was the first Indian national to go into space – on a Soviet rocket in 1984. At this juncture, a special homage is due to Kalpana Chawla, the Indian-American astronaut who was the first woman with an Indian background to travel to space – on the Space Shuttle Columbia in 1997 as a mission specialist, but who met with a tragic death in 2003 when it crashed, killing all seven crew members.

Space exploration, which was a craze some 50 years ago, lost considerable attention after the end of the Cold War. When hostilities between the United States and Soviet Union stopped and the USSR disintegrated, the race between them to explore space and seek domination there lost its punch. The ISS was a good step forward. Though the US took the lead in the construction of the station with support from European nations, Japan etc., in the 1980s at the initiative of Ronald Reagan as President, Russia too was drawn into it in the 1990s. The realization dawned on all for the need for a collective push in space explorations. All the same, the old enthusiasm is still missing in this field where many surprises await mankind in future. Before we reach out to life elsewhere, chances are also that others might come in search of humans right here. This now is also a time to think about a migration from earth at least for those who can afford to do so if and when favourable conditions emerge. With global private initiative, Space tourism is already a craze for many.

One of the early entrants in space explorations was India, with visionary prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru having set the ball rolling. India’s first rocket launch station, in Thumba, Kerala, came into being in 1963, followed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in 1969 and much else. Past the Chandrayaan missions to Moon, India is currently planning the Gaganyaan, aiming to launch the nation’s first human space mission in 2017. Some Air Force pilots are currently undergoing training for the same in Russia and here. India now boasts of achieving an unmanned docking in space; and was the fourth country to land a spacecraft on the moon. In space explorations, China was a late entrant but, with its resources and newly acquired technological clout, the red nation is closely behind us and might work wonders.

Letters to the Editor

Digital Transformation in Infrastructure – A New Path for Meghalaya

Editor,
Digital transformation is no longer a luxury or a competitive advantage—it has become a necessity for every sector, including infrastructure. In Meghalaya, where infrastructure has traditionally meant roads, bridges, water supply, and electricity, a new era is unfolding. These systems are now becoming smarter, more interconnected, and driven by digital innovation.

From building climate-resilient towns to improving connectivity across remote hilly regions, technology is playing a central role in Meghalaya’s sustainable and inclusive development. Infrastructure upgrades are now being powered by systems that collect and analyze data in real time, leading to better planning and delivery of essential services—be it water supply, electricity, traffic control, or even healthcare.

Digital tools such as sensors, smart grids, and live tracking systems are helping tackle day-to-day challenges like traffic congestion, power management, waste disposal, and public safety. The goal is to create cleaner, safer, and more efficient towns and villages.

Cutting-edge technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), Machine Learning (ML), and Data Analytics are equipping planners and administrators with tools to make faster, smarter decisions. These technologies offer new solutions grounded in real-time insights, making governance more responsive and future-ready.

Cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru have already adopted AI-based traffic management systems and public transport apps like BEST Chalo, which allow commuters to track buses and purchase tickets online. Such innovations could be adapted to Shillong and other urban centres in Meghalaya to ease daily commute and enhance public convenience.

AI is also transforming how infrastructure is designed and built. Engineers can simulate multiple models digitally to identify the most efficient and cost-effective options. In construction, robotics and drones are expediting projects while improving safety.

However, bringing this digital revolution to every part of Meghalaya is not without challenges. It demands significant investment and a workforce skilled in digital tools and platforms. Therefore, promoting digital education and capacity-building initiatives is essential.

Moreover, true digital transformation must be inclusive. Every citizen—

Let’s face facts: Meghalaya’s poverty is at the root of its poor educational outcomes

By Patricia Mukhim

There’s been much talk about the abysmal performance of the education sector in Meghalaya after the Performance Grading Index (PGI) launched by the Ministry of Education which looks at school education at the district level, was published. Naturally the State Education Minister tried to run for cover by blaming past governments for not doing enough to boost up the school infrastructure in rural Meghalaya. At around the time that the report surfaced, reports of schools in Garo Hills being run in rooms not bigger than a garage, dilapidated and susceptible to floods, had surfaced, thereby reinforcing the lack of attention by successive governments to provide basic facilities to their people. In Meghalaya there has been an over-reliance on private educational institutions, many of them run by church organisations. Rather than strengthening government run institutions, somehow it was felt that the missionary run schools would deliver better outcomes and make much better use of resources given to them. Hence many of such schools got absorbed into the deficit system of grant-in-aid.

Now the missionary run schools are not exactly affordable. While fees may be minimal, the uniforms and books cost money. Many parents are seen lining up at the homes of MLAs and ministers to look for financial assistance to enable them to buy the books and uniforms and to send their kids to school at the beginning of the school year. This is where the problem lies and which should be addressed. When the government speaks of free and compulsory education it should mean that education should not extract a cost on parents. Even uniforms and books – a once in a year expenditure ought to be provided by the government.

The other problem with education in Meghalaya today is that children at the pre-primary level are being taught by Anganwadi workers. With all due respect to these ladies, they are themselves not educated or trained to teach. Teaching is not something you just pick up by the wayside. A teacher needs to understand basic child psychology to really know how to deal with each of these fragile minds. The pre-primary or pre-school level is actually the formative years of a child and they

are the years that determine how that child is going to turn out in the long run. This idea of tasking Anganwadi workers with educating kids at their most vulnerable stage is fraught and needs to be revisited. The Anganwadi workers at main centres are paid a paltry Rs 4,500 a month at the main centres and Rs 3,500 at mini centres while Anganwadi helpers get Rs 2250 a month. Just look at the injustice of it. How can someone entrusted with children’s welfare be paid so little and be expected to educate young minds?

Those living in the comfort zone of the state capital will not understand why rural and peri-urban folks rely so much on Anganwadi centres. These are more like creches that look after kids while their parents eke out a hand to mouth living. Poverty is real and present in Meghalaya. It’s a different matter that the last socio-economic caste survey was done way back in 2011 and since then we have no data of the number of Meghalayans living below poverty line. My regular visits to rural Meghalaya informs that poverty has grown and so has landlessness. Hence the tussle between sending kids to school or making them work to augment the family income is ever present. Too often the latter wins.

According to the Annual Status of Education Report -2024 released by PRATHAM, the NGO working on educational outcomes in rural Meghalaya, the number of students enrolled in government schools in 2024 was 38.4%. Since not many can afford private educational institutions in rural Meghalaya it would mean that a huge chunk of children in the above age group are out of school. And this is visible because the young kids are either in the fields helping their parents or tending to cows and sheep. The heart-breaking question is – what is the future of these out of school kids? Their parents are poor; that poverty is replicated by their children and there is no visible effort at poverty alleviation or land restoration for those who have lost their land to mortgage or have sold it to meet immediate needs.

Since we are discussing education and learning outcomes in Meghalaya’s schools, the PRATHAM Report says the roots of the learning gap in India

are multifaceted and deeply intertwined.

The education system focuses too much on aggregate scores but misses out on subject-specific mastery. This often leads to students being promoted to the next grade despite significant gaps in foundational skills. Then there’s the problem of absenteeism, whether because of economic pressures on families or illness or the need to look after their younger siblings. This creates a discontinuity in education, leading to an incremental learning gap.

The less we speak about classrooms the better. They are unattractive, overcrowded and teachers don’t have sufficient teaching materials nor the passion to teach. This adds to school-dropouts. Too often teacher absenteeism makes children and their parents wonder whether it is worth sending their kids to school. But the flip side is also that teachers are increasingly being used for non-teaching jobs and assigned administrative duties. All this adds to the lack of interest in students attending school. They feel there’s more freedom to be themselves outside the classroom.

At the risk of being repetitive, let’s admit that our education system still focuses on rote learning for passing examinations rather than developing critical thinking skills. You need exceptional teachers to trigger thinking among students and allow them to give as many open-ended answers to a single question and the space to be wrong without being judgmental. At the end of the day the student must be able to apply what is learnt in the classroom to real life outside the classroom. Isn’t that what is called experiential learning? What’s the point of teaching environmental studies if students are not allowed by their school principals to join a river cleaning drive or they are not taken for a nature class to see deforestation with their own eyes and be asked how they would tackle it at their level and about raising their voices for the right causes? Isn’t that real life learning and the purpose of all education? This in effect is what learning gaps are all about. Students learn better outside the classroom where they are uninhibited and constricted by space and the need to be silent when they feel like

speaking. Many students go into the next class without mastering the foundational skills. Such students will face challenges in the real world. It is the law of nature that individuals with no critical thinking skills (thinking on their feet) are more likely to face unemployment. This needs to be understood by our teaching communities.

The challenge for educators in Meghalaya is to identify specific areas where students are struggling, by using diagnostic assessments. Do we have such diagnostic capacities? Only when we have diagnosed the problem can we begin to focus on targeted instruction and individualized support, which could include amongst other things – remedial teaching or one-on-one tutoring and use of technology to help the students get a grip on the foundational skills.

Currently there are two schools of thought in the country which are proffering their own sets of remedies to improve the educational standards in the country today. There are those who think that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a harbinger of a new dawn for education. Others contend that the NEP is a hastily adopted piece of legislation that has not gone through wide public discourse and have hence come up with a Peoples’ Education Policy (PEP).

The NEP 2020 has laid out bold and ambitious goals for the country which says, “Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term (including that every student will attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3).”

The NEP states upfront that the highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant to students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved.

All this is fine but the system needs a complete overhaul and that is the most stubborn challenge to achieve. This is where people’s involvement comes in and hence the Peoples’ Education Policy...

Meghalaya stigmatised for an isolated incident

Editor,
The recent travel advisory by the United States directing its officials in India and other travellers to stay away from certain areas in India such as Meghalaya in the North East, among others has hurt the sentiments of the people of the country and of Meghalaya as well. Why pick on Meghalaya? There appears to be a hidden agenda behind the whole idea of defaming the image of the North Eastern region and some parts of India which is uncalled for. Any untoward incident can take place anywhere in the world but that does not at all mean that such a place should be tagged as unsafe for tourists. Meghalaya is widely known for its age old hospitality towards tourists hence the travel advisory looks like an ulterior motive to tarnish the clean image of Meghalaya. We strongly oppose the recent US travel advisory and the undue amplification of the narratives by a section of the media.

Yours etc.,
Deepak Chhetry, Tura

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

No, Minister: Numbers don’t lie!

By KN Kumar

Meghalaya’s education system is clearly under some stress, as officially confirmed by its dismal PGI (Performance Grading Index) score of just 420 out of 1000 for 2023-24. The state trails far behind top-performing Punjab and Chandigarh and is positioned at the very bottom of the national rankings. PGI assesses school education across multiple dimensions—(i) learning outcomes and quality, (ii) infrastructure and facilities, (iii) equity, (iv) access, (v) governance processes, and (vi) Teacher education and Training. The Minister, Education has reacted and countered the PGI ranking of Meghalaya by citing (1) data lags, (2) structural complexities, and (3) technical mismatches. While these may provide partial explanations, they do not justify the persistent underperformance. Meghalaya’s chronic low ranking necessitates a clear-eyed account and urgent action. Let us analyse:

(1) The Minister asserts that PGI relies heavily on data sources like UDISE, which often have a one to two-year delay. He claims that improvements made in 2024 – new classrooms, electrification, or enhanced facilities – are not reflected in the 2023-24 PGI. This might seem technically correct on one level, but this position is equally applicable to all the states that face similar delays. But some of them still perform admirably. Meghalaya’s persistent bottom-tier status across multiple PGI cycles indicates an entrenched crisis, not just a transient lag. Indeed, high dropout rates—approaching 10% in lower primary and soaring above 20% in secondary—and hundreds of under-enrolled schools (some with fewer than 10 students) point to a chronic problem. These trends have persisted over successive years, through changing governments. Further, the Minister has not offered any official data indicating wide-scale improvements in 2024, which weakens his assertion. Without up-to-date metrics from the state, the PGI remains the most reliable indicator for the citizens.

(2) Structural Complexity: This one surely is a red herring. Meghalaya maintains a fragmented education system: government schools, grant-in-aid institutions, SSA-managed schools, deficit-assisted schools, and private schools – all co-existing under overlapping infrastructure. The Minister, therefore, argues that such categorization results in mis-attribution of facilities. This complexity can lead to some anomalies in scoring. Yet it is not a new issue – it’s been the case for years. Fragmentation may justify procedural delays, but it does not explain the staggering learning deficits or rampant absenteeism. These are distinctly human failings – not by-products of data categorization.

(3) To be fair, the Minister does admit that many schools lack basic amenities—functional toilets, drinking water, electricity, and libraries. These are undeniable constraints. According to UDISE: (1) Only about 53% of schools have access to drinking water; (2) Approximately 88% have toilets, some of which are still not fully functional; (3) Electricity coverage hovers around 36-38%; (4) Barely 24% of schools house libraries. These deficiencies—classrooms without electricity, water-starved schools, inadequate sanitation – all create debilitating barriers to learning. A student cannot focus in the dark, nor can he remain in a school without proper toilets and drinking water facilities. Internationally, such infrastructural inadequacies correlate strongly with poor academic outcomes, especially in Meghalaya, and have a direct and measurable impact. These are essential, not optional, foundations of a functional school. Acknowledging infrastructural deficits is insufficient when we juxtapose this with suboptimal fund utilization. Despite dedicating around 16% of its budget to education, Meghalaya has reportedly utilized only 60% of allocated SSA funds in 2022-23. The Minister promises a sweeping “infrastructure transformation,” but offers no specifics. No detailed enumeration of which schools will be electrified, which will receive safe water by when, or how many sanitation facilities

will be installed. If there was a blueprint, it would be in the fitness to lay it on the table. But let that pass.

(4) The limited point is that the PGI’s indicators go far beyond infrastructure; PGI judges learning outcomes, equity, access, and governance. On learning, surveys like ASER report that a mere 56% of Class 5 students can read at the Class 2 level. This grim finding reflects a breakdown in teaching quality as much as in facilities. Staff shortages compound the problem: secondary schools carry vacancy rates of up to 30%, and proxy teaching, where locals substitute instead of trained educators, is well-documented, especially in remote regions. Infrastructure investments alone cannot resolve these core issues.

(5) Meghalaya’s hilly terrain, remote hamlets, and dispersed communities do complicate infrastructure delivery. The Minister hints that PGI’s one-size-fits-all methodology fails to account for this. Yet other similarly topographically challenged states, such as Himachal Pradesh (PGI - 860) and Uttarakhand (around 780), and Sikkim have managed far better performance. Their success demonstrates that regional challenges are surmountable; they do not offer excuses. Moreover, PGI’s methodology is transparent and standardized. Meghalaya had the opportunity to contest or contextualize its unique profile, yet no such effort has been documented. Technical anomalies may exist in the margins, but they cannot explain the complete collapse of learning, governance processes, and inclusion indicators.

The data expose a systemic crisis. To emerge from the bottom ranks, Meghalaya needs concerted, accountable, and time-bound reform across several fronts: (i) A complete audit of school infrastructure (ii) filling the teacher vacancies (iii) fund usage, and (iv) NEP-2020 compliance progress should be made public. A white paper would build public trust. (2) Define clear targets—such as “100% electrification by December 2025,” “fully functional sanitation in all schools by June 2026.” Such should be the targets. I expect a leader to speak this language and galvanize his officials. (3) Accelerate recruitment to fill the 30% vacancy in secondary teaching posts. Recruit and train qualified teachers for remote areas, and punish them if they don’t remain in place. (4) Eliminate proxy teaching through accountability and community oversight. (5) Give local bodies and school management committees genuine responsibility in school oversight. Encouraging community participation—parents, NGOs, village durbars – in monitoring attendance, infrastructure upkeep, fund utilization, and classroom quality can be beneficial and transformative. (6) Reduce redundant, under-enrolled schools and merge enrollees to create viable, well-staffed institutions. Too many sparsely attended schools dilute funding and human resources. Consolidation can save costs and raise educational quality. The state’s educational system stands on shaky footing. The low PGI isn’t an invidious verdict handed down—it’s a wake-up call. The Minister has acknowledged infrastructural deficiencies. But infrastructure is only the visible tip of an iceberg. The greater challenge lies in teachers, learning quality, and governance. Without addressing those, even the best-built school remains just concrete. It is not the hardware; it is the software. Some of the finest schools of India were the ancient Gurukuls. They had limited infrastructure, but the highest teacher commitment.

The minister’s assertions—about data lags, categorization, and technical quirks—may each hold a splash of truth. But collectively, they form a narrative that distracts rather than engages. Meghalaya’s condition isn’t the result of faulty reporting; it’s the outcome of decades-long poor governance and missed opportunities. By facing the data head-on and committing to real action, the Minister can change the story. I respect the Minister; he is one of our sincere political leaders. This rot predates him. Some unsolicited advice from my side: Stop being kind to the system, be kind to the children. They are our country’s future.

"Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow."

— Gustave Flaubert

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Cadastral Survey Crucial

THE NITI Aayog report on the multi-dimensional poverty index 2023 had found West Khasi Hills to have the highest number of poor people based on the two National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). As per NFHS-5 (2019-21) as many as 52.48 per cent of the people are multi-dimensionally poor in West Khasi Hills. West Jaintia Hills came second in the percentage of poor people with 52.08 percent. It was followed by East Jaintia Hills at 43.79 per cent as per NFHS-5. In East Khasi Hills, the multidimensionally poor account for 24.10 per cent (NFHS-5). Interestingly the survey found that all districts in Garo Hills fare better insofar as the number of multi-dimensionally poor is concerned.

In South West Garo Hills, it was only 18.27 per cent; East Garo Hills 14.96 per cent and in North Garo Hills, it was 13.26 per cent while South Garo Hills has reduced the number of poor people to 9.77 per cent (NFHS-5) from 11.27 per cent (NFHS-4). Further, in what may be seen as a steep reduction in the number of multidimensionally poor people, West Garo Hills currently has only 8 percent of such people as compared to 27.29 per cent as recorded in NFHS-4. A question that needs to be asked is what did Garo Hills do right and where did the Khasi-Jaintia Hills go wrong? The National MPI measures simultaneous deprivations in the area of health, education, and standard of living that are represented by the 12 SDG-aligned indicators. These include nutrition, child and adolescent mortality, maternal health, years of schooling, school attendance, cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, assets, and bank accounts.

In a recent report, it is learnt that in Garo Hills there have been attempts to map out the land ownership status which is as good as a cadastral survey. The importance of a cadastral survey at this crucial juncture cannot be over-emphasized especially in Khasi-Jaintia Hills where rural landlessness stood at 76% as per the socio-economic caste census, 2011. While some contest this figure, unless there is alternative data, this number stands. West Khasi Hills has been known to be the district where landlessness was a huge issue right from the time when the poverty alleviation programme was launched by the International Fund of Agricultural Development (IFAD). When the project got underway the project implementers found that farmers of West Khasi Hills (the project area) were actually farming on leasehold land. This was problematic as the lease was for short tenures. It was at this point that the realisation dawned that poverty was staring people in the face and not much was done to secure community land and prevent privatisation of land. Attempts to carry out cadastral surveys in the past met with stiff resistance since the tribal elite that had captured land were also the political elite then. The hunger for land has only grown exponentially today. The MDA-2 Government has to make cadastral survey a priority to arrest the poverty syndrome. In fact, the Government at this point has a duty to pass a land ceiling act before people take up arms to address these genuine grievances.

ILP an Unfinished Fence: Identity, Influx and Delhi's Deliberation

By Wangbo Wangsu George

The verdant hills of Meghalaya echo with a long-standing demand, a persistent plea for a protective barrier - the Inner Line Permit (ILP). This yearning isn't born of mere whimsy but from a deep-seated apprehension, a fear that the very essence of its indigenous identity could soon be under siege by unchecked influx. Despite an array of constitutional, social, and economic provisions designed to safeguard the unique heritage, the clamour for ILP intensifies. The people seek to peel back the layers of this paradox, critically examining why existing safeguards seem insufficient, fuelling the hunger for ILP, and illuminating the intricate dilemma faced by the Government of India in acceding to this fervent demand, particularly in light of global historical lessons on immigration and its impact on vulnerable populations.

Meghalaya, a state carved out of Assam to protect its distinct tribal identity, stands as a testament to the foresight of India's constitutional framers. At its core, the Sixth Schedule remains the bulwark, granting the KHADC, JHADC, GHADC significant legislative, judicial, and administrative powers. These councils possess the authority to enact laws governing crucial aspects of tribal life, powers theoretic robust enough to shield indigenous identity from external pressures. Complementing this, the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971, specifically prohibits non-tribals from acquiring tribal land without explicit permission, a critical safeguard against alienation. Socially, the recognition of Khasi and Garo as associate official languages, alongside academic integration of tribal history, aims to preserve linguistic and cultural heritage.

Economically, reservations for Scheduled Tribes in state government jobs and educational institutions, coupled with benefits under the Tribal Sub-Plan and tax exemptions, are designed to empower the local populace. Politically, the reservation of all 60 Legislative Assembly seats for ST candidates ensures indigenous representation, besides, partial exemption from the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a direct acknowledgement of the state's unique demographic sensitivities.

Yet, despite this seemingly formidable constitutional and legal framework, a pervasive sense of vulnerability permeates the indigenous communities. The paradox is glaring: if the existing provisions are so comprehensive, why does the demand for ILP continue to resonate with such intensity? The answer lies not in the provisions themselves, but in their weak and often porous implementation. While laws exist on paper, their enforcement on the ground has been fraught with challenges.

The Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, though prohibi-

tory, is often circumvented through informal arrangements, proxy ownership, or benami transactions, leading to subtle but persistent land alienation, especially in commercial and urban areas. The ADCs, despite their legislative powers, frequently grapple with limited financial resources and administrative capacity, hindering their ability to effectively monitor and enforce their own laws, particularly in border areas or burgeoning towns. Corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a lack of unified, stringent oversight contribute to these loopholes. The existing safeguards, while internal, largely fail to address the fundamental concern of regulating entry and stay, which is seen as the primary source of demographic pressure. Without a robust mechanism to control who comes in and for how long, the protection offered by subsequent laws feels like locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.

This perceived inadequacy fuels the relentless hunger for ILP. For the indigenous communities, the ILP is not merely another legal provision; it is viewed as the absolute, indispensable instrument of control, the ultimate barrier against what they perceive as an existential threat to their very identity. The demand stems from a deep-seated demographic anxiety, a haunting fear of becoming a minority in their own homeland, a fate that has tragically befallen indigenous communities in other regions, most notably Tripura. The history of unchecked migration, both legal and illegal, particularly from neighbouring Assam and Bangladesh, has fostered a profound distrust in the efficacy of existing system.

The post-CAA scenario, despite Meghalaya's partial exemption, intensified this fear, with concerns of a "spillover effect" pushing migrants into the seemingly less regulated state. For activists and pressure groups, ILP is a straightforward, easily understandable mechanism, a visa for one's own country that clearly delineates who belongs and who is a visitor. They believe it is the only way to effectively track, regulate, and if necessary, restrict the entry of individuals whose presence is perceived as threatening the fragile demographic balance, traditional livelihoods, and cultural fabric. The sheer persistence of their agitation, often spilling onto the streets, speaks the depth of their insecurity and their conviction that the existing safety nets have gaping holes.

While acknowledging the genuine concerns of Meghalaya's indigenous communities, Delhi's reluctance to grant ILP is multi-faceted, balancing constitutional principles, economic aspirations,

and geopolitical realities. The core of this dilemma lies in reconciling the state's demand for greater control with the broader national imperatives of economic integration, fundamental rights, and seamless movement within the Union.

Among the Centre's apprehensions are the economic implications. The implementation of ILP could significantly deter investment. Businesses seeking to establish ventures in Meghalaya, whether in manufacturing, services, or large-scale agriculture, would likely face bureaucratic hurdles and potential labour shortages if the free movement of workers is restricted. This could stifle economic growth, create an unattractive investment climate, and potentially exacerbate unemployment among locals if major projects are shelved or scaled back. The burgeoning tourism sector, a vital economic lifeline for many local communities, also stands to suffer. While proponents argue that tourists visit ILP states, the additional layer of paperwork and scrutiny could deter a significant segment of visitors, impacting local livelihoods dependent on the industry, from homestays to taxi operators. Furthermore, the Centre sees the Northeast as a critical component of its "Act East Policy," aiming to transform it into a trade gateway to Southeast Asia.

Meghalaya serves as a vital corridor for connectivity to Mizoram, Tripura, and parts of Assam like the Barak Valley. Imposing an ILP regime without a robust and foolproof transit mechanism could severely disrupt the movement of goods and people to these landlocked regions, isolating them and causing immense economic and logistical hardship. Developing a system that effectively differentiates between a genuine tourist, a businessman, a long-term resident, and someone merely transiting through Meghalaya, without causing undue harassment, is an administrative and technological nightmare that the Centre is wary of undertaking without clear, viable solutions from the state.

The ILP restricts the fundamental right to free movement and residence enshrined in Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. While the Constitution allows for "reasonable restrictions" in the interest of Scheduled Tribes, granting a blanket ILP to Meghalaya, given its historical integration and mixed demographics in certain areas, could invite legal challenges and set a politically sensitive precedent. The Centre must justify such a restriction not merely on sentiment but on demonstrable, unmitigated threats that cannot be addressed by existing laws.

While ILP is in force in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and recently Manipur, it has not been a com-

plete panacea for illegal immigration or demographic changes in those regions. Reports of corruption in issuing permits and continued challenges in controlling undocumented movement suggest that ILP, in isolation, is not a silver bullet. This internal assessment likely contributes to Delhi's cautious approach, questioning whether imposing ILP in Meghalaya would truly achieve its intended outcome or merely create new administrative burdens and unintended economic consequences.

The concerns of indigenous communities in Meghalaya are not merely localized fears; they resonate with a historical record across the world. Uncontrolled influxes, particularly into regions with fragile economies and limited resources, consistently pose significant threats. Historically, such movements have led to: Strain on Public Services: Schools, healthcare, water, and sanitation systems can become overwhelmed, Depressed Wages and Job Competition: New populations, often willing to work for lower wages, can put downward pressure on local labour rates, making it harder for the indigenous populace, especially those with traditional skills, to compete. Pressure on Land and Resources: Increased population density inevitably puts strain on natural resources, leading to deforestation, water scarcity, and environmental degradation, which directly impact indigenous communities whose livelihoods are intrinsically linked to their land, Social Friction and Cultural Erosion: Demographic shifts can alter social dynamics, leading to communal tensions, loss of local languages, dilution of traditional practices, and a fundamental change in the cultural landscape, as original inhabitants struggle to maintain their distinct identity.

Meghalaya's fears, therefore, are rooted in a global pattern of vulnerable communities facing severe challenges when their borders are perceived as open and their regulatory mechanisms as weak. Granting ILP requires navigating the complex interplay of fundamental rights, regional economic integration, logistical challenges, and the historical effectiveness of the permit system itself. The path forward demands a nuanced understanding from both sides: Meghalaya must present a clear, modern, and comprehensive plan that addresses the Centre's practical concerns, while the Centre must acknowledge the profound and historically validated fears of the indigenous populace.

Only through transparent dialogue and a willingness to tailor solutions that genuinely balance security, identity, and inclusive, sustainable development, can Meghalaya construct an enduring fence that truly protects its unique soul without inadvertently walling off its future prosperity.

National Education Policy Vs People's Education Policy

By H. Srikanth

In response to Toki Blah's article, "The Story of Learning in Our Tribes" (ST, June 3, 2025),

Glenn K. Kharkongor came out with the piece, "NEP 2020: An Education Policy for Our Times and Our People" (ST, June 24, 2025). Contesting Toki Blah's support to the People's Education Policy (hereafter PEP), Kharkongor defended the NEP 2020. While agreeing to the PEP's views on budget allocations and national entrance examinations for admissions, Glenn Kharkongor opined that the PEP is "caught in a time-war, hanging on to outdated precepts and practices". To him, NEP 2020 is a visionary document that serves the needs of the tribals in the state. Keeping in view the interests of the tribal people of Meghalaya, we need to keep alive the ongoing discourse on the NEP 2020 and the PEP 2025.

The draft Peoples' Education Policy never claimed that the state of education in the country was better before implementing the NEP 2020. There were indeed serious problems concerning the quality and reach of education, which needed attention. The NEP document, in fact, mentions several problems afflicting education in the country. But the question is whether the NEP has offered any solutions. Take, for example, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) which Glenn Kharkongor mentions. In its recent report ASER says that around 49 percent of students studying Class V cannot read the textbook of Class II. The problem of comprehension is acute among the rural poor students coming from marginalized communities. Can we improve the quality of school education in the country without the government allocating more funds and coming in a big way to start more schools, improve the infrastructure and quality of teaching in the schools? Instead of improving the conditions, the governments are busy closing many schools in the remote areas in the name of rationalization. The PEP therefore suggests that there should be more schools with trained teachers. No detention policy followed in many states adversely affected the quality of education. Hence, PEP proposes to introduce the pass-fail system providing special attention and remedial classes for those who lag in their studies.

Glenn Kharkongor welcomes the NEP's proposals, such as multi-disciplinary education, multi-modal forms of teaching and academic banking. The PEP is opposed to such proposals for valid reasons. What the NEP advocates in the name of multi-disciplinary education is nothing but a cafeteria model where students, as buyers, choose different subjects, just as we choose different food items in buffet party. Student's knowledge will not increase if he or she takes one paper from physics, one from literature, one from history, and another from music. This model only produces jacks of all trades and masters of none. What we need at a higher level of education is to master one subject and its allied disciplines. The PEP proposes an inter-disciplinary approach to multi-disciplinary education. A student studying political science should become familiar with public administration, political economy, political sociology, and international relations. Similarly, a student studying biology should become familiar with knowledge of bio-chemistry, bio-physics and bio-informatics. Expecting a student with a humanities background to study physics or mathematics makes little sense. The PEP is not against the use of digital technology in classrooms. But it insists that technology should sub-serve, not replace the teachers. We all know how education went for a toss when everyone had to rely on online teaching during the Covid pandemic. Taking MOOC courses involves additional expenditure, which most students cannot afford. Further, ideas like Academic Bank make little sense in a country where the universities vary considerably in terms of quality and infrastructure. In the absence of equivalence of

academic standards, will the students of Ashoka University come and study in the private universities in Meghalaya, or will our students be allowed to gain credits in JNU and IISc?

When the NEP proposes drastic changes in the structure of education, first one should state what is wrong with the time tested 10+2+3 pattern. Can't we improve the quality of education within the education structure with which we are familiar? What reform is that which replaces the three-year degree with the Four-Year Undergraduate Program (FYUP) and proposes to reduce the two-year PG to one year? If what we study in the fourth year of the Four-Year Undergraduate Program (FYUP) is the same as what we teach in the first year of the PG program, what do students gain by changing the structure? As possessing a degree is the minimum qualifications for most jobs, what do the students gain by one-year certificate and two-year diplomas? Again, how does it make sense to introduce the research component prematurely at the degree or PG level, when most colleges do not have teachers who have experience in research? Since appointing teachers with Ph.D. qualifications is difficult, it makes sense to revive the M.Phil program. The PEP is critical of NEP 2020, not because it is conservative, but because it is impractical and goes against the interests of the poor and middle-class students.

Glenn Kharkongor claims the NEP is sensitive to the concerns of tribal people and the NEP's idea of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) takes care of tribal knowledge systems as well. True, the NEP document makes references to tribal languages and tribal knowledge. But we need to go beyond the document and see what the government is actually doing in the name of the NEP 2020? More than developing the tribal languages, the government is making efforts to impose Hindi and replace English. Terms such as social justice or secularism hardly find a place in the NEP document. It may talk about tribal knowledge systems, but what the government is actually promoting in the country in the name of IKS is Yoga, Hinduism and Sanskrit. Can we ignore the fact that the CBSE books have removed lessons on the Mughals and introduced lessons on Kumbh Mela, etc.? We are novice if we separate the NEP 2020 from the politics of Hindutva that the rulers in Delhi practice.

Some intellectuals, carried away by neo-liberal arguments against the state intervention, view privatization as the panacea for the ills affecting public education. They forget that the state played a positive role in laying the foundation for universal and secular education in many advanced capitalist countries. In India, it is the public universities and the institutions like IIT, IIM and AIIMS, which laid a firm foundation for education and enabled many people from marginalized backgrounds to have access to higher education. But by reducing the allocation for public education, the NEP is favoring the private universities, whose number has increased exponentially in the last two decades. Majority of the private educational institutions are started only to make money. Indeed some of these institutions have better infrastructure and they offer better options for the rich students to pursue studies. But they have little relevance for the majority of students from the poor and marginalized sections who cannot get admission in those elite institutions which charge lakhs of rupees as fees. Hence, the PEP opposes privatization and commercialization of education. It demands that the government should intervene to ensure that private schools and universities don't become ruthless mercenaries. The future of the nation is not safe in the hands of those who view education only as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. At the same time, the PEP underscores the need for preserving and expanding public education to realize the principles of equity and justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Letters to the Editor

Timely information for NEET aspirants imperative

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I want to bring to the attention of the Health Department, Government of Meghalaya, the urgent need to publish an advertisement for admission to medical colleges (through state government quota) for NEET aspirants.

As a prospective student from a humble background, I am eager to secure a seat in medical colleges, through government sponsorship. However, given the financial constraints of my family, it is imperative that I am informed about the admission process in a timely manner. I therefore request that the department publishes the advertisement for admission at the earliest possible date, subsequent to the release of the merit list of candidates, along with the probable number of seats available. This would enable students like myself to assess our current position and make informed decisions about whether to wait for the final

results or prepare for the next year's examination. Understanding that the admission process may be delayed due to the state's reliance on central government allocation, I believe that early publication of the advertisement and merit list would greatly alleviate the uncertainty faced by aspiring students.

Yours etc.,
Pritisha Kharsyntiew,
Via email

Experiential learning through NEP 2020 Internship

Editor,
The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) brought a new dimension to higher education across the region by integrating academic study with hands-on practical learning. As a student enrolled under this course through North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), the internship program offered a valuable opportunity to connect classroom theories with real-world experiences across various sectors within 120 hours duration as given by the University.

As part of the initiative,

we were placed in a range of government and non-government departments, including Forest, Agriculture, Rural Development, Disaster Management, and Water Resources. These placements aimed to familiarise students with the working of institutions and their roles in governance, development, and planning, while also helping students apply academic knowledge to practical tasks.

One of the key highlights of the internship was "field engagement". Tasks such as land surveys, mapping, observation, documentation, and occasional interaction with communities gave students an opportunity to better understand how policies and programs are executed on the ground. The experience deepened understanding of both subject matter and social realities.

The internship also played an important role in "skill-building". It helps us improve our communication, adaptability, time management, and teamwork skills through the responsibilities assigned. Stepping into unfamiliar environments encouraged the development of professional confidence and personal responsibility. Despite initial hesitation, students adapted and gradually grew more comfortable in handling real-world sce-

narios.

Nevertheless, the program also encountered certain challenges. In many instances, host departments were not fully informed about the internship objectives or how to engage student interns effectively. This resulted in some students receiving repetitive or unrelated tasks, while others experienced delays in getting started. These issues highlighted the need for improved coordination and planning to make the internship more structured and beneficial for all parties involved.

The internship under NEP 2020 stands as a valuable model of applied learning in higher education. It allowed students to connect theoretical learning with real-life settings, thereby broadening their academic and professional understanding. It also encouraged growth in personal skills, such as confidence, clarity, and practical judgement.

This initiative aligns well with the core objectives of NEP 2020, which seeks to make learning more holistic, flexible, and application-oriented. However, the success of such a program depends not only on placement but also on structure, communication, and support. Strengthening these

aspects will help maximize the potential of internships and ensure lasting benefits for both students and institutions.

With improved clarity of roles and cooperation between the university and host organizations, this program has the potential to become a cornerstone of experiential education in the region and beyond.

Recommendations for improvement

To enhance the efficiency and relevance of the internship program under NEP 2020, student placements must be closely aligned with their academic disciplines. Departments receiving interns should be well-informed about the scope of the internship and the kind of work expected. Clear communication will ensure that students are engaged in tasks that contribute to their learning outcomes.

Internship activities should be based on a planned schedule with set tasks and objectives. This structure would help reduce uncertainty and make the experience more impactful. A simple and consistent feedback system should also be introduced so that both students and departments can evaluate the process and suggest necessary changes.

Attention must be given

to logistics such as transportation and communication support, especially for internships in rural or difficult-to-access areas. These practical aspects play a significant role in facilitating smooth participation and learning.

Most importantly, NEHU should organise orientation sessions with both government and non-governmental organisations before the start of each internship cycle. These sessions would serve to explain the objectives of the Internship Program (IPO), clarify the roles expected from host institutions, and ensure a shared understanding of how to support student interns effectively. Proper orientation will help eliminate confusion, improve preparedness, and make the program more purposeful for all involved.

With such measures in place, the internship initiative under NEP 2020 can grow into a powerful tool for experiential learning, shaping students into capable, responsible, and practice-ready graduates.

Yours etc.,
Teinam Dkhar,
Via email

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How to nurture creativity in congested cities

Children's play is essential for their cognitive, physical and social development. But in cities, spaces to play are usually separated, often literally fenced off, from the rest of urban life.

In our new study, we compare children's use of such spaces in Auckland, New Zealand, and Venice, Italy. Our findings present a paradox: playgrounds built for safety can stifle creativity and mobility, while self-organising open spaces offer rich opportunities to explore and belong.

In Auckland, places such as Taumata Reserve are a testimony to contemporary playground design - grassy, shaded, equipped with slides and swings, and buffered from traffic. Such places are an oasis cherished by caregivers for the sense of perceived safety they provide.

Yet during our observations, we noted how these spaces function not necessarily as an oasis or a point for social encounter, but rather as isolated refuge islands, disconnected from the city's everyday life. Children's independent mobility and opportunities for diverse play activities remained limited and predefined.

Contrast this with Venice's Santa Croce neighbourhood. Car-free streets and piazzas, such as Campo San Giacomo dell'Orto above, pulsate with life. We saw children play ball, draw on pavements, chase each other and even water plants. These spaces are shared inter-generational stages.

To compare children's experience, we measured the diversity of activities (a proxy for creativity). Auckland's Taumata Reserve scored just 1.46. In contrast, Venice scored 2.33, with more than 2,600 spontaneous acts in the streets, reflecting a child-led play culture.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Play is not a luxury. It is a fundamental necessity of life to understand, navigate and adapt to the complexities of the world.

From a deterministic perspective, contemporary Western cultures (such as in Europe and New Zealand) pre-

scribe diverse benefits of play. This includes learning and developing resilience, spatial awareness and social skills.

In Auckland, safety is the focus. While inclusion for children with special needs is understandable, it

this: children need to be able to learn risk competency.

Venice is a cultural model we can draw lessons from. Its pedestrian streets let children roam, climb statues and play hide-and-seek on bridges. This exposure to risks builds judge-

competency in children and caregivers, strengthening community bonds through a culture of care. Auckland's spaces for play are spatially fragmented, limiting social encounters and the risk-taking skills vital for development.

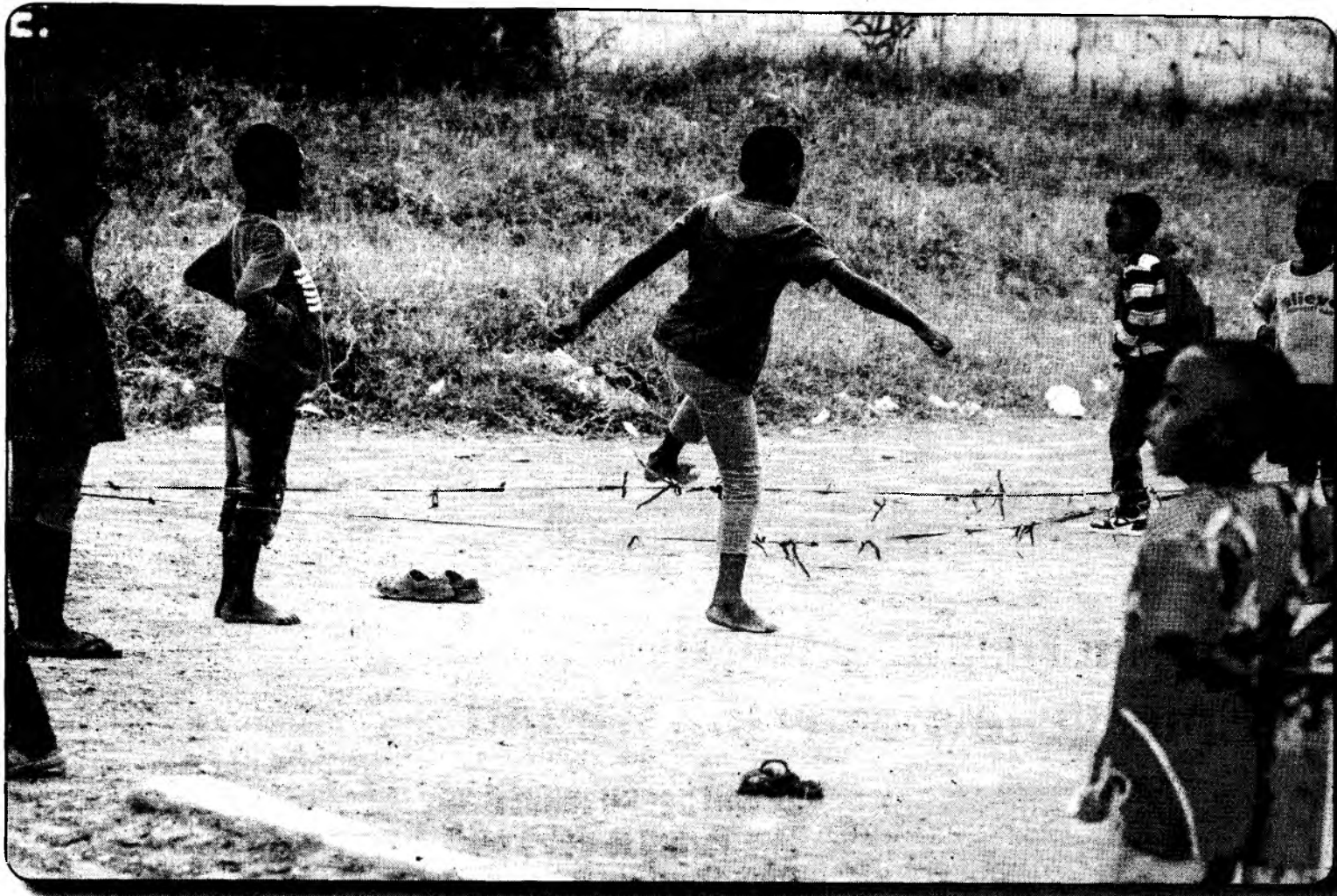
WHAT OTHER CITIES CAN LEARN

From our research, we can draw lessons for how urban spaces might be reimaged to better support children's wellbeing and autonomy. This includes: 1) Designing public spaces with natural elements, "risky art", loose parts and creative equipment for open-ended play that balances safety without compromising opportunities for discovery and risk-taking 2) reducing the number of cars and slowing speeds to achieve better outcomes for children 3) reclaiming streets so that all people and animals can have positive adventures 4) prioritising policies for car-free or traffic-calmed areas across neighbourhoods and in proximity to social places (schools, libraries, shops, parks) to contribute to a culture where safety is a collective responsibility and a commitment towards a stronger social cohesion 5) proactively involving children in urban design through placemaking and temporary appropriation; it is their right to be heard and listened to through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 6) encouraging participatory co-design workshops and action-focused initiatives to harness children's insights to design spaces that meet needs 7) considering nuanced and emotional indicators for success such as belonging, curiosity, joy and inter-generational exchange rather than just efficiency or maintenance cost 8) and collaboratively modifying the environment over time.

We envision cities where children roam freely, invent and experience deeper and authentic belonging. Venice proves that shared public spaces help children enrich and shape cities, as much as the rest of the population does.

Safe playgrounds are only a starting point. For healthy, regenerative and vibrant cities to work, we need to realise that children should have agency to shape the complex assemblage that cities really are. Let's build urban futures where children don't just play, but can have positive adventures.

The choices we make today matter. We can either feed the fear or meet the cultural challenge together by embracing the positive adventures of life, with a sense of collective wellbeing, care and stewardship. *(The Conversation)*



may inadvertently limit the collective capacity for vital and formative developmental experiences at the neighbourhood scale.

Global research shows declining children's mobility, linked to car dependency and adult-controlled routines.

This reduces children's activity radius, constrains confidence and diminishes connection to place. For one of us, a father of two, watching his daughters navigate parks underscores

ment, adaptability and agency. It also makes children co-creators of urban life.

Our study uses what we call "temporary appropriation" - when children use spaces in unplanned, creative ways - and a design framework called SPIRAL, which draws from individual experiences and cultural narratives to build public spaces.

Auckland's rules and fences curb this; Venice's human-scale design invites it. Venice's conditions foster risk

From a New Zealand perspective, it is also essential to recognise the significance of place-based belonging from a Maori worldview.

Concepts such as whakapapa (genealogy), whenua (land) and whanaungatanga (relational ties) emphasise deep, inter-generational connections to place.

In this view, play is not merely recreation but a cultural expression; a way for children to experience turangawaewae (a place to stand).

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, June 29, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Saturn on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for you. You will work with dedication but the result will not be gainful. At work you will try out but will not get the desired results. You should move ahead in business by making a strategy. Do not reveal trade and business secrets to anyone. You need to be careful in money matters. Your self confidence will help you achieve a victory in exams and interviews etc. You will also make plans for buying a fixed asset, vehicle etc. Do not sign legal document before reading it carefully. You could get involved with a person known to you. It could lead to marriage ties. Brother/sister will support you fully. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. You will also take investment decision wisely. Financial position will remain strong and stable.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Some associations can be competitive in business as you shine and work well in your field of activity. You initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. You are likely to protest against domination by people at work. You may have to face egoistic people. This week brings love, romance and excitement in personal relations. Deep personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get stronger. Good luck in finances and new opportunities is encouraging. This is an excellent period for starting a new regimen to improve your health and well-being; such as regular exercise, more structured and productive use of your time, and so forth.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You have the desire for love, harmony and a peaceful life. It is a gentle, considerate, and sensitive vibration. You are diplomatic, warm and sensitive. This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. There are strong chances of materialization of friendship into a long term relationship during this time. Your social life may be restricted to business and family related obligations. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and brings a smile to their face.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Self-confidence and prompt action are highlighted. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You stand in the middle of a doorway in the middle of the week while making an important decision be it professional or personal. It would be better to listen to your own judgment and do what is good for you. People around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are loving, stable, and harmonious in personal relations. There is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and moods can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. You can get stressed and manifest a health problem as you worry about everything.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are practical, trustworthy, hard working, and helpful. This week influences your finances and material aspects, suggests that you are considerably more goal-oriented related to earnings. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. It's an excellent phase to make a lifestyle change. Self-confidence and action are highlighted. You may go in for a change of your image. Personal relationships especially with your loved one are stable and rewarding.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You have intellectual vibration and ability to adapt to most situations. This period brings financial gains for those in banking, investment, hotel industry and those who are in the teaching profession. There could be alteration in ideas

or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by undue enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration can be strengthened through understanding and commitment.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You are introspective and quiet. This week brings some changes in the way you look at professional goals and new interests are developed. You connect with fun loving people, artists and entertainers. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform. Your finances could also improve as long as you employ a tried and tested strategy. Attending an important social occasion or festival may put you in the public eye. Meditation and introspection is therapeutic and revealing as you intuitively get to the bottom of things.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This phase brings youthful energy and you accept challenges in your life. You are diligent and pedantic at work and specialize further in your field of activity. You are on the threshold of a creative and inventive work that brings you name and exposure. Meditate on the constant changes happening around you and centre within. Good health and energy enables you to participate in sports and related pastimes. A pleasant surprise awaits you at the end of the week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and not take things personally. You would express your adaptability and persistent energy in professional projects. You deal with official and personal matters with calm authority. You possess great power to attract creative and charismatic people around you to make your social life enviable. You would be dynamic, forceful and assertive in professional ventures to establish a position of authority. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You are practical, hard working and helpful in personal and professional matters. New friendships and group associations are likely to come about and you will experience increased energy and a stronger ability to assert yourself. You will not feel the burden of your responsibilities. You will work with a quiet mind. You will diligently work to complete your duties. A new approach to friendships or new friendships altogether will pave a new path towards happiness and fulfillment. New associations or affiliations, or plenty of social activity are in store for you. This is an excellent period for beginning a new health regimen.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This phase brings excellent work opportunities for sportspersons and lawyers and also a favorable time to appear in written exams, handle court matters and attend to legal matters. Self-confidence and tremendous efforts are highlighted to attend professional goals. Financial benefits may come your way through investments. You need to be careful in your interpersonal dealings and you must avoid confrontations with your family. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than look to others. Make sure that you do not get caught up in arguments as a simple and straightforward approach is all that's called for.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You may see the light in a friendship, realizing its importance in general, as well as the importance of acceptance and camaraderie. Circumstances may be such that you bring a new spirit of friendship into a romance or another connection in the next months. This can be invigorating. Surprises coming from children may be part of the picture. Your creativity, romance, pleasure, and children are involved. This could manifest, for example, as a romantic proclamation from a lover, a creative project bearing fruit, a child revealing something significant to you, and other such possibilities during this time. The results of exams/tests will be favorable. Your papers will be good. You will remain emotional in love matters.

Strawberries and cream: The true Wimbledon icon

Wimbledon is all about strawberries and cream (and of course tennis). The club itself describes strawberries and cream as "a true icon of The Championships".

While a meal at one of the club's restaurants can set you back GBP 130 or more, a bowl of the iconic dish is a modest GBP 2.70 (up from GBP 2.50 in 2024 - the first price rise in 15 years). In 2024 visitors munched their way through nearly 2 million berries.

Strawberries and cream has a long association with Wimbledon. Even before lawn tennis was added to its activities, the All England Croquet Club (now the All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club) was serving strawberries and cream to visitors. They would have expected no less. Across Victorian Britain, strawberries and cream was a staple of garden parties of all sorts. Private affairs, political fundraisers and county cricket matches all

cream, which might have been watered down.

Wimbledon's lawn tennis championships were held in late June or early July - in the midst, in other words, of strawberry season.

Eating strawberries and cream had long been a distinctly seasonal pleasure. Seventeenth-century menu plans for elegant banquets offered strawberries, either with cream or steeped (rather deliciously, and I recommend you try this) in rose water, white wine, and sugar - as a suitable dish for the month of June.

They were, in the view of the 17th-century gardener John Parkinson, "a cooling and pleasant dish in the hot summer season". They were, in short, a summer food. That was still the case in the 1870s, when the Wimbledon tennis championship was established.

This changed dramatically with the invention of mechanical refrigeration. From the late 19th century, new technologies enabled the global movement of chilled and frozen foods across vast oceans and spaces.

Domestic ice-boxes and refrigerators followed. These modern devices were hailed as freeing us from the tyranny of seasons. As the Ladies Home Journal magazine proclaimed triumphantly in 1929: "Refrigeration wipes out seasons and distances. We grow perishable products in the regions best suited to them instead of being forced to stick close to the large markets." Eating seasonally, or locally, was a tiresome constraint and it was liberating to be able to enjoy foods at whatever time of year we desired.

As a result, points out historian Susan Friedberg, our concept of "freshness" was transformed. Consumers "stopped expecting fresh food to be just-picked or just-caught or just-killed. Instead, they expected to find and keep it in the refrigerator." Today, when we can buy strawberries year round, we have largely lost the excitement that used to accompany advent of the strawberry season. Colour supplements and supermarket magazines do their best to drum up some enthusiasm for British strawberries, but we are far from the days when poets could rhapsodise about dairy maids "dreaming of their strawberries and cream" in the month of May.

Strawberries and cream, once a "rare service" enjoyed in the short months from late April to early July, are now a season-less staple, available virtually year round from the global networks of commercial growers who supply Britain's food. The special buzz about Wimbledon's iconic dish of strawberries and cream is a glimpse into an earlier time, and reminds us that it was not always so. *(The Conversation)*



typically served the dish.

Alongside string bands and games of lawn tennis, strawberries and cream were among the pleasures that Victorians expected to encounter at a fête or garden party. As a result, one statistician wrote in the Dundee Evening Telegraph in 1889, Londoners alone consumed 12 million berries a day over the summer. At that rate, he explained, if strawberries were available year-round, Britons would spend 24 times more on strawberries than on missionary work, and twice as much as on education.

But of course strawberries and cream were not available year-round. They were a delightful treat of the summer and the delicate berries did not last. Victorian newspapers, such as the Illustrated London News, complained that even the fruits on sale in London were a sad, squashed travesty of those eaten in the countryside, to say nothing of London's

"Power is so characteristically calm, that calmness in itself has the aspect of strength."

—Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton

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Housing a mirage

PERCEPTIONS are that India's real estate sector is witnessing a strong revival – after a long period of uncertainties and "muted growth". Developers are reporting record sales and massive uptick in constructions across the urban landscape. Alongside, perceptions are also that the play of corrupt money in this sector is making homes unaffordable for the middle class, leave alone the poor who live in slum-like conditions. The role of black money is well-acknowledged in this sector, where sale deeds reflect only a fragment of the actual payments. A tiny flat in Mumbai, Delhi or Bengaluru could cost more than a crore, forcing the middle-income groups to rely on housing in the distant suburban areas. Several government initiatives in this sector over the past decades made only marginal impact and very few actually benefited from such schemes by housing boards etc. The unbridled play of private entities in this sector has been a real curse.

Ever since Independence, while the governments concentrated attention on several sectors, housing has not received the urgency it demanded. Population explosion further complicated the scenario. The PM Awas Yojana Urban Mission launched by the NDA government in 2015 – a year after Narendra Modi took charge – aimed at providing housing for all in urban areas in a space of seven years. The mission has only partly achieved its objective. A year ago, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman acknowledged the slow momentum and promised in the Budget that the housing needs of one crore eligible urban families would be addressed in the next five years. While there's action in both urban and rural areas through different schemes, the overall scenario is progressively worsening, not improving. Governmental claims about helping the poor or the disadvantaged with free or subsidized houses formed only a part of the larger issue. Some 1.50 crore houses were constructed under the PM housing schemes between 2019 and 2024, as per official figures. Yet, many more of India's population do not have a proper home. Affordable home for the middle class too remains a mirage.

The play of cartels in the private housing sector in major urban centres too is well-documented. Financial experts recently created a buzz in discussion circles by stating that nine families controlled some 20 percent of Mumbai's property market. Citing the real estate sector as one of the "most corrupt" in the country, it has been observed that rich businessmen who possess black money see investment in the housing sector or purchase of gold as two main options to hide their wealth. So too with politicians who make big bucks from government deals and corrupt bureaucrats. Together, they jack up the apartment prices, even land prices, across the board, making the ordinary people pay through their noses to own a home or flat. The government is a silent spectator, irrespective of whether the UPA ran it or the NDA. Big talks serve little purpose. The chasm between promises and delivery is unbridgeable.

MDA 2.0 steps to \$10 Billion Economy!

By H.H. Mohrmen

The Conrad Sangma-led MDA 2.0 government has actively pursued innovative development strategies to ensure inclusive growth and reach every citizen in Meghalaya. Contrary to criticism that it is inactive, the government has launched several flagship programs addressing livelihoods, entrepreneurship, skill development, and tourism. Last year the Chief Minister also claimed that the state will achieve its goal of becoming a \$10 billion economy by 2027. It remains to be seen if these initiatives bear fruits; impact the people and help the state reach its \$10 billion dollar economy.

FOCUS & FOCUS+

One of the government's flagship programs is FOCUS which means Farmers' Collectivization for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems. It aims to enhance farmers' livelihoods by organizing them into producer groups and providing support across the value chain. I can understand the need to form the producers into the group because we have experience with the big Farmers' Producers Organisation promoted by NABARD which is not working in the hills. When the FOCUS project was introduced I could easily connect and I also believe it will complement the SHG program promoted by the Meghalaya State Rural Livelihood Mission.

In the FOCUS project, the PGs were provided with funding, and each member received an initial mobilization fund of ₹5,000. Since its launch in March 2021, FOCUS has benefited 2.45 lakh farmers. Through its extension, FOCUS+, registered households receive an additional ₹5,000 through direct cash transfer. Households obtain a FOCUS+ card as an identification document, and membership in producer groups is mandatory to avail of the benefits. As of now, there are 4,409 Producer Groups (PGs) with 54,881 registered producers.

Even where some outcomes have not fully materialized, FOCUS has given the government critical data on major livelihood activities across blocks, enabling better planning for future interventions. For example, through FOCUS the government has been able to identify the three major produce in every block of the state.

IVCS: Integrated Village Cooperative Societies

Another very innovative project implemented by the government is the Integrated Village Cooperative Societies (IVCS). To overcome poor financial inclusion in rural areas, were introduced. These locally managed institutions provide thrift, credit, and financial services and function as intermediaries for government schemes, input supply, product aggregation, storage, and market linkages.

IVCS operates on a membership model, requiring a minimum of 15 members to start, though typically 300 or more members strengthen operations. Members purchase

shares at rates fixed by the society. Managed by elected male and female committee members, IVCS ensures financial services reach underserved rural populations while offering non-financial services as per local needs.

PRIME: Promoting Entrepreneurship

Recognizing the critical role of private sector-led growth, Meghalaya launched the Meghalaya Startup Policy in 2018, aiming to make the state a leading Startup Hub by 2023. To operationalize this vision, the PRIME (Promotion and Incubation of Market-driven Enterprises) program was established with support from IIM Kolkata.

PRIME addresses limitations in earlier entrepreneurship programs that focused on production but lacked strong market orientation, technology dissemination, and integrated support structures. Meghalaya faces systemic challenges such as weak credit access due to limited banking penetration, complex land tenure systems, and high collateral demands.

PRIME seeks to integrate four essential components under one roof to help entrepreneurs access credit and technology, linking them to the market, and also help them in skill development.

PRIME HUBs serve as one-stop shops across the state, providing end-to-end support to entrepreneurs in partnership with various departments. Through PRIME, entrepreneurs receive systematic facilitation to help them start and sustain their businesses in Meghalaya's unique economic context.

Meghalaya Skill Development Mission

A skilled workforce is fundamental for economic growth. Meghalaya's youth – 27% of the population falls in the 15–29 age group – face high levels of underemployment and unemployment, even among graduates. A significant mismatch exists between market needs and available skills, compounded by limited private investments and high dependence on public-sector employment.

The Meghalaya Skill Development Mission (MSDM) addresses these challenges by conducting a Skill Gap Analysis to identify gaps across sectors and design demand-driven training programs. It integrates skills development with credit and market access to ensure employability. It offers multi-skill training to make youth employable across diverse sectors. The mission is to facilitate self-employment opportunities through skill-building and credit linkage.

With regard to trainers it has engaged mostly local Training Providers and in the process evolved training standards for trainers, curricula, assessment, and post-placement support. It not only insisted on third-party assessment but the mission has also established robust

monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for continuous improvement.

Unlike traditional long-term training programs, Meghalaya's strategy emphasizes short-term, market-aligned training (30–45 days) that quickly prepares trainees for available jobs. Like in our case the Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE) we offer training on Integrated Farming at the village level because we believe in taking the training to the doorstep of the trainees.

Sectoral Mission

The Jackfruit Mission, Lakadong, and Piggy Mission are unique sectoral initiatives to develop the different products of the region. Jackfruit's mission is an effort to promote Jackfruit as a viable commercial crop. The program promotes processing, value addition, and marketing of jackfruit products, thus offering an alternative livelihood source to farmers while tapping into Meghalaya's natural produce. Similarly, the Lakadong Mission was initiated to promote the high curcumin content and endemic to the state Lakadong turmeric. While some missions, such as the Piggy Mission, have faced challenges – notably feed supply, vaccinations, and lack of insurance, the outbreak of swine flu has also had a toll on the mission.

Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP)

Music has always been integral to Meghalaya's cultural identity. To harness this potential for employment, tourism, and cultural promotion, the government launched the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP). When I think of MGMP the two cousins from our church come to my mind, they are both musicians in their own right, and one works with the NGO that I manage. My staff is earning additional income from playing in some of the gigs and his cousin is the organizer of the show. Hence the project has helped both of them earn additional income.

MGMP creates performance platforms for emerging musicians like street performance platforms, it also organizes performances at café like Music Café Platforms. It also provides monthly special curated music events for musicians and artists.

These platforms not only offer visibility to local talents but also create jobs for artists, technicians, and event organizers while enriching the tourist experience in the state. The Tourism Department has complemented this effort by inviting renowned artists while ensuring grassroots participation remains central.

Promoting Tourism

Tourism remains a key sector for Meghalaya's growth. The government offers substantial incentives to promote homestays and small resorts. Homestays and Resorts provide entrepreneurs access to

a 30% capital subsidy under PMEGP (Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme) and an additional ₹3 lakh support from the Tourism Department. These schemes aim to promote eco-friendly, community-based tourism that benefits local communities directly. Recently in order to promote the state, the government introduced the Meghalaya Film Tourism Policy 2025 and hopefully this will create more publicity for the state.

Meghalayan Age Limited

The state also established Meghalayan Age Limited, a government-owned enterprise that promotes branding and marketing of Meghalaya's unique heritage and products, including agro-produce, crafts, and cultural assets. The Meghalayan Age store in Delhi is one good example of how brands from the state find a place in the national capital.

State Livelihood Mission (SLM)

The state has also embarked on promoting organizing and natural farming practices. Through the State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM), Meghalaya, farmers in the state are supported to go into organic farming via natural farming. This effort in some ways also aligns with the Meghalaya State Rural Livelihood Society supported by the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), in promoting natural farming in the state.

Perhaps it is not out of place to mention that the work undertaken by MSRLS in organizing women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), facilitating credit access, capacity building, and livelihood enhancement activities across rural areas is heartwarming. As a person who has been involved in rural and community development in the state for more than three decades, MSRLS's work is nothing short of a movement that has greatly empowered women in rural areas.

Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES)

Recognizing the value of its rich natural ecosystems, Meghalaya has also begun exploring Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) models. Under PES, communities and landowners receive financial incentives for conserving forests, water sources, and biodiversity, promoting sustainable development while protecting the environment.

Conclusion: The MDA 2.0 government's development agenda combines multiple dimensions: agriculture, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, skill development, tourism, culture, environment, and community-based institutions. While certain programs face operational challenges, the government's integrated approach reflects a serious commitment to inclusive, sustainable growth and long-term development of Meghalaya. Its innovative interventions attempt to balance immediate livelihood concerns with structural reforms that build resilient systems for the future.

Abrogation of Adhoc Rules in Perpetuity

By Melarbor Lyngdoh Thabakh

Adhoc is derived from a Latin phrase which means "for this". Adhoc means done or created for a particular purpose as necessary. Adhoc 2(f), 3(f) and Normal Adhoc also refers to a specific type of temporary appointment made under a particular regulation under the Limitation of Functions Regulations. These appointments are made to fill positions on a "Temporary Basis" due to exigency staffing needs of post(s) left vacant due to the death or retirement of regular staff (s). These posts are filled by temporary staff(s) to meet the exigencies up to the time that the post(s) are advertised. We have to know the fact that these Adhoc posts are NOT regular permanent posts but exist for a limited period of time and such posts are not designed to become permanent. Hence, the appointment to these posts is Non-Permanent in nature because they do NOT follow the normal rigorous advertisement and examination selection process. Appointment to these posts is NOT a guarantee of regularization. It is important to note that the letter "P" in 2(f) or 3(f) signifies that the appointment falls under the specific clause within the Limit of Regulation or signifies the "failure" of the departments to advertise the posts when it has been temporarily or is filled temporarily by the Adhoc staff.

In Meghalaya, most times these posts which are filled by the Adhoc staff are never advertised by following the normal recruitment process. These posts though filled up for a specified period since the recruitment process in Meghalaya takes years; usually become Permanent Posts for those Normal Adhocs who had completed the normal ten years of continuous service in those posts. Normal Adhocs are different from 2(f) and 3(f) Adhocs who need to renew their Adhoc posts every two months for 2(f) and three months for 3(f) respectively. None the less, the permanent posts occupied by these 2(f) and 3(f) are usually never advertised. The pertinent question therefore is – where is the ETHICS when people who do not compete through fair means get a FREE LUNCH because of supposed alleged connections to influential people or whichever the case may be for which they get to occupy for years, decades or even permanently to these vacant sanctioned posts? The posts occupied by Adhocs are severely and utterly deprived of the normal competitive recruitment process which we earn through sweat, toil and tears.

It is worth mentioning that Adhocs receive the same salary and all associated benefits of TA and DA whichever applicable as the permanent state government employees do, who, by the way, got their jobs after passing hard fought extremely tough competitive examinations: Where are the ethics, equity and fairness through a competitive examination in a democratic nation? The government has regularized the appointment of 3,635 Adhoc Group C & D staff through a Personnel B Notification on 12.12.2022 and another 850 Adhoc staff through a Personnel B Notification on 10.01.2025 both belonging to the pre December 31st 2007 group thus bringing the total number Regularized Adhocs to 4,485. Will this regularization stop and will the right thing be done is the important question.

The Personnel (B) Department will have to decide on the following points:

(i). The Personnel (B) Department has to decide as to whether the Normal Adhoc staff who had been working since January 1, 2008 till date on these Vacant Sanctioned Posts that they occupy and for which the posts have not been advertised by the respective Departments. In such a scenario should these Adhoc staff be Regularized or should these "Occupied" Vacant Sanctioned Posts be Advertised Through Competitive Examinations for the hordes by CONVERSION of those Adhoc staff occupying these posts as either Unskilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled

and Highly Skilled workers under the Labour Department depending on the numbers of years that they had served as Adhoc in all the various state government establishments and instruments.

(ii). The government must also decide if they are to Regularize the Adhocs who had joined from January 1, 2008 till March 31, 2010 – whether or not these staff will get Pension Benefits.

(iii). The government will have to decide on whether the posts occupied by 2(f) and 3(f) Adhocs "with break of service" be Advertised or Regularized and that these staff be CONVERTED as either Unskilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled and Highly Skilled workers under the Labour Department depending on the numbers of years that they had served as Adhoc in all the various state government establishments and instruments.

(iv). The government will also have to decide on whether or not the Regularized (Normal, 2(f), 3(f)) Adhoc staff will be eligible for Promotion or Not just like the permanent staff who came in "by the right way".

(v). The government will also have to decide on whether or not to regularize Adhocs who have completed five years of service or less than ten years of service.

When it comes to Regularization, it is also important to note that Group B and Group A posts by their teachers, lecturers or office workers are officer level posts, usually advertised by the MPSC or Recruitment Boards and they cannot be regularized as Adhocs since these posts are specialized officer posts and have to follow the accepted norm of advertisement and examination process. In this regard, one has to highly commend the 12.12.2022 Personnel (B) Notification for regularizing only Group D and Group C posts occupied by Adhocs.

In a state which is not industrialized, which does not have MNCs, which does not have SEZs, where vacant sanctioned government jobs are saturated to the brim, where educated unemployed youth are depressed and feel hopeless with no advanced industrial skill, a certain section of which became addicted to substance abuse and have become a menace to society; is it not worth advertising these posts occupied by the Adhoc staffs? This is the dilemma that the Personnel Department has to grapple with and find a permanent solution to.

Ethics, Equity and Fairness when clubbed as one constitute the "Fundamental" ethos of any democratic nation which cannot be broken unlike in an authoritarian nation. Based on this premise, it is up to the Government whether it will completely abrogate all existing Adhoc posts by an Amendment through a Notification in the Official Gazette or a Statute.

The Cabinet had said, "Don't just criticize but suggest and be constructive". Thus, my humble suggestion to submit is this: Current vacant sanctioned posts which are deemed very important and need to be filled up immediately should be filled up as Contract Basis posts and paid as such with yearly increments but no longer as Adhoc posts which can be achieved by converting all Adhoc posts to Contractual posts to be filled up by removing all Adhocs from the existing rules and regulations through amendments. These vacant sanctioned posts which are of importance and filled up temporarily as Contractual posts must be advertised within a span of 6 months to a maximum of 8 months which has to go along with the Amendment. The economic benefit of this is that this "saves money for the government" for which it can spend on advanced industrial production skill training for the youth instead of payment on a pay scale with all the benefits and perks. More importantly, it promotes justice when these posts are advertised for the unemployed youth.

Letters to the Editor

Poverty and Poor Learning

The article by Patricia Mukhim, titled "Meghalaya's poverty is at the root of its poor educational outcomes" (ST June 27, 2025) takes us straight to the heart of the matter.

The heartland of Meghalaya lies in the village communities scattered over the hills and dales of our state. Those of us who live in the comfort of Shillong are insulated from the misery of the hinterland by bad roads and apathy. Our clansmen and women are connected to us by blood and culture, but notions of class and money divide us.

A vicious cycle that begins in poverty plays out in the daily lives of our rural clans people. Landless and penniless, poverty first impacts their health and well-being because of the lack of food and essential nutrients.

A study by Dr Melari Nongrum, now at IIPH Shillong, showed the inad-

equacy of diets among Garo, Jaintia and Khasi women in the reproductive age. All groups had poor diets, with Khasi women having the least nutritious intake. There was a deficiency of foods with micro-nutrients such as vitamins and iron. When these women get pregnant, they tend to have low weight infants with poor nutritional reserves. These infants are prone to early malnutrition and stunting. Severe prolonged malnutrition may cause cognitive deficiency. These children are set up for poor performance in schools.

Another study by Dr Melody Marpa at MLCU, found seasonal malnutrition in children who appeared healthy during the rest of the year. This occurs in poor families in the autumn when money and stocks of paddy runs out, and the next harvest and its income has not yet arrived. Data showed more children hospitalised with severe acute malnutrition during this season. Many rural families resort to collecting wild edibles from

the forest.

Poverty and malnutrition lead to high infant mortality. Some families compensate by having more children, so that at least some will survive. Contraception is often refused. Meghalaya has the lowest use of contraception in the country. In large families, there is not enough money for food, let alone for books and uniforms.

Girls drop out at puberty because of the lack of hygienic facilities at school and to help at home. Teenage pregnancies in Meghalaya are already high, and ours is the only state in which teenage pregnancies are increasing. Girls out of school are more vulnerable to pregnancy than school going girls. Early motherhood and lack of birth spacing perpetuate the high birth rate, malnutrition and poverty.

This never-ending cycle continues to blight our society. All these factors converge to poor learning outcomes. But poor educational indices are not the final outcome. Drop outs and poor academic performance leads

to unemployment, depriving the state of talented human resources and slowing the pace of development and prosperity.

This vicious cycle cannot be broken overnight. It will take years of engagement with multiple social and economic factors. Some short term measures by the state government are encouraging such as the MPOWER project for improving adolescent skills and well-being, and the push to reduce maternal mortality, which has already shown improvement. Anganwadis provide a critical opportunity for early development, especially for children who receive little stimulation in the struggling home environment.

The poignant word that stood out in Patricia Mukhim's article was "heartbreak". Children are innocent and voiceless, yet face a bleak future in our society. We need to do so much more for these blameless victims.

Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Men have the right to cry too!

Editor,
I cried for two months," CM Conrad Sangma admitted in your front page article dated 29th June, and I was deeply moved. To see a man of such stature speak those words, printed boldly for the world to read, was nothing short of powerful due to the ability to be vulnerable & "let the world judge" kind of attitude.

Politics aside, in a world that often tells men to "man up" instead of open up, we've created generations of boys taught to bottle up what breaks them. They are told that tears make them weak, that vulnerability is shameful, that strength means silence. From the time they scrape a knee, little boys are told, "Don't cry like a girl" as if tears belong to one gender, and silence makes a man.

But the truth is, sometimes a man needs to cry not in secret, not to shame, but in

the full light of his humanity. Tears are not failure; they are grief, healing, memory, and hope, raw and unfiltered. Tears mean something mattered deeply. Some men have broken down behind closed doors after losing dreams they poured their souls into. Some cried for weeks after defeat, rejection, heartbreak, or just the weight of carrying too much for too long. But from those tears came strength, not despite the breaking, but because of it. Rock bottom, I've learned, is not the end. It's often the foundation for something new.

We must stop teaching boys to be emotionally mute. Let them cry. Let them feel. Let them rise from it. Tears aren't weakness. They are water. And water grows things.

Yours etc.,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

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