

“Avoid popularity if you would have peace.”
— Abraham Lincoln

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Truth as casualty

WE are living an increasingly make-believe world. Truth is far from what is being dished out as information. Claims, counter-claims, rebuttals rent the air while truth goes on a holiday. It is cleverly hidden from our eyes. Parliament heard accusations against the government vis-à-vis Pahalgam and its after-effects in the form of Operation Sindoor. We heard a lot, but are yet to know what really happened on the ground—more than what was initially dished out by a pliant media, followed by claims by the chief of defence staff and now the explanations in the form of replies to the debate by ministers, topped by the Prime Minister himself. What none of them would say is how many fighter jets India lost in the military engagement.

The government takes refuge behind a smoke-screen. The Prime Minister's final round-up of the discussions skillfully avoided answers to prime questions and instead, he and his ministers went back in time, exorcising the ghosts of the past, like the ‘blunders’ of previous governments. In the absence of specific answers to vital questions, we are left with more chaff and little grain. It could force many to believe in the figures projected by Pakistan, like its claim that India lost five to six fighter jets in the war, while they lost none. All goes to show the Modi government has much to hide about the military engagement that cost India heavily in terms of precious resources; and prima facie, without gaining anything tangible.

Even the ceasefire “announcement” from the US, about which a lot of confusion prevailed, remains unexplained in Parliament other than for some flat denials. This takes us back to the claim by Trump, then, that both India and Pakistan agreed to his call for ceasefire in return for his offer of some alluring trade deals with them. Now, Pakistan is smiling ear to ear over his trade ‘concessions’ and India is groaning under the weight of his imposition of a 25 per cent tariff on exports to the US from India. Who won and who lost the game is well-answered. Trump's actions are bound to bleed India in some of the prime sectors of its exports, namely textiles and garments, pharmaceutical items, jewellery, auto spare-parts etc. Trump is duty-bound to protect America's interests, just as Modi is to protect India's. A hug and a laugh by themselves are simply diplomatic niceties. Diplomacy principally aims at facilitation of deals through hard-edged bargain with a broad smile. Too much need not be read into an occasional-hug between Trump and Modi, or any other leader for that matter. The US needs India to take on China. It needs Pakistan to do much more. Policies are dictated by geopolitical interests; not by a hug and a smile. A ceasefire at the ‘wrong time’ too might have suited Trump's geopolitical game plans; not necessarily India's.

When Law Yields to Fear: Two Nuns, Constitutional Promise, and the Crisis of Trust

By Bijoy A. Sangma

When the news was reported on July 25, 2025, regarding the arrest of Sisters Preeti Mary (45) and Vandana Francis (50) at Durg Railway Station in Chhattisgarh, I experienced an uneasy feeling in my chest, an impression that something fundamental was disintegrating before our eyes. They were not merely nuns; they were service workers escorting three adult tribal women from Narayanpur to Agra for lawful employment. Their sole ‘crime’, as asserted by activists of Bajrang Dal and acted upon by the Government Railway Police (GRP), was trafficking and attempted religious conversion under Chhattisgarh's Freedom of Religion Act, 1968, and Section 143 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita (BNS).

Consent and Intent Questioned
According to official reports, the three women, aged 18 to 19 were promised jobs in nursing or housekeeping at Agra convents, with monthly salaries ranging from Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000. Their families, including some who had previously converted to Christianity, provided written declarations of informed consent, and documents were submitted to police in Narayanpur on July 26 stating that their daughters had left voluntarily. Despite these precautions, the nuns and their companions were quickly taken into custody, and the women were placed in protective shelter homes.

Faith Versus Law
Legal scholars and civil society have identified this as a quintessential instance of constitutional contradiction. According to Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, citizens possess the right to freely select and practice their religion. As adults, these women had agency, an aspect often overlooked when authorities reacted to accusations from what critics have called self-professed ‘guardians’ of community morals.

Mob Suspicion Over Proof
What makes this incident more concerning than just a procedural mistake is the ongoing bias against religious minorities. Anti-conversion laws, once uncommon, are now present in ten Indian states and were defended by the Supreme Court in *Rev. Stanislaus v. Madhya Pradesh*, enabling their enforcement even when coercion is suspected. Many of these cases arise from mob suspicion rather than concrete evidence. In this case, allegations reportedly evolved following unverified reports of one of the women being assaulted, claims linked

by local media to Bajrang Dal activists. Meanwhile, two others maintained they acted voluntarily.

Protests Across Kerala
The response in Kerala was prompt and unified. On July 29, a gathering comprising nuns, priests, and laypersons assembled in Thrissur under the auspices of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), led by Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath, to denounce what they called mob justice and to call for the immediate release of the nuns. The Chief Minister of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan, attributed the arrest to groups affiliated with Sangh Parivar, notably the Bajrang Dal, accusing them of orchestrating the detention and undermining the constitutional principles of secularism and pluralism. Concurrently, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Latin Catholic Council, and other organisations condemned the incident, asserting that it represented an affront to national unity and minority rights, and warning that it tarnished India's international reputation.

Political Battlegrounds Drawn
Regarding the political developments, Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and KC Venugopal characterised the incident as part of a ‘systematic persecution of minorities’, accusing the BJP-led state government (Chhattisgarh) of tacitly endorsing violence and misusing legal frameworks for ideological objectives. John Brittas, a CPI(M) MP, condemned the arrests as a ‘blatant misuse of law’, and called for an independent investigation into the complaint and the influence of ‘vigilante groups’ on police actions. Conversely, state (Chhattisgarh) BJP officials, maintained that the incident was a ‘misunderstanding’ and committed to providing full legal support to the nuns, while, at the same time, distancing the party from Bajrang Dal, which they acknowledged as an autonomous organization.

Legal Landscape Tightens
This incident must also be viewed within the wider legal framework. Chhattisgarh is reportedly contemplating more stringent legislation concerning conversions, specifically targeting non-governmental organisations accused of channelling foreign funds for covert activities. Critics contend that this measure will further criminalise social

service efforts and exacerbate suspicions surrounding interfaith charitable activities involving Dalit, Tribal and Adivasi communities.

Constitution in Question
From a constitutional perspective, the incident prompts critical inquiries concerning due process, evidentiary standards, and state neutrality. When a citizen's rights, whether religious, bodily, or financial, are superseded solely due to apprehensions about societal perception, the Constitution's function becomes merely symbolic rather than practical. Our legal framework presumes innocence until proven guilty; however, in this context, the onus appears to be inverted, and innocence must now be established subsequent to arrest.

Christians Under Pressure
The social stakes are considerable. Christians make up approximately 2.3% of India's population of 1.3 billion, with their efforts primarily directed towards education, healthcare, and tribal upliftment. According to data from the United Christian Forum, there were 4,316 incidents of attacks against Christians between 2014 and 2024. According to Joseph Jude, Vice-President of the Kerala Region Latin Catholic Council (KRLC), and Fr. Jiju George Arakkathara, the General Secretary, said there has been a significant rise to 834 incidents in the year 2024 alone, primarily in states with anti-conversion laws.

Global Eyes Watching
On the international stage, this case undermines India's reputation as a pluralistic republic dedicated to freedom of belief. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) assures the right to adopt and change faiths without coercion. When our citizens are detained on the basis of group accusations with minimal corroboration, we diminish our credibility in the realm of international human rights discourse.

Nevertheless, political leaders, judicial authorities, and civil society retain mechanisms for action. The judiciary is required to examine evidence, such as written consent, travel documents, and testimonials, and to assess whether the initial grounds for arrest conformed to legal standards. The state bears the responsibility to investigate the influence of Bajrang Dal impartially. Furthermore, political repre-

sentatives must refrain from exploiting such incidents for partisan advantage.

If this situation is permitted to remain unaddressed, particularly if arrests based on unverified, subsequently altered testimonies become commonplace, we establish a perilous precedent. Presently, it involves two nuns; in the future, it could involve a tribal or dalit educator, a philanthropic worker, or a community organiser. Consequently, all actions and intentions may be viewed with suspicion, and secular principles risk becoming obsolete.

What Justice Demands
What are the requisites of justice? Justice necessitates the release of individuals when evidence indicates the absence of coercion or illegality. It mandates an independent investigation into the origins of the complaint. Moreover, it calls for legal reforms to guarantee that adult agency and consent are not overridden by populist hysteria. Additionally, justice requires political restraint to differentiate between legitimate concerns and ideological persecution.

Above all, it necessitates us to inquire: In whose India are we residing? Is it a nation where suspicion casts its shadow over service? Or one where identity predetermines guilt prior to due process? Alternatively, is it a country where secularism, pluralism, and legal equality continue to possess significance?

A Test of Conscience for India
This is not just the story of two nuns in Chhattisgarh. It acts as a crucial test case for India's constitutional integrity. It is a timely opportunity, if we choose to take it, to reaffirm that every citizen's dignity is paramount, that laws should govern society rather than mob actions, and that through diversity, we find strength instead of giving in to fear.

India must not be remembered for trials by mob, nor for faith garments used as evidence of guilt. Instead, we should be remembered for our justice, integrity, and steadfast conviction that dignity, rights, and compassion are unconditional and constitutionally protected.

(Bijoy A. Sangma is a development professional, lawyer, analyst, and commentator on public affairs, constitutional values, public leadership, social justice, and religious freedom, with extensive experience in global leadership roles and contributions to public policy and social transformation.)

The Growing Screen Culture Among Students: Boon or Silent Threat?

By Jairaj Chhetry

“We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.” — Marshall McLuhan, Media Theorist

“Our attention is the most valuable thing we possess, yet we are surrendering it to platforms designed to exploit it.” — Cal Newport, Author of Digital Minimalism

Once, a crying child was pacified with lullabies, toys, or gentle rocking in arms. Today, that child is more likely to be handed a mobile phone. Just a few taps on a screen and a fussy infant is hypnotised into silence by dancing cartoons or catchy jingles. The Smartphone has silently replaced the rattle as a modern pacifier—and the consequences are now unfolding in classrooms, homes, and counselling rooms across India.

Digital screens—once hailed as the ultimate tools of empowerment—are increasingly seen as double-edged swords. From waking up to the soft glow of notifications to falling asleep after watching reels deep into the night, students now live in an uninterrupted continuum of digital interaction. This immersive “screening culture” is not just changing how students learn, but also how they think, feel, behave—and in some cases, how they misbehave.

Smart phones, tablets, laptops, and smart TVs have become integrated into daily life—especially for students. According to a 2024 NCERT survey, Indian teenagers now spend an average of 6 to 8 hours daily on digital screens. Shockingly, only 20% of that time is used for academic work. The rest is consumed by YouTube, reels, gaming, scrolling, chatting, and social media voyeurism. This trend deepened after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online schooling became the norm. What began as a necessity has quietly evolved into a compulsive, even addictive, behaviour pattern.

Why Are Students Hooked? The Psychology of Screen Addiction “Digital media are not passive tools. They are addictive by design.” — Jean M. Twenge, Psychologist and Author of iGen

Social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube thrive on dopamine-triggering feedback loops—likes, comments, and instant responses. Reels and short videos offer bite-sized entertainment that feels far more stimulating than a slow-moving textbook or lecture. The fear of missing out (FOMO), peer pressure, and the desire for online visibility keep students glued to their screens. A 2023 Pew Research Centre study revealed that 46% of Indian teens check their phones more than 50 times a day.

Moreover, these platforms are designed to be endless—scrolling never stops and neither does the craving. In many homes, especially in urban nuclear families, digital supervision is minimal. Children often consume unfiltered content without guidance or accountability.

Academic Fallout: Skimming Over Studying “Heavy screen use reduces attention spans and limits deep thought. Students today skim, they don't study.” — Dr. Manfred Spitzer, Neuroscientist

Teachers across the country echo a common concern: students today struggle to focus even for half an hour without checking their phones or zoning out. This was not the case a decade ago. Heavy reliance on AI-generated summaries and answers has dulled students' ability to think critically. Original thought is being replaced by copy-paste culture. A recent Lancet Child & Adolescent Health study (Feb 2024) found that students exposed to more than 4 hours of non-academic screen time daily exhibited a 25-30% reduction in memory and reasoning skills.

Emotional and Mental Health: The Connected Generation is Lonely “The most connected generation is also the most anxious.” — Time Magazine, March 2024

In Meghalaya and elsewhere, educators are witnessing a silent rise in mental health challenges. Sr. Delphine Fernandez, former Principal of Holy Child School, Shillong, warns: “Many students are falling prey to online bullying and comparison. Depression, anxiety, even suicidal thoughts are linked to their online experiences.”

Late-night screen use disrupts sleep cycles and creates emotional turbulence. According to India Today (April 2024), one in three teenagers in India report depressive symptoms linked to excessive screen time. In rural and semi-urban regions like the Garo Hills, these concerns are magnified due to lack of counselors, mental health resources, and parental awareness.

Juvenile Crime and Digital Misconduct: A Disturbing Correlation The darker side of screen exposure is beginning to reflect in rising cases of juvenile crime.

NCRB 2023 data shows a 17% rise in cyber crimes involving minors, ranging from phishing and impersonation to online abuse. Addiction to online gambling, pornographic content, and aggressive games has even led some students to commit digital fraud using parents' devices.

A principal from a reputed school in Tura shares: “Two students created fake profiles to cyber bully classmates. Another got involved in online betting groups. These aren't isolated cases anymore.”

When real-life consequences are blurred by the virtual world, children find it easier to cross moral and legal boundaries.

The Happiness Illusion: Screens vs. Real Connection “Screens give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.” — Sherry Turkle, MIT Professor

Today's students may seem always “connected,” but emotionally, many feel emptier than ever. A 2024 report by The Hindu revealed that 52% of teens feel emotionally drained after long screen sessions. The joy of creative hobbies, outdoor play, or heartfelt conversations is disappearing.

A teacher from Williamnagar recalls: “Students used to bring paintings or poems. Now, they just show what they watched or uploaded.”

In interviews with school heads from Shillong, Tura, and Williamnagar, a consensus emerged: the need is not to ban screens but to discipline their use. A few common suggestions from them are:

- ▶ Digital detox hours, especially during classes and evenings
- ▶ Counselling workshops for parents and students
- ▶ Incorporation of digital well-being education into school curriculum
- ▶ Mandatory offline days and device-free school events

As parents, educators, and policymakers, the task before us is daunting yet urgent. If we don't intervene today, the next generation may pay a price not just in grades, but in empathy, creativity, and character. Let's stop mistaking hyper-connectivity for real growth. Let's give our children the gift of balance. Because in the end, a child's mind deserves more than a screen—it deserves a future.

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Letters to the Editor

Expensive Modi Bear Hugs

Editor, Indian News Channels yesterday and the News Headlines for today, 31st July 2025, are awash with the sudden imposition of 25% Tariff duty on Indian goods by the US. The US President, a “Good friend” of our PM, Narendra Modi has seen fit to make that announcement through his notorious tweet diplomacy. Lets face it, the US today under Donald Trump is not the US of yesteryears, a US that handled diplomacy with the charm and charisma of an Old Grandmother, while at the same time dealing deadly back-stabs through covert CIA interventions. That heady mix of sweet seduction of nations running cheek-to-cheek with concealed agendas of the spy for subservive action has disappeared for ever. Its now mafia style diplomacy where tariffs are openly used instead of the good old tomymy gun.

Under Trump it's a different America altogether. Uncle Sam's diplomatic idea of using philanthropy, compassion, humanity and generosity to manage the world have been tossed out of the window. Its now a world of diplomatic control through deals. Deal making has become an art form to be seriously studied by all budding diplomats. It's a New World Order that has sent world leaders scrambling to make sense of it all. It's a world of the Banja where the concepts and ideology of the Vishwaguru, the Indian vision of enacting the role of

‘World Teacher’ in foreign policy discourses, has little or no recognition. Under Trump, Diplomacy has been reduced to bazaar haggling and bargaining and that too openly under full public scrutiny. A visit to a khar pusari shop at lewduh will serve as a good eye opener on how a deal is usually done.

There are comments galore on social media about the price India has to pay to accommodate Modi's Bear Hugs with Trump. Perhaps there were 25 such hugs every time they met and to a deal making US President, who perhaps kept count, imposing 1% tariff on India exports for every Bear Hug was a way of deal making. So here we are slapped with a 25% tariff duty for no fault of ours except that our PM mistook comforting bear hugs as deal making gestures. A high price to pay and its clear that Modi, despite being Gujarati is no match at deal making. Come to think of it Meghalaya Cabinet members, especially those hard-nosed business types, from the eastern part of the State, could perhaps teach Modi a thing or two about governance through the “Art of Deal Making!” Come to think of it, Conrad Sangma could be doing the country a great service if some high ranking Cabinet members aided perhaps by similar minded senior bureaucrats of the state, could be sent on Deputation to Delhi to teach PMO and MEA how to make deals. They are good at I am told. Our Cabinet members, that is!

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Our forests endangered

Editor,
What was in the news about our state for a couple of weeks now is that the agreement signed in 2014 by the then Syiem, (L) Latho Manik Syiem and his Myntiris, during the tenure of former CEM, Ardent Miller Basiaawmtoit to declare ‘Law Mawpat’ as a ‘Law Adong (protected forest)’ was revoked in 2019. Hence plots have been allotted to many MLAs whose identities are still not placed in the public domain. What was a ray of hope and a way forward towards the protection and safeguarding of the forests and the environment came crashing.

What came as an even greater surprise were facts shared by Paiem Laborious Manik Syiem, former Syiem of Hima Myliem in the panel discussion, “To Ngin Iathir” by The Shillong Times on July 26, 2025. Here Paiem, spoke about how self-serving those in power and authority could be which affirms that human wants are unlimited. The more we get the more we want and at times our yearnings turn to greed making us unscrupulous and selfish. This is nothing short of disregard for morality and a lack of fellow feeling on the part of those who prefer to grab rather than think about the greater good of all. Painfully true and honest write-ups in The Shillong Times told tales of those in power and might subjugating the rights of their own people while shamelessly securing pieces of land that would otherwise help realise its purpose of

providing a clean and safe environment for all.

Pertinent questions that arise are: Why was an important agreement for the good of all, especially our future generations revoked? What made one CEM realise the purpose of the ADC and the other to annul it when the sole purpose of being in the District Council is to safeguard the rights, customs, and traditions of our tribal communities and managing local governance and development? Were the traditional heads really ignorant of the happenings in their locality? Why are plots allotted to the MLAs? Who are these representatives of the people? We all agree that we need to sustain the forests for the larger good of humankind and the environment. Can the Syiem Hima Myliem, the KHADC and those in a position to help maintain a healthy planet, set things right?

As a little girl in school I had read about the Law Kyntang in my Khasi books and was also told stories by my grandmother about the Lawkyntang at Mawphlang and about the farsightedness of our ancestors. These forests do not only have religious and cultural moorings but show the close connection that people have with nature and their sincerity towards protecting medical herbs and plants, a sanctuary for a variety of animals and wildlife and also regulating climate. Today we are braving the challenges of climate change and global warming, we need to provide more such green spaces for our children to breathe the clean air, drink clean water and ensure their well-being. While our ancestors

were conscientious and selfless people who thought about the greater good of all, especially the future generations, today we have those in power and authority bereft of conscience, ethics and morality. In doing so, they let us down by failing to champion the cause of the people who voted for them and imperiling our lives and those of our children.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Mawkhar Presbyterian Church in crisis again!

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I wish to express my deep concern over the unfortunate spate of controversies plaguing the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church to which I belong. The most recent episode involves the suspension of a senior pastor in the church by the Synod, which I understand, was for reasons of gross indiscipline and insubordination to the authority of the Synod. Instead of due compliance and the matter ending there, the pastor in question chose to defy the suspension order and continued to function with the concurrence of our church committee apparently. This development, apart from bringing disgrace and dishonour to the name of the church, has made church members at large to question in particular, the intent and role of the church committee in all this, with some viewing the committee as being spineless,

biased, and compromising its true principles and character. There is nothing more disconcerting and damaging to the church than this.

Perhaps some questions are worth considering, such as - would it be right for members of the church to accept a suspended pastor to illegitimately perform his functions in the church? Whether the confrontational path of defiance against authority would one day lead the church to the brink of being branded a ‘rebel church’? Isn't the church committee teaching and encouraging the culture of defiance and challenge to authority, which clearly is opposed to the word of God and its teachings, and what will happen if the committee itself is faced with such challenges internally? These questions are not far-fetched to reckon with but they are real and pertinent, and not easily dismissible.

Sadly, the situation is so bad that it has literally exposed the weakness of the church leadership or lack of it, and revealed its moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Wittingly or unwittingly, it has thrown the whole church into a state of uncertainty, fraught with unimaginable and undesirable consequences. We hope and pray that the church redeems itself by fearing and obeying the Lord and His word before it is too late.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request.
Via email.

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

Congress-less Assembly

HENCEFORTH the Congress will have no representative in the Assembly. But does that matter? MLAs realise soon enough that sitting in the Opposition becomes a pointless exercise. Opposition MLAs know that better than anyone. If a people well past the use of their rational minds can still be appointed advisors to the Chief Minister because they are in the ruling party and be paid out of the public exchequer plus enjoy other facilities, why would a younger, more useful human continue to sit in the Opposition and suffer the consequences of seeing his/her constituency being left unattended or their words not carrying weight? Hence Ronnie V Lyngdoh's shifting loyalty from the Congress to the National Peoples' Party (NPP) surprises no one. In Meghalaya the Opposition is a divided house. The Trinamool Congress MLAs don't confer with the Congress or the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) although that would have made them a formidable Opposition since they comprise senior legislators who could have put the Government on the mat on several issues, not only during the Assembly sessions but through the entire 5-year tenure of the MDA Government.

The role of the Opposition in a democracy involves following closely what Government does or fails to do. It involves visits to different departments such as the PWD, PHED and others to follow up on the schemes left undone, abandoned or unfinished. MLAs have every right to question the bureaucracy through proper channel to find out the reasons for delayed projects. If the Opposition MLAs had this tenacity of purpose they would have been able to correct many of the governance issues. Actually, being an Opposition MLA involves extensive research which is why part of the MLA scheme should be used to employ young researchers who can delve into the implementation of all schemes and financial allocations; detect how money is being used and the outcomes out of those allocations. Monitoring and evaluation of government schemes is the real work of the Opposition. Their job is not merely to point out Government failures during the Assembly sessions and to only speak about their respective constituencies. They are supposed to be ombudsmen keeping track of all Government expenditures and how public money is utilised.

Unfortunately, in Meghalaya, Opposition MLAs are only active during the Assembly sessions which was also noted by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) as being the shortest and poorly attended sessions. The role of all legislators in a democracy is also to legislate enlightened laws. Proposals for such bills can come from the Government or the Opposition. Understandably pushing for legislative reforms is the prime role of the Opposition which also means it has to deeply engage in the process and present a united face. This is not the case with the Opposition in Meghalaya. Each group charts its own course just waiting in the wings for the next election with the hope that their fortunes change. Meanwhile people leave the original party from which they were elected, at their convenience. There is no commitment to any political party; everything is aimed at getting the best deal for themselves with people as scapegoats.

Ecological Dynamics and Bio-geochemical Impacts of Pine Forest Expansion

By Kitlang Donbor Kharkongor

The montane ecosystems of Meghalaya represent a complex biogeographical mosaic characterized by distinct forest assemblages that exhibit contrasting ecological trajectories and ecosystem functioning. This northeastern Indian state encompasses diverse elevational gradients supporting two primary forest community types: coniferous formations dominated by Pinus khasiana (locally termed diengksheh), and mixed hardwood assemblages (diengmet) constituting the region's characteristic rainforest biome.

While hardwood species diversity encompasses numerous taxa, coniferous representation remains taxonomically constrained to approximately five to six pine species, with Pinus Khasiana demonstrating the most extensive distributional range across East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Ri-Bhoi districts at mid-to-high elevational zones.

Pine forest ecosystems in Meghalaya provide measurable socioeconomic benefits through multiple pathways. The economic valuation of mature pine stands demonstrates significant monetary returns through timber harvesting for construction materials and biomass fuel production. These monospecific stands contribute substantially to local economies through furniture manufacturing and residential construction applications. From an aesthetic and restoration ecology perspective, pine plantations facilitate rapid revegetation of degraded landscapes and anthropogenically disturbed sites. The species exhibits enhanced propagule availability compared to hardwood taxa, with abundant seed production facilitating cost-effective reforestation initiatives across previously barren terrain.

Agricultural integration of pine resources demonstrates traditional ecological knowledge applications, particularly in integrated pest management systems. The natural terpene compounds present in pine foliage function as bioactive deterrents against lepidopteran herbivores (Cnaphalocrocis medialis) in rice cultivation systems. Additionally, these secondary metabolites exhibit antimicrobial properties that suppress cyanobacterial proliferation in paddy ecosystems, preventing yield reduction associated with algal blooms.

Subsistence applications include utilization of pine needle biomass as bedding material, representing an economically accessible resource for socio-economically disadvantaged communities. However, comprehensive ecosystem analysis reveals significant negative ecological consequences associated with pine forest expansion that fundamentally alter regional ecosystem processes and biodiversity patterns.

Pine needle litter exhibits extremely low moisture content compared to broadleaf deciduous species, resulting in recalcitrant organic matter that resists microbial decomposition. This biochemical characteristic leads to accumula-

tion of undecomposed needle litter that fails to contribute to soil organic matter pools or nutrient cycling processes. Experimental observations demonstrate that pine needles maintain structural integrity even under prolonged physical disturbance, indicating plastic-like persistence in terrestrial environments. This decomposition failure fundamentally disrupts the detrital pathway essential for ecosystem nutrient cycling.

Pine forest canopy architecture provides minimal interception efficiency for precipitation due to needle-like foliage structure, resulting in accelerated soil erosion during monsoon periods. The sparse canopy coverage fails to provide adequate protection against raindrop impact, leading to systematic topsoil loss and reduced soil fertility across pine-dominated watersheds. Hydrological analysis reveals severe water retention deficiencies in pine forest soils, characterized by increased bulk density and reduced porosity that inhibits groundwater recharge. This hydrological dysfunction manifests as reduced spring discharge and stream baseflow in pine-dominated catchments, particularly in forest stands exceeding 25-30 years of age. The implications extend to regional water security, with major hydroelectric reservoirs such as Umiam Lake experiencing reduced water availability outside monsoon periods due to pine forest expansion in catchment areas.

Pine forests exhibit dramatically reduced species richness and simplified community structure compared to hardwood ecosystems. Avian community composition shows marked impoverishment, with most bird species avoiding pine habitats due to limited nesting sites and food resources. This pattern extends to mammalian fauna, which utilize pine forests primarily as movement corridors rather than permanent habitat. Understorey vegetation demonstrates severe species depletion, with most indigenous medicinal plants and wild food-species unable to establish under pine canopies. This biodiversity collapse reflects fundamental habitat unsuitability rather than competitive exclusion processes.

Quantitative soil analysis reveals that pine forests significantly alter soil chemistry through acidification processes. Laboratory analysis of pine forest soils from Jaintia Hills demonstrated pH values ranging from 5.35-4, indicating strongly acidic conditions that inhibit plant establishment and microbial activity. This acidification results from the biochemical properties of pine needle litter and root exudates. Experimental pH measurements demonstrate the magnitude of this acidification effect. Water samples from various forest types show clear patterns: A) Mixed forest systems (Mookyndur): pH 5.48-5.52 (strongly acidic)

B) Pine needle leachate

in neutral water: pH 3.49 (extremely acidic). C) Pine needle leachate in distilled water: pH 3.38 (extremely acidic). These measurements indicate that pine forests create soil conditions unsuitable for most plant species, explaining the observed biodiversity patterns.

Agricultural systems adjacent to pine forests demonstrate reduced productivity in both aquaculture and crop production. Fish pond productivity shows significant declines due to acidic, nutrient-poor water inputs from pine dominated watersheds. The absence of planktonic organisms in pine forest streams reduces food availability for aquatic organisms, directly impacting fish growth rates and survival. Rice cultivation systems near pine forests exhibit reduced yields due to acidic irrigation water that lacks essential nutrients and beneficial microorganisms. In contrast, agricultural areas receiving water inputs from hardwood forest catchments demonstrate enhanced productivity due to optimal pH conditions (5.9-6.36) and higher nutrient content. Pine forest expansion has initiated cascading ecological effects that disrupt natural ecosystem processes.

The absence of frugivorous fauna in pine habitats eliminates seed dispersal mechanisms essential for hardwood forest regeneration, creating positive feedback loops that accelerate ecosystem conversion. Meteorological analysis suggests that pine forest expansion may be influencing regional precipitation patterns. Historical data from villages near Umiam Lake indicate reduced rainfall frequency and intensity compared to 25-30 years ago, potentially linked to decreased evapotranspiration from pine forests compared to hardwood systems. Pine forests also provide minimal windbreak functionality due to sparse understorey development, leaving agricultural areas vulnerable to erosion and pathogen dispersal during cyclonic events.

The documented ecosystem dysfunction associated with pine forest dominance necessitates active management interventions to restore ecological integrity. The optimal approach involves strategic hardwood species reintroduction within existing pine stands to initiate soil chemistry amelioration through leaf litter inputs that gradually neutralize soil acidity. Reference ecosystems such as sacred groves (Law Kyntang) and community forests demonstrate the potential for hardwood forest restoration. These protected areas maintain year-round soil moisture, neutral pH conditions, and diverse biological communities that provide essential ecosystem services including groundwater recharge, biodiversity conservation, and climate regulation.

The restoration imperative extends beyond local ecological considerations to

regional water security and hydro-electric power generation. Catchment area management through hardwood forest restoration represents a critical intervention for maintaining reservoir water levels and ensuring sustainable energy production. This analysis demonstrates that while pine forests provide short-term economic benefits, their long-term ecological costs fundamentally compromise ecosystem functionality and sustainability. The integration of phylogenomic approaches with ecosystem-level analysis reveals the critical importance of maintaining hardwood forest diversity for regional ecological stability and human welfare in montane ecosystems of northeastern India.

The comprehensive ecological assessment presented here finds substantial corroboration across multiple independent research initiatives conducted within Meghalaya's montane ecosystems. Systematic field investigations by regional agricultural research stations, coupled with collaborative studies from academic institutions including St. Edmund's College and various governmental research facilities, have consistently documented the deleterious impacts of pine forest expansion on ecosystem functionality. Indigenous knowledge systems maintained by traditional communities across the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Hills provide additional empirical validation of these findings. Local environmental observations spanning multiple generations demonstrate clear correlations between pine forest proliferation and concurrent declines in water availability, agricultural productivity, and biodiversity indices. This convergence of scientific methodology with traditional ecological knowledge creates a robust evidence base that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, hydrological monitoring data from the Meghalaya State Electricity Board regarding reservoir water levels, particularly at Umiam Lake, provides quantitative validation of catchment-scale impacts associated with coniferous forest dominance.

Agricultural extension officers consistently report reduced crop yields and aquacultural productivity in pine-dominated watersheds, supporting the biochemical mechanisms described in this analysis. Given this overwhelming scientific consensus and community-based evidence, the Government of Meghalaya must implement immediate policy interventions prioritizing hardwood forest restoration and sustainable land-use planning. Continued inaction regarding ecosystem restoration will result in irreversible ecological degradation with catastrophic consequences for regional water security, biodiversity conservation, and socioeconomic sustainability. The scientific evidence demands urgent governmental response to prevent further ecosystem collapse.

(The writer is a retired District Agriculture Officer)

Can Laitumkrah Become Shillong's First Proper Walking Street?

By Avner Pariat

Walking through Laitumkrah these days feels like running an obstacle course. You've got cars honking, bikes weaving through crowds, and street vendors packed so tightly along the footpaths that pedestrians are forced to walk on the road. It's chaotic, it's stressful, and honestly, it's just not working for anyone.

The recent move by the Shillong Municipal Board to relocate street vendors in Police Bazaar has brought this issue into sharp focus. Some people are thrilled - finally, they say, we'll be able to walk without tripping over vegetable carts and fruit stalls. Others are upset - where will we buy our daily necessities now? And what about all those small vendors who depend on these spots to make a living?

First, let's understand why this has become such a heated issue. Street vendors have always been part of Shillong's culture. They provide affordable goods, create jobs, and add vibrancy to our neighbourhoods. Many of us have fond memories of buying steamed momos or alumuri from roadside stalls or picking up fresh vegetables from local vendors.

But as our city grows, these informal arrangements are causing real problems. The middle class in particular seems to have developed a strong dislike for street vendors, and it's worth understanding why. For one thing, the congestion is unbearable. Try walking down from Beat House to Police Point during peak hours and you'll see what I mean - the sidewalks are completely taken over by stalls, forcing pedestrians into the street where they have to dodge traffic. It's not just inconvenient, it's downright dangerous. This situation becomes even more unbearable during the Monsoons.

Then there's the cleanliness issue. Let's be honest - the haphazard way vendors currently operate creates a lot of litter and clutter. Plastic sheets, makeshift stalls, and piles of goods everywhere don't exactly make for a pleasant street-scapes. Stale fish is sold right in the open and chicken blood and bits splatter onto pedestrians as the butchers hack at the meat. Many Laitumkrah residents I spoke to dream of a more organized, aesthetically pleasing shroong (locality). There's also the fairness argument. Shop owners who pay rent and license fees rightly wonder why street vendors get to occupy public space for free. It creates an uneven playing field that understandably frustrates business owners who play by the rules.

But that is one side; if we're being completely honest, there's class bias at play too. Many middle-class office-going salaried people have started seeing street vendors as symbols of disorder. They have never asked themselves about what economic hardships would compel people to come out onto the streets to sell their wares and services for little profit. It is not an easy life to 'brave the torrential rain, scorching heat, biting cold and incessant vehicular pollution to scrape together a living. It is much easier to be inside an office in Secretariat and enjoy a cup of tea at one's leisure. I have remained quiet regarding the issue thus far but the silence of those who claim to be 'defenders of the Jaitibnyriew' has struck me as being exceedingly hypocritical. Why did they not come out and join in defending the right to livelihood of the poor and rural Khasis whom they claim to represent? The reason is simple: The Meghalaya and Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSVA) - which is the main union of hawkers - is not a racist organisation. Its President - Angela Rangad - has been quite vocal in defending the rights of everyone to earn. Its members have also been seen defending non-tribal hawkers much to the great annoyance of the 'Jaitibnyriew defenders'. Ultimately it would seem that all these 'defenders' care about is stoking communal

sentiment as and when it suits their own political machinations. Encountering a force that does not bend to their will immediately invites their silence.

But beyond the petty politics, here's a thought - what if we could fix this problem for good? What if we could turn Laitumkrah into a proper walking street, the kind you see in so many cities around the world? A place where people can stroll comfortably, vendors can do business without harassment, and everyone wins? It's not just a pipe dream - with some smart planning and community co-operation, we could actually make this happen.

The solution isn't to get rid of street vendors, but to organize them better. Imagine a Laitumkrah where vendors have proper designated spots, where pedestrians can walk safely, and where the whole area is cleaner and more pleasant for everyone. It's possible - many cities around the world have made this work. Take Chennai for example. They implemented a system where vendors get licensed spots in designated zones. The city provides proper stalls and waste management, vendors pay reasonable fees, and everyone benefits from the more organized setup.

First, we should start with a trial period. Maybe make Saturdays pedestrian-only to see how it works. Close the main road to cars during market hours, let vendors set up in properly marked spaces along the main road, and see how people respond. The trial would help us work out the kinks before committing fully.

Secondly, instead of treating the hawkers like criminals, let's give them recognition: a small fee, special permits for temporary sellers, with priority given to local vendors who've been operating in the area for years. This way, the Dorbar Shnong earns revenue while giving vendors security and legitimacy. If there are say 100 hawkers who pay Rs 500 per month, the Dorbar Shnong could easily get Rs 50,000 per month simply as rent. That's free money!

Of course, we'd need to handle traffic carefully. No cars during market hours except for emergencies and only buses could be allowed to ply through. Maybe the rent collected by the Dorbar Shnong could be used to pay for electric auto-rickshaws to transport people around, especially those with special needs and the elderly.

A well-managed walking street could actually become a tourist attraction. Imagine having street performers and festive markets with special themes during holidays. It could breathe new life into the area. Many people will say - "Oh, this sounds great in theory, but will it actually work here?" No doubt there would be challenges. Drivers would complain about parking. Even the vendors might fear change. But these aren't reasons to dismiss the idea - they're problems we can solve with good planning. The key is starting small, testing the concept, and adjusting as we go. If the weekend trial works, we expand. If certain things don't work, we fix them. The important thing is that we try - because the status quo isn't working!

At the end of the day, Shillong is changing whether we like it or not. We can either let that change happen haphazardly, with more congestion and conflict, or we can shape it intentionally to create a city that works better for everyone. A proper walking street in Laitumkrah could be a model for the rest of Shillong - showing how we can preserve what we love about our city while making it function better for everyone.

The Shillong we leave for future generations depends on the choices we make today. Maybe it's time to try something new, something bold, something that could transform one of our busiest areas from a source of frustration into a point of pride. The best cities aren't those that resist change, but those that manage it wisely.

Letters to the Editor

Preposterous allegations against nuns

Editor,
The arrest of Sisters Vandana Francis and Preeti Mary - two Catholic nuns (from Kerala) - in Chhattisgarh, for alleged human trafficking and forced conversion, is truly appalling and should be condemned and confronted in no uncertain terms, not just by Christians, but by all righteous Hindus. Practising Hindus should protest groups like Bajrang Dal, for persecuting Christians and other minorities, and for distorting their religion. Righteous Hindus should be the first to protest all signs of Hindu fascism, which betrays and offends the highest principles of Vedantic Hinduism. Above all, India needs active inculcation of genuine religious cosmopolitanism, through education in interfaith dialogues.

Christians have contributed immensely to Indian education and charities. The fragrance of Catholic education lingers with me to this day and I remain grateful for the beauty of Catholic culture.

To accuse nuns of human

trafficking is preposterous to begin with. Instead of prosecuting the many rapists that abound in India, these hoodlums are persecuting innocent nuns.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

Serious concerns about safety & mismanagement at NSTI(W), Tura

Editor,
I was just checking out the ads for courses at the National Skill and Training Institute (NSTI) (W) formerly known as RVTI (W). Established way back in 1987, it's supposed to be a shining beacon for women's empowerment. But honestly, what I saw and overheard felt more like a comedy show gone wrong than a place seriously committed to empowering women. While at the institution I overheard some conversations. An accountant - who clearly isn't a tribal - and his wife, who is from Assam and is appointed here as the Training Officer, were shouting at the girls as if they are the bosses of the universe. That set the tone. As I listened further, I heard

many people talking about the real state of affairs there. Appointments of non-Garos (the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya) seem to be happening more often than not.

And the so-called hostels? They're more like glorified shanties than proper accommodation. Dirty, unhygienic toilets, and here's the shocking part - there's no warden at all for these women boarders! Yes, you read that right. It's complete neglect by the Department, leaving young women in a place with zero supervision or security. An open invitation for trouble!

Now, about the "mess." Or should I say, the canteen? It's a total joke. It's not a proper mess, just a rundown canteen managed by someone who's abusive and manages it like his personal fiefdom. The food? Unhygienic at best. And to make things worse - sometimes they even serve biri-kan'tong (raw tobacco roll stubs) along with the food! Eeww! Imagine young women from UP, Bihar, and other parts of India, eager to learn and grow, being served food with biri-kan'tong floating on their plates. It's disgusting, unsafe, and frankly, borderline criminal.

And as far as safety is con-

cerned, forget it. Some male workers reportedly enter and exit the women's hostel at any time of the day or night. Without security or a warden to watch over them it's a disaster waiting to happen. No security, no safeguards - just an open door for trouble.

This institute a truly unique one in Northeast India, is meant to serve women from all over India. But after more than 40 years, it remains a place of neglect, apathy, and mismanagement. No proper infrastructure, no permanent teachers, no oversight, just neglect wrapped in bureaucratic silence. If this isn't a serious case for investigation, I don't know what is.

I've also heard that some pressure groups recently visited this Institute and submitted some letters. What those letters said, I do not know. But if even half of what I've described is true, it calls for urgent action.

Our women, from all over India, deserve better. Our region deserves better. It's high time the authorities stop turning a blind eye and start doing something. Because right now, this institute feels more like a sad joke than a place of genuine empowerment.

Please, do the right thing. In-

vestigate, clean up, and give our women the respect, safety, and facilities they truly deserve.

Yours etc.,
Shashilla Sangma
Via email

State Central Library in bad shape

Editor,
I am compelled to bring to your attention the state of disrepair of the State Central Library. Despite its importance as a hub of knowledge and learning, the library's current condition is appalling. The premises are marred by dust and dirt, with bookshelves and floors that appear to have been neglected for a considerable period. The windows, which could provide natural light and fresh air, are instead grimy and inoperable, contributing to a stale and uncomfortable atmosphere.

Furthermore, the furniture within the library, including desks and chairs are also covered in dust, making it an uninviting place for study and research. The staircase, in particular, is stained with betel nut spit, which adds to the overall unpleasantness of the environment.

In contrast the North Eastern Council's Library in Nongrim Hills is well-maintained, clean and provides a pleasant atmosphere that fosters learning and intellectual inquiry. The difference between the two libraries is striking, and it raises questions about the level of care and attention given to the State Central Library.

I strongly believe that immediate action is necessary to address the issues at the State Central Library. The staff responsible for the library's maintenance should be hauled up to ensure that the premises are regularly cleaned and well maintained. Only then will the library become a welcoming and conducive place for readers and students to explore and expand their knowledge.

I hope that this letter prompts the authorities to take the necessary steps to improve the State Central Library.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Loneliness: The causes and cure

By Marlee Bower

Without even realising it, your world sometimes gradually gets smaller: less walking, fewer days in the office, cancelling on friends. Watching plans disintegrate on the chat as friends struggle to settle on a date or place for a catch-up.

You might start to feel a bit flat or disconnected. Subtle changes in habit and mood take hold. Could you be lonely? It's not a label many of us identify with easily, especially if you know you've got friends, or are in a happy relationship. But loneliness can happen to us all from time to time - and identifying it is the first step to fixing it.

So, what is loneliness?

Loneliness is the distress we feel when our relationships don't meet our needs - in quality or quantity.

It's not the same as being objectively alone (otherwise-known as "social isolation").

You can feel deeply lonely even while surrounded by friends, or totally content on your own.

Loneliness is subjective; many people don't realise they're lonely until the feeling becomes persistent.

What are some of the signs?

You may feel a physical coldness, emptiness or hollowness (I've heard it described as feeling like you are missing an organ). Some research shows social pain is experienced similarly in the brain to physical pain.

Behavioural signs may include:
-changes in routine
-trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep -changed appetite (maybe you're eating more or less than you normally would, or have less variety in your diet) -withdrawing from plans you would usually enjoy (perhaps you're skipping a regular exercise class, or going to shows or sports events less often).

Emotionally, you may feel:
-a persistent sadness
-tired
-disconnected
-like you don't belong, even when you are with others.



-You may also feel more sensitive to rejection or criticism.

But you're not alone and you're not broken.

Loneliness is a normal response to disconnection.

The late US neuroscientist John Cacioppo described loneliness as an evolutionary alarm system.

In the past, being separated from your tribe meant danger and risk from predators, so our brains developed a way to push us back towards connection.

The pain of loneliness is designed to keep us connected and safe.

Why is it often hard to recognise loneliness?

Sadly, there's still a lot of stigma around admitting loneliness, especially for men. Many people resist identifying as lonely, or feel this marks them as a "loser". But this silence can make the problem worse. When no one talks about it, it becomes harder to break the cycle of loneliness, and the stigma remains. While passing loneliness is normal, chronic or persistent loneliness can hurt our health.

Research shows chronic loneliness is associated with:
-depression
-anxiety
-weakened immunity
-heart disease
-earlier death.

Loneliness can also become self-reinforcing. When loneliness feels normal, it can start to shape how you see the world: you expect rejection, withdraw more and the

cycle deepens.

The earlier you notice you're lonely, the easier it is to break.

But I'm in a relationship, have loads of friends and a rewarding job. Yes, but you can still be lonely.

Most of us need different kinds of relationships to thrive. It's not about how many people you know, but whether you feel connected and have a meaningful role in these relationships.

You may feel lonely even with strong friendships if you are lacking deeper connection, shared identity or a sense of community.

This doesn't mean you're ungrateful, or a bad friend.

It just means you need more or different kinds of connection.

OK, I'm lonely. Now what?

Start by asking yourself: what kind of connection am I missing? Is it one-to-one friendships? A partner? Casual social interactions? A shared purpose or community? Then reflect on what's helped you feel more connected in the past. For some, it's joining a choir, a book club or a sports group. For others, it may be volunteering or just saying "yes" to small social moments, like chatting with your local barista or learning the name of the local butcher.

If you're still struggling, a psychologist can help with tailored strategies for building connection. It's also important to remember loneliness is often not because of personal failings or overall mental health.

My own research shows loneliness is often shaped by structural factors, such as poor planning in our local neighbourhood environments, financial inequality, work pressures, social norms, or even long-term effects of restrictions from the COVID pandemic.

We are also learning more about how climate change can disrupt social connection and worsen loneliness due to, for example, higher temperatures or bushfires.

Loneliness is normal, common, human and completely solvable.

Start by noticing it in yourself and reach out if you can.

(The Conversation)

Expert tips on how to avoid winter burns

It's a cold, crisp evening and the air carries a chill that bites. As temperatures drop and houses get colder, we turn to trusted sources of warmth such as wood fires, heaters, hot water bottles and warm drinks.

But these winter comforts come with the risk of burns.

Young children are naturally curious, and in winter, their explorations often take them dangerously close to sources of heat. A common scenario involves toddlers reaching out to touch a glowing wood-fired heater.

These are attractive to curious children because they are bright, warm and often within reach. Tragically, these burns can cause significant injuries to small hands and fingers, often requiring long recovery times and specialist care.

Scalds from hot drinks are also very common in young children. These accidents tend to happen during everyday moments, such as when a parent is trying to juggle a hot drink with a sick, unsettled child on their lap.

Seasonal colds and viruses mean children often need more comfort and physical contact, increasing the likelihood of accidents. A hot drink, even one that has cooled slightly, can cause deep burns to a child's skin if spilled.

In many parts of Australia at this time of year, bonfires, fire pits and campfires become common. Extinguishing a fire with sand may seem safe, but embers can retain enough heat to burn skin hours later.

Children running in light shoes can be unaware of where a fire has been and step directly onto it, resulting in severe burns to their feet.

Hot water bottles are one of the most common causes of scalding and burns in both adults and children.

Hot water bottles can cause scald burns from spills when being filled, can leak or burst if cuddled or rolled on, or cause contact burns if placed directly on the skin. Always check the bottle for wear, use hot tap water instead of boiling water, and keep a layer between the bottle and the skin.

Wheat bags can also cause burns over winter, particularly when overheated or applied directly to skin

without a cover. Rarely, wheat bags have caught fire, especially when overheated or re-heated repeatedly without allowing them to fully cool between use.

Elderly people face a unique set of risks in winter. For some, underlying health issues, such as diabetes or poor circulation, can reduce sensitivity to heat, making them unaware they have been burnt.

A classic example is burns to the lower legs caused by sitting too close to a bar heater for extended periods. These burns may go unnoticed until they become painful or infected.

In some cases, financial strain plays a role. Many older adults live on fixed incomes and may hesitate to heat their entire home to save on energy bills. Instead, they may rely on small portable heaters in closed rooms or heated blankets and hot water bottles. These are cost-effective, but can increase the risk of burns.

Burns are preventable injuries. Here's how to reduce the risk: -use a barrier around heaters to protect exploring hands -keep hot drinks out of reach when holding a child, and consider using mugs with lids for added safety -supervise young children closely around campfires, bonfires and fire pits, and extinguish with water not sand -ensure hot water bottles are in good condition. Never fill a hot water bottle with boiling water, use the hot tap, and do not use if there are signs of wear or damage. Don't overheat wheat bags -regularly check your heater is safe and sit at least a metre away.

If a burn happens, run the burn under cool running water for at least 20 minutes, while keeping the person warm. Don't apply ice, creams or ointments, as they can cause more damage by trapping in the heat. Remove tight clothing or jewellery. Cover the burn with a loose, clean cloth or non-stick dressing.

Seek medical attention if the burn is deep, even if the person isn't in pain or is larger than a 20c piece or has blisters or involves the airway, face, hands or genitals or looks leathery, or there are patches of brown, black or white and also if the person has trouble breathing. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 3, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

The Moon's trine with Saturn on your solar return chart heralds a year of solid achievements and favorable outcomes. Your cherished projects will finally see completion, driven by a surge of vitality and determination. You'll feel inspired to explore uncharted territories in life, blessed with a kind of golden touch that ensures your efforts bear fruit. Peers and superiors will be highly supportive, appreciating your initiatives. Those aspiring to settle abroad or seeking international job offers will find the stars aligned in their favor. Expect joyous occasions at home, possibly weddings of younger family members. Your health will remain excellent, and your commendable work for society will not go unnoticed - recognition and rewards await you.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week brings understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations. You gain money and influence through business ventures and partnership. You connect with old friends and business associates. You are happy as there is balance and harmony at home and synergy in the work area. You start a new business project while adding zest to an old one. Don't allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is an especially introspective phase during which you have the chance to truly uncover your personal strengths and talents. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources now more than usual. This is an excellent time under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions in your relationships with loved ones. All which is deeply personal comes into focus now. Intimate matters are especially important to you during this period. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Research uncovers new material that allows you to develop a better overall picture of the events.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This is the time to explore and develop a sense of inner security. This is a time for re-organization and heightened awareness of your roots, issues of intimacy and vulnerability, and it's an excellent time to be in touch with your feelings and needs. Focusing on your support system and the manner in which you support others is also probable. This is a good time to make long-range plans for the future or to do any type of re-organizing or even re-modeling of the home and other family-related activities.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are dynamic and assertive while making new beginnings at work. However, you are soft and loving in personal relationships to maintain a balance. You make important changes in personal and professional situations by integrating contrasting elements or aspects. You are courageous and diplomatic when you need to be. You are ready to face professional competition or rivalry. Victory is on the cards after a short period of strife. Walking can be a therapeutic pastime and can add to your fitness routine.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are original and ambitious instilling a personal style in whatever you do. This phase challenges you to take responsibilities for who you are and live your truth. It's time to put your best foot forward, but be sure to do so with grace and consideration for others, or you may just make a display that you regret later. Give yourself the knack of responding to whatever comes, as it comes in life. Health needs to be replenished with a planned diet and fitness schedules.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You may be tempted to spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant. You retain a professional position of power and influence despite all the changes that happen at work.

Success in material aspects is on cards. You are noble when approached for involvement in a worthy cause. Your personal relationships go through a dreamy and transitional stage since you wait for promise and commitment. It's fine to make a compromise in an ongoing conflict and understand another person's point of view.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Finances and budgets need to be kept in mind as you complete projects and start new ventures. You would improve personal and professional relations with patience, love and care it would be better to avoid discussions, criticism and arguments. You would achieve professional success with your own power, wisdom and resources. You may require solitude in order to get mental work done during this time. Your memory is sharper than usual, and your thoughts often turn to personal matters, family, and loved ones.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Your communicative abilities will largely be applied to professional world ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters. Your personal affairs may take time to resolve, be patient and persistent. Love, romance, party fun, celebration and family reunions can keep you busy and happy this week. Health needs to be nurtured and cannot be ignored.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would bring a combination of wisdom and knowledge in personal and professional life. A personal involvement has the qualities of love, balance and freedom that you desire: It is time to heal old friendships with tender, love, care and move into new relationships with sensitivity. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. Arguments can be detrimental to production in business and harmony in family. Go out in the open and commune with nature it will help you reflect and be a stress buster too.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates learning important lessons from life could be the beginning of spiritual growth and understanding. You are blessed with divine wisdom and inspired to take up a professional challenge. Spiritual pursuits and meditation can be rewarding. You grow and transform as you pass through a touching emotional experience. This is a period during which you can enjoy increased powers of concentration. Stars indicate an especially busy and hectic time on the domestic front.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Success in business and love in personal relationship transforms your life and attitudes. There are chances of new associations as new opportunities and changes may come. You have to find better creative and progressive options. It would be better to participate in social and family celebrations to lighten up and relax. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side and organizational skills. You feel fresh and re-energized after a long walk or light exercises.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This period brings more efficiency and creativity to your work. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships. Travel, promotion, or publishing could also figure in your career and benefit you. A professional collaboration comes together when you have given up all the hopes of it. Creative and professional plans are set to actualize and it is best to work towards them persistently. Your business plans have a magical quality of perfection and completion.

Marine climate interventions can have unintended consequences

The world's oceans are being rapidly transformed as climate change intensifies. Corals are bleaching, sea levels are rising, and seawater is becoming more acidic - making life difficult for shellfish and reef-building corals. All this and more is unfolding on our watch, with profound consequences for marine ecosystems and the people who depend on them.

In response, scientists, governments and industries are trying to intervene. People all over the world are experimenting with new ways to capture and store more carbon dioxide, or make up for damage already done.

Ocean-based climate actions include breeding more heat-tolerant corals, restoring mangroves, and farming seaweed. Such interventions offer hope, but they're also inherently risky. Some may be ineffective, inequitable or even harmful.

The pace of innovation is now outstripping the capacity to responsibly regulate, monitor and evaluate these interventions. This means current and future generations may not be getting value for money, or worse, the chance to avoid irreversible change may be slipping away.

In our new research, published in Science, we reviewed the latest evidence on known and perceived risks of new ocean-based climate interventions. We then gathered emerging ideas on how to reduce those risks.

We found the risks aren't being widely considered, and the benefits are unclear. But there are emerging assessment tools and planning frameworks we can build on to plan ocean-based climate actions that meet humanity's climate goals.

The promise and peril of marine climate interventions

Marine climate interventions vary in scope and ambition. Example can be found all over the world. These include: - making oceans in North America more alkaline (ie: acidic) so they can take up more carbon dioxide - breeding heat-tolerant corals in Australia to transplant onto degraded reefs - farming seaweed in Africa to capture carbon and reduce ocean acidity - restoring mangroves in Asia to defend coastal communities - avoiding emissions by banning offshore oil and gas exploration.

Some interventions are still at the proof-of-concept stage, and several have been tested and abandoned.

Others are facing challenges owing to the complexity of monitoring and verification.

Each has its own set of benefits, costs and risks. For example, making the ocean more alkaline may help to sequester more carbon from the atmosphere, but it's difficult to verify how much carbon has been removed.

This makes it hard to justify the costs and the potential damage to ecosystems, such as effects on local fish populations.

Restoring coral can support biodiversity in the short term, but it may not last as warming exceeds

their (modified) ability to adapt. This type of intervention is also expensive and labour-intensive, with unintended emissions from energy-intensive processes. So it may be impossible to scale up.

Seaweed farming at scale would occupy thousands, if not millions, of square kilometres of oceans, displacing fishing, shipping and conservation. Harvesting 1 billion tonnes of seaweed carbon would require farming more than 1 million square km of the Pacific Ocean, and would deliver just 10% of the annual atmospheric carbon dioxide removal required to limit global warming to 1.5°C.

It's doubtful whether seaweed farming would actually remove carbon from the atmosphere. But seaweed farming can - if well-planned - produce a range of other climate-related benefits.

Moreover, interventions often overlap in space and time, creating cumulative impacts and unintended consequences. In some cases, the projects may displace other users, undermine Indigenous rights, or erode public trust in climate science and policy. Without careful understanding and planning, these efforts could exacerbate the very problems they aim to solve.

Governance gaps and ethical dilemmas

One of the most pressing challenges is the lack of regulation and oversight suited to the scale and complexity of marine climate interventions.

Existing regulations are often outdated, fragmented, or designed for land-based systems. Few countries have biosafety laws for the ocean. This means many interventions proceed without comprehensive risk assessments or community consultation.

Ethical dilemmas abound. Who decides what constitutes a "healthy" ocean? Who bears responsibility if an intervention causes harm? And how do we ensure benefits - such as improved livelihoods or climate resilience - are equitably distributed? Currently, scientists, funding bodies and non-government organisations do the bulk of the decision-making.

There is limited input from governments, local communities and Indigenous Peoples. This imbalance risks perpetuating historical injustices and undermining the legitimacy of many ocean-based climate actions.

Proceed with caution

The ocean is central to our climate future. It absorbs heat, stores carbon, and sustains life. But it is also vulnerable - and increasingly, a site of experimentation: If we are to harness the promise of ocean-based climate action, we must do so with care, humility, and foresight.

Responsible governance is not a barrier to innovation - it is its foundation. By embedding ethical, inclusive, and evidence-based principles into our marine climate strategies, we can chart a course toward a more resilient and equitable ocean future. (The Conversation)

"In time of difficulties, we must not lose sight of our achievements."
—Mao Zedong

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Young 'dead' economy

A perceived strength of the Narendra Modi-led NDA dispensation was the "efficient" manner in which it managed the national economy. When the economies of neighbouring countries underwent shocks, the scenario here seemed normal. But, the description of it being a "dead" economy by US President Donald Trump has created a sensation. Predictably, Opposition Leader Rahul Gandhi has caught on to it, certifying that this was "true" and that everyone stated so, out here, other than PM Modi and his finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Overall, India is growing in terms of its modern infrastructure, defence preparedness and quality of life for the rich and other upwardly mobile segments. The ordinary people, forming over 80 per cent of the population, however, got a raw deal. For them, progress or a better life is mostly a mirage.

In totality, India as a nation faces serious internal issues that have not been addressed by successive governments. To add to this are the threats from external powers. For one, the US muscle-flexing will have serious adverse effects on India. Based on figures last year, India exported over \$80 billion worth of goods to the United States, while the US sent goods worth \$40 billion to India. The volume of exports from here to the US is likely to be sharply hit by the Trump Administration's imposition of a 25 per cent tariff on all items reaching its shores from India from this month. Trump's accusation is that India's own tariffs "are too high, among the highest in the world," — in a warning that the US was not interested in boosting trade with this country. Notably, the EU and the US have been India's main destinations for exports. The Indian economy was visibly at its best during Dr Manmohan Singh's tenure; the GDP rising to an unsustainable over 9 per cent. During the fag end of his term, it scaled down. Since 2014, it went further down, touching around five per cent, and it now runs at six-plus. However, India is still better off than its neighbours.

On record, India positions itself as the world's fourth largest economy in a comparative analysis. It is set to outwit Germany and emerge as the third largest. It has to wait there and cannot aspire to outwit titans, the US or China. The IMF predicts that India's economy would cross the \$6.8 trillion mark by 2030. The US is now a \$30 trillion economy and China a \$19 trillion. India's strength is its young workforce. Some 37 crore people are aged 15 to 29, this being the world's largest population of young people. While this demographic dividend is our main strength, their productive energies are not channelled in the right direction. They would eventually age and become a huge burden on the nation. Their youthful energy now should not be wasted. While China acted with foresight and gained, India might as well lose. For, the government here looks the other way. Laziness is encouraged here through free/subsidized ration. There has to be a better way out!

The Great Distraction: Meghalaya's Obsession with Identity Politics the Achilles' Heel of Development

By Napoleon Mawphniang

Stop by any tea stall in Shillong and you're guaranteed to hear the same old record spinning. Someone's always going on about how "these outsiders are stealing our jobs" or "they're destroying what makes us who we are" or "we've got to stand up for our people." And there you are, nodding along while stepping around that massive pothole that's been eating up half the road for the past three years. The government school down the street? Still doesn't have proper desks for half the kids. And that friendly guy who just handed you your tea? He's probably taking home barely enough money to buy groceries for three days in Meghalaya, forget about a whole week.

It's almost surreal when you think about it — here we are, having these grand debates about identity and culture while the most basic stuff that actually affects our daily lives just keeps falling apart around us.

This is what I call "issue-displacement syndrome" — a peculiar condition where societies become so consumed with identity-based anxieties that they lose sight of the bread-and-butter issues that actually determine their quality of life. Meghalaya, I'm afraid, has become a textbook case of this malady.

Don't misunderstand me. Cultural preservation and protecting indigenous rights are legitimate concerns. But when these conversations dominate our public discourse to the extent that corruption, healthcare collapse, and economic stagnation become background noise, we've lost the plot entirely. We've become masters at fighting the wrong battles while the real enemies of our progress — systemic corruption, administrative incompetence, and economic mismanagement — slip past our defenses unnoticed.

Consider this sobering reality: Meghalaya ranks among India's poorest states despite being blessed with abundant natural resources. Our per capita income hovers around ₹47,000 annually — less than half the national average. Youth unemployment runs rampant, our healthcare infrastructure is crumbling, and rural areas lack basic connectivity. Yet our political discourse remains fixated on who can sell what where, and which community gets preference in government jobs.

This "developmental tunnel vision" isn't unique to us. History offers instructive parallels. Take Northern Ireland during the Troubles. For decades, communities were so consumed with sectarian divisions that basic governance took a backseat. Schools deteriorated, economic opportunities vanished, and an entire generation grew up in a

climate where political identity mattered more than practical progress. It wasn't until the Good Friday Agreement shifted focus toward shared economic development that real transformation began.

Similarly, post-apartheid South Africa initially struggled with what scholars termed "grievance politics" — an understandable but ultimately counterproductive obsession with historical injustices that sometimes overshadowed urgent developmental needs. The breakthrough came when leaders like Thabo Mbeki began emphasizing the "African Renaissance" — a forward-looking vision focused on economic growth, education, and infrastructure rather than endless recriminations.

Meghalaya's situation bears uncomfortable similarities. We've created what I call a "distraction economy" — a political system that thrives on manufactured crises and identity-based conflicts because they're easier to mobilize around than the complex, unglamorous work of actual governance. It's far simpler to organize rallies against perceived cultural threats than to audit government spending or demand accountability for failed development projects.

Let's examine what we're ignoring while we're busy protecting our identity. The leakage in MGNREGA funds alone could transform rural livelihoods if properly utilized. A recent CAG report highlighted how nearly 30% of allocated funds in various schemes never reach intended beneficiaries. That's not an identity issue — that's straight-up theft from the public exchequer.

Our healthcare system presents another stark example. Meghalaya has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in Northeast India, yet our public health budget consistently goes underutilized due to administrative inefficiencies. When women in rural areas die during childbirth because the nearest PHC lacks an ambulance or basic medical supplies, what comfort does "cultural preservation" offer their families?

The minimum wage scenario is equally telling. While we debate the finer points of tribal identity, daily wage workers — many of them local tribals — struggle to earn ₹200 per day for backbreaking labour. Construction workers, domestic helpers, and agricultural laborers remain trapped in poverty not because of any external threat, but because our labor laws lack teeth and implementation remains pathetic.

Employment generation presents perhaps the starkest

example of our misplaced priorities. We've spent enormous energy on reservation debates and identity-based job preferences while ignoring the elephant in the room: there simply aren't enough quality jobs being created. Our industrial policy remains virtually non-existent, our education system produces graduates unsuited for modern employment, and our infrastructure can't attract serious investment. No amount of identity protection can compensate for an economy that creates jobs at a snail's pace.

Take a lesson from Kerala's transformation in the 1960s and 70s. Despite being a small state with limited natural resources, Kerala achieved remarkable development indicators by focusing relentlessly on education, healthcare, and social services. They didn't get distracted by linguistic chauvinism or regional politics — they prioritized human development over identity politics. The result? Kerala today enjoys living standards comparable to middle-income countries.

The best way forward for us is to embrace "constructive realism" — acknowledging our challenges without falling into the trap of blame games. We need to develop what psychologists call "strategic attention" — the ability to focus on issues that actually impact outcomes rather than those that merely generate emotional responses.

This means redirecting our collective energy toward demanding transparency in government spending. Every contract awarded, every rupee spent, every scheme implemented, every development project initiated should face public scrutiny. We need citizen audit committees that track fund utilization with the same passion currently reserved for identity politics.

We must demand accountability for non-performing assets in our developmental infrastructure. Why do rural schools lack teachers? Why do PHCs remain understaffed? Why do roads deteriorate within months of construction? These questions deserve the same attention we give to cultural preservation debates.

This demand for transparency becomes even more urgent when we examine the state of our information ecosystem. Try filing an RTI application with any Meghalaya government department and you'll witness what I call "bureaucratic comedy theater" — responses so evasive and unprofessional that they'd be laughable if the implications weren't so serious.

Ask for details about the Chief Minister's office ex-

penditure and you'll be told "information not available." Inquire about the state's fiscal deficit and receive the same dismissive response. This isn't mere administrative inefficiency; it's a systematic effort to maintain what I term "governance opacity" — the deliberate obscuring of government functioning from public scrutiny.

The recent amendments to RTI rules in Meghalaya represent perhaps the most brazen assault on transparency in recent memory. A government that fears the Right to Information Act clearly has much to hide. When citizens file first and second appeals, they encounter what amounts to an "accountability firewall" — appellate authorities who seem more committed to protecting the government than serving public interest.

On the other hand, our administrative staff often lacks basic professional ethics, treating public information as personal property rather than citizen entitlement. Meanwhile, we remain distracted by identity politics. Until we demand the same passion for government accountability that we reserve for cultural debates, Meghalaya will continue its spiral of "transparent poverty" amidst opaque governance — poor outcomes delivered through systems designed to avoid scrutiny.

Most importantly, we need to cultivate what I call "developmental nationalism" — a pride in our state that manifests through economic progress, social indicators, and quality of life rather than through exclusionary policies or chest-thumping rhetoric. True pride comes from building a society where young people have opportunities, where healthcare is accessible, where governance is transparent, and where every citizen can aspire to a better life.

We're at the crossroads, and honestly, it's getting embarrassing. We can keep obsessing over identity politics while real problems devour our future like termites, or finally wake up to what matters. Our kids won't care about preserved cultural symbols if they can't find jobs or must leave home to survive. They'll judge us on whether we left them a functioning state — where businesses operate without bribes, healthcare works, and the government serves people properly. We've been distracted too long arguing about who belongs where while schools crumble and corruption consumes development funds. Meghalaya needs actual progress, not endless debates. Are we ready to grow up?

(The writer is Advocate, Human Architect, Trade Unionist and Los Nadies. Email: lazy-mounted grub@duck.com)

Restoring Public Space: A Love Letter to Law and Logic

By Lyzander E Sohkhlet

Since the day Bhogtaram Mawroh published his long-winded response to my article, Shillong has moved on. Quite beautifully, in fact. Khyndailad is breathing again, pedestrians walk freely, families shop without squeezing between carts and chaos, and the vendors who relocated to the MUDA complex are not just adjusting, they're thriving. Meanwhile, many continue to beat the same ideological drum, eyes squeezed shut to the blooming reality around them. Khyndailad, once a pedestrian's nightmare, is now a place where people can breathe, walk, and yes, even smile. The air is cleaner, the roads are clearer, and the MUDA Complex, previously dismissed as a bureaucratic afterthought, is now humming with happy vendors and happier customers. These aren't elite shopkeepers or traders. These are the same vendors who were once on the streets, now thriving in a cleaner, safer, and legally designated space.

Ask them yourself. Many have publicly said they prefer this relocation. "Business is better. We don't have to face the rain or the wind anymore. And we're not inhaling car smoke all day, nor fighting for a space," said a vendor. Many vendors who once sold food under hazardous conditions, by gutters, amidst fumes, exposed to vehicular dust (They were violating Section 15 of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act, 2014) which concerns public hygiene) are finally selling in cleaner, safer spaces within the MUDA market. Their food is no longer marinated in exhaust smoke. They now have dignity, structure, and hygiene. Vendors I've spoken to express satisfaction with the relocation, proud that they no longer fear eviction or police confiscation. One even said, "It feels like I finally have a shop, not a spot on the street."

Let me remind readers: vending in front of hospitals, or anywhere not designated for vending, is a violation of the 2014 Act. Section 15 (page 5 of the NASVI PDF version) explicitly prohibits vending in a no vending zone. Section 29 outlines penalties for such violations. Even Bhogtaram, in his generous imagination, suggests road-widening as a solution, on the condition that vendors remain where they are. In other words, he proposes altering urban infrastructure to accommodate illegality. That's like suggesting we abolish speed limits because people like driving fast. There's also a curious lack of concern for public hygiene in Bhogtaram's narrative. Relocated vendors now operate away from open drains, dust clouds, and vehicle smoke. This is not classism; it's common sense. The same food that was once exposed to exhaust pipes is now sold in a clean environment. Isn't that a public good? Or is it only "pro-poor" when food safety is optional? Suggesting we ignore current violations until a utopian land exchange occurs is like saying we should allow double parking on hospital roads until we build a multi-storey parking lot in 2030. It's unrealistic, and frankly, irresponsible.

Bhogtaram Mawroh states he works in the area, but I live in the chaos. His observations punch in at 9 am and politely exit by 5 pm. Meanwhile, I witness the daily disappearance of footpaths, the vanishing act of road space, and the magical multiplication of carts with every passing hour. While he studies the area from a distance, I experience its challenges directly, every single day.

I also find it amusing how Mawroh has tried to build his case around a recent

judgment by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, only to cherry-pick lines that suit his argument. He quotes the Court's sympathy but skips the part where the case was dismissed for lacking legal basis. More inconveniently, he omits the fact that the Court imposed a ₹50,000 fine on each petitioner for wasting judicial time. Sympathy, dear readers, does not replace statutory procedure.

Mawroh also tries to bait me into playing the ethnic card, commending me for not bringing up issues of ethnicity. Thank you, Mr Mawroh, but I don't need a gold star for basic decency. What I do need is a clear debate. One based on facts, not feelings. You say I cherry-pick the law? I say you've turned the whole tree into a self-serving metaphor.

The government's relocation effort isn't perfect. No policy ever is. But it is a step towards fairness, order, and dignity, for vendors and citizens alike. We cannot let a handful of ideological absolutists convince us that demanding civic order is elitism, or that every enforcement of law is oppression.

Interestingly, today's spectacle in front of the MUDA office. The street vendors' association staged a protest right in the middle of the road, blocking traffic for over an hour while chanting "Ha ri lajong katba mon!" — "In my town I can do whatever I want." If that doesn't sum up the entitlement of lawless advocacy, I don't know what does.

And for those still unsure whether these vendors violated the law: yes, they did. Besides vending in no-vending zones (including hospital perimeters, Nazareth Hospital & Civil Hospital), they operate without cleanliness, and some without FSSAI license, and ignored public safety norms. The 2014 Act clearly states that vending is protected, not unregulated. No certificate, no legal ground. It's not elitism, it's enforcement. But yes, we must also confront the irregularities within the Certificate of Vending (CoV) system. Several vendors have reportedly received CoVs without proper verification, while others continue vending without any certificate at all. This undermines the very spirit of the Street Vendors Act, which was designed to balance livelihood with legality. The CoV process must be audited, transparent, and subject to community oversight. If vending is to be protected, it must also be regulated.

Lastly, let's talk about what's being framed as a rich versus poor battle. Are local entrepreneurs, paying rent, taxes, and compliance fees, suddenly part of the "elite class"? Is every shopkeeper in Shillong now a villain for obeying the law? The narrative has been warped beyond recognition. What we are witnessing isn't class war, it's a legal framework catching up with the chaos of unregulated urban growth. The truth is simple. The MUDA relocation is working. Vendors are earning, shoppers are walking, the city is breathing. Some people may miss the chaos because it gave them a cause. But most of us are happy to move on, with the law, with the people, and toward a cleaner, safer Shillong.

To all those still watching this unfolding drama, I say this: we can be a compassionate city without being a chaotic one. We can support vendors without turning sidewalks into slums. And yes — brace yourself — we can even cite Section 10(1) without setting the Constitution on fire.

(The writer is a student Of St Edmund's College, BA Political Science)

Letters to the Editor

Pine needles have their uses
Editor,
The special article "Eco-

planning." A comparative framework of pine needles vs. native broadleaf system in Meghalaya below serves as a good illustration:

Attribute	Pine Forests	Native Broadleaf Forest
Fire Risk	Extremely high due to resin-rich, flammable needles.	Low natural leaf litter is moisture-retaining.
Soil Impact	Acidifies soil; suppresses microbial and plant diversity.	Enhances fertility; supports diverse microbes and understory flora.
Grazing Potential	Poor; needles make fodder species.	Rich grazing base for livestock and wildlife.
Decomposition Rate	Slow due to lignin content.	Fast; contributes to humus formation and nutrient cycling.
Biodiversity Support	Monoculture prone; support few species.	High biodiversity; supports interdependent ecosystems.
Regeneration Dynamics	Fire-dependent seed release; creates pine dominance.	Natural regeneration favours mixed species resilience.

logical Dynamics and Biogeochemical Impacts of Pine Forest Expansion" by Kitlang Donbor Kharkongor (ST August 2, 2025) made interesting reading. The Ex-District Agriculture Officer has made an excellent presentation of the ecological and resilience dynamics between pine forest and native broadleaf ecosystems and the impact on the environment in Meghalaya. He has rightly concluded that "the Government of Meghalaya must implement immediate policy intervention prioritising hardwood forest restoration and sustainable land use

potential source of bio-energy by scholars of G.P. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand states that "the Himalayan region suffers a lot from seasonal power shortages, due to poor electrical infrastructure and transmission. The conventional methods (direct burning of fuel and wood) are highly practiced in these regions. Pine needles have great potential for conversion into fuel due to their high calorific

value as compared to other biomass. There are several ways for thermochemical conversion of pine needle biomass into fuel; the biomass can be directly used for electricity generation, used in with-binder or binder-less briquetting, pyrolysis and gasification. The end products of thermochemical conversion (pyrolysis, liquefaction and gasification) processes are bio-oil, bio-char and producer gas." A policy and mapping framework around pine needle utilisation is the need given the pine needle proliferation. Application matrix below:

production through thermochemical conversion.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Unity is Good, But Democracy Needs More Than One Voice

Editor,
When Meghalaya's Deputy Chief Minister and NPP State President Prestone Tynsong says, "We have enough room for all 60 MLAs," it sounds warm and welcoming. And who does not wish for peace and progress? But let us pause and think: is a legislature with no opposition really progress or a warning? Development without debate, without questions, without accountability, can easily become one-sided. A government that faces no challenge may begin to believe it makes no mistakes. And that is where the danger begins.

The NPP's open invitation to all MLAs on the condition that they support "development" may sound noble. But what does that really mean? Is "development" now the only acceptable political belief? Are we saying that anyone who asks questions, who demands answers, or who offers a dif-

Use Case	Type	Local Potential	Challenges	Suggested Intervention
Biogas for fuel	Energy	High for rural, low for urban.	Logistics, low awareness.	Establish village-level collection cooperatives, subsidize manure.
Biochar for degraded soil	Ecological	High	Lack of soil monitoring frameworks.	Integrate with watershed and soil conservation programs.
Essential oil extraction	Pharmaceutical	Moderate	Quality control, requires tech.	Launch a G-SIP linked micro-enterprise cluster.
Paper/pulp from needles	Industrial	Low	High lignin, requires quality.	Use only as supplementary fibre with bamboo/waste paper.
Compost integration	Agricultural	Medium	Slow breakdown, balancing.	Blend with cow dung/microbial culture. Partner with Kheti Vidya.

The feasibility study by the scholars of G.P. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand referred to above concludes that pine needles are a suitable precursor for bio-energy

ferent idea is somehow against progress? That cannot be the spirit of a democracy. The opposition is not an enemy. It is a part of the system. It is not there to create trouble; it is there to prevent trouble. It checks spending. It questions decisions. It reminds power that it must answer to the people. Remove the opposition, and you do not have unity. You have silence.

And now, we hear that "Meghalaya need not spend crores building a State Assembly."

With all respect, this is troubling. The Assembly is not just a building. It is a symbol of democracy. It is where laws are made, where ministers are held accountable, and where elected representatives speak for their people. Should such a space be dismissed because one party feels strong today?

A strong government does not fear debate. A confident democracy does not cancel its classroom just because everyone seems to agree. Let us also remember: the Constitution gives us a system of balance. It allows for a ruling party — but also for a strong, active opposition. That balance is not outdated. It is essential. Yes, political stability is good. But stability built on merging parties, offering positions, and absorbing MLAs into one-fold without real public mandate does not strengthen institu-

tions. It weakens them. It turns elected representatives into party loyalists first, and public servants second.

And what happens to those who disagree? Are they left out? Are they seen as obstacles? We must be honest: one-party dominance, even with a smile, is still dominance. And when no one dares to say "wait, let's think again," democracy begins to sleep.

We do not question the NPP's right to govern. We do not doubt their desire to develop Meghalaya. But we do ask: can development truly thrive without space for different voices? Can progress be real if no one is allowed to question how it is being done?

And let us not build a future where only one party speaks, for the day may come when no one else is left to listen. Let us choose not just development but democracy with depth. Let us welcome unity but never at the cost of our right to ask, to question, and to choose. Because a healthy state is not one where everyone agrees. It is one where every voice, even the one that disagrees, is heard.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai
Observer of Northeast Politics & Education Policy
Via email

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"Victory is always possible for the person who refuses to stop fighting."

— Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

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Religious Overreach

WHILE the Meghalaya High Court has allowed Hindu pilgrims to visit the Mawjymbuin cave in in Mawsynram, questions now arise as to who controls that site? Is the site now owned by Hindu sects and therefore they have complete control over how the site is used for religious purposes only while putting a halt to tourists and researchers with an interest in geology and in Meghalaya's limestone caves. It is not known as to why this particular cave is zeroed in by the Hindu groups when every limestone cave has stalagmites which are limestone pillars formed by mineral rich water dripping from the roof of the cave and depositing calcium carbonate on the cave floor. This precipitation occurs as the water evaporates and releases carbon dioxide causing the dissolved minerals to solidify and build up over time to form upward growing structures which look like pillars. They are found inside every limestone cave in Meghalaya and elsewhere in the world. Stalactites on the other hand grow downward from the caves ceiling. Reputed geologists see this phenomenon as a natural one and have pointed out that stalagmites are not Shiv Lingam. But in an atmosphere soaked in religious fervour this is a cry in the wilderness.

That tourists visiting the cave at the time of the yatra were made to comply to Hindu rituals and asked to remove their shoes et al, does not bode well for Meghalaya a tribal state which has already ceded sufficient space for creating places of worship of all religions without discrimination. But for any single religious group to lay claim over a geological site that would at some point be subject to geological research to find answers to some of the climatic shifts as had happened in the Mawmluh Cave now famous for the establishment of the its Meghalayan Age. Renowned geologists from across the globe have classified the last 4,200 years as being a distinct age in the story of planet earth. This they have done through extensive research and they call it the Meghalayan Age, the onset of which was marked by a mega-drought that crushed a number of civilisations worldwide.

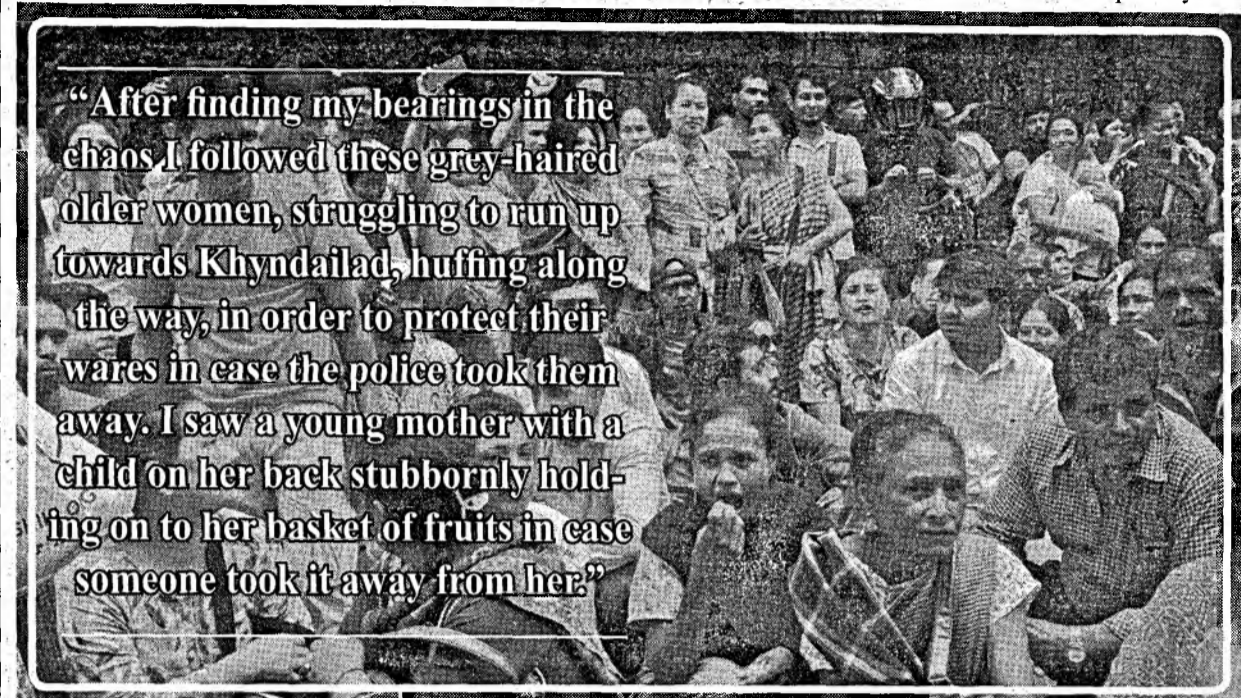
Considering the importance of these limestone caves for several other scientific and geological studies it is important that such spaces are left untouched by any faith group. That the state has to provide security to the yatris is another dimension that needs debating. Can the state with an already reduced police force afford to guard the yatris and the cave each time there is some such ceremony? It's time the Meghalaya Government challenges the High Court order in the apex court on the plea that the cave is a geological marvel and has nothing to do with a specific religion and just because some group makes sanctimonious claims over it does not make it binding on the state to also follow that diktat.

I write this after witnessing a protest on 1st August, 2025, by the hawkers and street vendors in front of the Municipal office. Through the various articles I have read recently concerning this issue, I have been educated and informed about the Street Vendors Act and how the Government has failed to uphold or refuses to act in accordance with the law as stated. If there is any group that can hold the Government accountable, I am confident it is the hawker's association. But I am here not to talk about that. I write

bit, just a bit what it would mean to be in their place. Please understand this is not a communal issue, whoever has tried to use this narrative in the past, you are attempting to mislead without any real understanding of what the fight is about. Please understand that this is not about lack of space or increase in traffic or a disturbance to pedestrians. The government will not evict the big cars that take up space, the thousands of new car registrations in

put her basket of sohphi and her stall of kwai-tympew out in case she was not allowed to sit there. I saw women of various ages shouting and standing their ground to the magistrates and police officers who attempted to carry forward the eviction process. I saw hawkers looking out for each other, carrying and protecting each other's wares. It was a collective act of solidarity and strength. Unfortunately, only saw a picture and a video of the

them." Women spoke and shared with each other about their struggles, why they were there and their right to vending in their spots. Another woman bought me some channa as I sat there with her. This to me is solidarity. I stayed on to listen to an older woman who had been vending since 1998; a grandmother aware of her vending rights and the service she provided near Civil Hospital to patients and families who came from the villages, unable to even afford food at the hospital canteens. She proudly told



"After finding my bearings in the chaos I followed these grey-haired older women, struggling to run up towards Khyndailad, huffing along the way, in order to protect their wares in case the police took them away. I saw a young mother with a child on her back stubbornly holding on to her basket of fruits in case someone took it away from her."

this instead from a position where I acknowledge my privilege and the privilege to be ignorant of the class struggles of the hawkers and the street vendors. Until date this was merely an issue that I was aware of and empathized with but did not allow myself the time or the space to actually understand what was happening at the ground level, at a very human level, at a level that forces us to confront our privilege of staying ignorant. I write also as a mother to a young child who saw other young mothers at these protests, the difference being that they carried their babies with them while protesting for their rights to earn their livelihood in dignity. I write therefore for these women, who are at the forefront of this fight for justice because they do not have the privilege to not fight or not resist.

I write this because what I have witnessed has shaken me to an extent that does not allow me to continue to be ignorant. Instead, I hope I can appeal to you to step out of your privilege and perhaps imagine for a

Meghalaya in 2025 alone, or the big official cars with their loud sirens that are used by our officials for non-official drives. Please understand that as a society that claims to uphold the tenets of tip biew tip blei bad kamai ia ka hok we can at least attempt to understand this resistance, this fight that may seem inconsequential to many...to earn a livelihood in dignity.

At the protests, this was what I saw (allow me this space to express myself as an artist with some emotion and feeling). On 30th June 2025, I stepped out of my home to witness the attempt to evict the hawkers from Khyndailad. After finding my bearings in the chaos I followed these grey-haired older women, struggling to run up towards Khyndailad, huffing along the way, in order to protect their wares in case the police took them away. I saw a young mother with a child on her back stubbornly holding on to her basket of fruits in case someone took it away from her. I saw a young girl not knowing whether she should

Kong who held up an axe (u sdie) in front of the officials. Why would a mother raise an axe if not pushed to the brink of losing everything and not being able to provide for her children? The government that claims to protect the well-being and livelihood of women in a matrilineal society has failed us in so many ways.

On 1st August 2025, I stepped out to be part of the protest by the hawkers in front of the Municipal office.

The sight that I encountered was one that should put our entire donburom society to shame. There, the hawkers from Civil Hospital, Bimola, Laitumkhrak, Police Bazaar came together in front of the Municipal Building to protest and demand their right to meet with the officials. A woman told me that they had been standing there since 10 am, another one said, "Why are the Municipal gates closed to us? They could let us in instead of making us wait outside on the streets. We do not need to be here all day. We want to dialogue with the officials. We want a response from

me how she has been able to support and raise her children, her grandchildren and now her great grandchildren. Another hawker explained how their presence would boost the economy of the State and shared about how their fight is a fight for the future of their children. We spoke about the safety of our streets because of the presence of the hawkers; ka jingshngai jong ki lynti syngkein.

I stayed on a bit longer to witness a collective voice that demanded the Chief Executive Officer to come out and meet them, to address their demands;

"Ngi dawa ia ka hok, ngi dawa ia ka hok, ngi dawa ia ka hok!"

(defiant women, hungry, tired, exhausted but fully aware of their rights to earn a livelihood in dignity because they do not have the privilege to be ignorant and unaware).

As for me, I cannot help but be in awe of these women who have shown me what strength, courage and resilience is all about.

On pavements and people who are glued to them

By Ellerine Diengdoh

I must confess that it took me a long time to write this down, overwhelmed as I was by many emotions...chief among them, a deep and profound shame. Shame because for a people so proud of our words, we have become blind to their meaning. "Tip Biew, Tip Blei," we declare—to know Man is to know God. We boast of "ka jaithynriew ba tylli" a unified people, a singular body. We claim the mantle of a Christian state, a community built on compassion, on love, on brotherhood. But I ask you to look away from the high chair of comfort, from the podiums of pontification, and to look down, at the pavement. For it is there, on the cracked and grimy concrete, that our proud words ring hollow. It is there that our boasted unity is revealed as a myth. It is there that our faith is tested, and it is there that our humanity is laid bare. This, then, is why I write. To speak to our collective conscience, in the hope that a heart still beats there.

I wonder what it feels like to be a human splinter. To exist as an inconvenience, like a stain on a Shillong's pristine collar. To be a piece of gravel the world wants to sweep into the gutter.

From inside a car, with the windows up and the AC on, you just see a blob, a splash of colour that's blocking your way. But get out of the car. Stand on the pavement and breathe what they breathe. Go on. Let the fumes and dust coat your tongue. Let the city's angry curse, a chorus of relentless horns, wash over you. This is the only song they hear. This is the soundtrack to their life.

Now look at her. No, really look. Over there... a woman, fused to a tiny plastic stool, one that looks as sad, as tired, as worn-out as she does. Her back is bent into a question mark, from holding up a sky of indifference since morning. The sun has been screaming at her all day, and now the dark clouds are threatening to cry on her. She is marooned on a tiny island of pineapples... each one a spiky hope against despair.

She has learnt the art of not being looked at. She has become an expert at being ignored. While her whole body is screaming, "Please, just buy, just buy!" her face wears a smile, because you can't look desperate. People don't like desperation. It is ugly!

Her shop has no walls, no roof, no door. Her shop is a sheet of plastic on the cold,

hard ground. Breathe it with her, the grimy film that settles on the mouth and the teeth. It is the residue of the black cough of a bus, the stench of burnt rubber from bikes and scooters. This is not just her air. This is the only air she is allowed to breathe.

A sea of legs and shoes flows around her, a relentless human tide that barely registers her existence. For a fleeting second, a face will tighten, a mouth will purse. It is the flinch of irritation... the ugly, silent grammar of a world that sees her not as a woman, but as a nuisance, a menace, a delay.

What separates her from us, is a line. The line is the edge of the pavement. It is only inches of concrete, but it is worlds apart. It is the distance between worrying about traffic, and praying the rain holds off long enough to sell one more pineapple... just one...so your child can eat tonight.

This isn't a career choice...this pavement, this tiny two-foot square of dust and dirt, is the entire plan. This is the only choice, this is the raw, bleeding edge of what's left, laid out on a dirty sheet of plastic. This is the human mess that spills onto the street because there's no room for it anywhere else.

However, in homes and rooms far from the streets, in clean, comfortable worlds, people with soft hands and clean words, talk about "vending zones," "rehabilitation," "beautification"... words that mean nothing on the pavement. You cannot tidy up hunger, you cannot rehabilitate desperation, you cannot sweep a human soul under a rug of civic pride.

"They" are not a problem, "they" are proof...proof that you can shove a person into the gutter, and they will claw a life out of the dirt. Humanity is a weed, it will grow between the cracks of the pavement, because all it needs is just a little light...

Imagine it. To be a problem just by taking up space. To have the entire, brutal, beautiful, messy fact of your fight for life dismissed with a sigh. To be an inconvenience.

Once you truly imagine what it feels like to be an inconvenience, you realise the question isn't, "Why are they in my way?"

Ask the other one, the one that hurts, the one that should keep you awake at night.

Ask, "Why is the pavement the only place that's left for them to be?"

Letters to the Editor

A History Forgotten, A Future at Risk

Editor,

The Inner Line Permit (ILP) is not just a policy it is a shield, a protective boundary created during colonial times to safeguard indigenous communities from unchecked outside interference. Originally introduced by the British under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, the ILP was meant to preserve the identity, culture, and land of tribal populations in the Northeast. It exists in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and parts of Manipur. And once yes, once it was granted to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills too.

Historically, Meghalaya, particularly the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, was governed under special provisions that functioned similarly to the ILP. These protections recognized our uniqueness our matrilineal society, our customs, and our sacred bond with the land. But over time, this shield was weakened, diluted, and eventually removed, even as the threat of demographic invasion grew stronger. In the wake of growing migration and economic expansion in the 21st century, the people of Meghalaya have repeatedly demanded the re-implementation of the ILP. The desire

is not born out of hatred, but out of a need to preserve our heritage, secure our future, and protect our land from being swallowed by the outside world.

Yet here we are, in 2025, still asking: Where is the ILP?

The truth is painful. While the public shouts and rallies, the government hesitates, delays, and distracts. Promises are made before elections. Committees are formed. Files are passed from office to office. But is there real political will, or is the ILP just another tool in the game of power?

We must ask the hard questions:

• Is the government truly fighting for the ILP at the national level, or only pretending to care?

• Are leaders more interested in economic partnerships with non-tribal business lobbies than in protecting the indigenous population?

• Is the state benefiting from this open-door policy at the cost of its sons and daughters?

The danger is clear. If we do not draw the line now, we risk becoming a minority in our own homeland. Our identity will be reduced to folklore. Our language, customs, and sacred lands will be commodities sold to the highest bidder.

Are we playing politics with the soul of Meghalaya?

If ILP is not implemented with urgency and sincerity, then yes, we are gambling with our future, and the cost will be irreversible. This is not just a policy fight. This is a fight for survival. A fight to remind every authority local and national that Meghalaya belongs to its people, and no political game can be allowed to rewrite that truth.

2025 is not just another year in the pages of time it is a loud alarm bell for every Khasi who still believes in the sanctity of our land, our culture, our future. The truth is clear, yet many choose comfort over courage: Meghalaya is under threat not from war, but from slow, systematic erasure. The unchecked and rising influx of non-Khasis into our sacred hills is no longer a concern of tomorrow; it is a crisis of today. Look around the markets of our towns no longer echo with our language. Lands once held by our ancestors are now in the names of outsiders. Our youth wander without jobs, while non-locals open shops, dominate trades, and control contracts. Our culture is being diluted, our traditions mocked or forgotten, and our identity once proud and distinct is being chipped away, brick by brick.

2025 has seen an alarming rise in illegal settlements, voter manipulation, and job occupations by people who have no ancestral ties to this land. Under the guise of "development" and "progress," we are witnessing silent colonization. Let's be honest: when outsiders outnumber locals in business, politics, and land ownership, it's not co-existence it's replacement. What will be left for our children if we don't act now? A borrowed language? A borrowed land? A borrowed identity? This is not a call for hate. This is a call for survival. The Khasis are a peace-loving people, but peace without protection is surrender. Let us not be remembered as the generation that watched our homeland fade without raising a voice. Let us rise in unity, wisdom, and fierce love for our land.

This is our warning. This is our time.

Yours etc.,
Pynshaiha Latam,
Via email

Ever growing air pollution levels

Editor,

My name is Yarrabeth Kharkongor, and I am 11 years old. Every year, I look forward to coming home to Shillong for my summer holidays. But as much as I love this beautiful place, there is also a part of me that dreads it, because of the thick, black toxic smoke that pours out from the tailpipes of cars and trucks. The air

becomes suffocating, and the pollution hangs over the city like a silent killer.

It makes me sad that a place I love so dearly feels like it's hurting me and other children. Our lungs are still growing, and this dirty air is poisoning us.

I would like to ask the Pollution Control Board: Why isn't anything being done about these harmful fumes? Why are vehicles allowed to pollute the air so badly?

If Shillong acts now, we could save many lives in the next 30 years. Pollution is a serious danger, especially for children. It can lead to asthma, worsen breathing problems, affect brain development, and even increase the risk of premature births and sudden infant death.

We need clean, fresh air to grow up healthy. We need to do something before it's too late for us, and for the generations to come.

Yours etc.,
Yarrabeth Kharkongor
Via email

Decoding Assam CM's Stance on USTM

Editor,

While Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has framed his opposition to the University of Science

and Technology Meghalaya (USTM) around environmental and legal concerns, there is a growing perception that his stance reflects a deeper, more nuanced discomfort—one that extends beyond mere ecological vigilance. His repeated and unusually sharp remarks about USTM, including his public wish for the campus to be "razed," suggest a level of personal animosity that appears disproportionate to the issue at hand. Given that USTM is a UGC-recognised institution established through a state legislative act, the persistent targeting of this particular university—especially when other similar institutions across the region face less scrutiny raises questions about underlying motives. The fact that the university is located in a border area, where territorial sensitivities between Assam and Meghalaya have long persisted, adds another layer to this narrative. It is difficult not to see a pattern where development initiatives in Meghalaya, particularly those near the inter-state boundary, are met with resistance from Assam's leadership. This has led to a perception among many in Meghalaya that the criticism is less about forest laws and more about curbing the state's autonomy and progress in strategic sectors like education. In this light, Sarma's actions may be interpreted not just as environmental advocacy, but

as part of a broader posture that views development in neighbouring states especially along contested borders with suspicion, potentially undermining the spirit of cooperative federalism and regional harmony.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Rymbai
Via email

Appeal for Subsidy in Diagnostic & Procedure Tests in Govt & Charitable Hospitals

Editor,

While Ensuring the health and well-being of its citizens is a fundamental responsibility of the State and providing affordable healthcare is paramount. The Central and State Governments have introduced initiatives such as the ABPMJAY and MHIS cards to facilitate access to healthcare services. However, these benefits are primarily available for hospitalization, which is often a last resort for many individuals.

Most people prefer outpatient department (OPD) treatments or visits to private clinics. To accurately diagnose ailments, attending doctors frequently recommend medical tests. Unfortunately, the cost of diagnostic

tests in private hospitals and diagnostic centres is prohibitively high for the average person. Consequently, many individuals opt for tests at government hospitals, such as the Civil Hospital and NEIGRIHMS in Shillong.

Recently, even these institutions have seen a rise in the cost of diagnostic tests and procedures. This increase has placed a significant financial burden on the economically disadvantaged, who rely on these facilities for OPD treatments. Faced with high costs, many patients are forced to abandon medical treatment and resort to self-care, which can be detrimental to their health.

In light of the escalating costs of diagnostic and procedural tests in both government and charitable hospitals in Shillong, we appeal to the relevant authorities in the Central and State Governments to explore the possibility of providing additional subsidies for patients. Furthermore, we urge private hospitals operating in Shillong to consider their social responsibility and contribute to making healthcare more affordable. In no case should the motto be, "YOUR BODY IS OUR BUSINESS"

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chhetri
Shillong-2

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

"We seek peace, knowing that peace is the climate of freedom."
—Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Shillong Times

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Cool down, your honour

THE dignity of individuals and institutions rests mainly on how they conduct themselves through their words, dispositions and deeds. So too with the Supreme Court. It waded into an avoidable row now over its response to comments from Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, about the "losses" India suffered vis-à-vis the Galwan Valley military engagement. That fight was against Chinese attempts at intrusions into Indian soil in 2022. While the court has stayed the proceedings against Gandhi in a defamation suit filed by the Border Roads Organisation director and others, the tone and tenor in which the bench made some pronouncements are unacceptable and uncalled for. The voice of the Leader of the Opposition is the voice of the people. Moreover, he's leader of the nation's main political establishment, the Congress party, which remained central to India's post-Independence history. It is not in the realm of the Supreme Court to decide what a leader occupying such a high position should say or speak. Take for granted that he speaks up for the people. In this context, what Jagdeep Dhankar, as Vice President, stated recently about the judges is worth remembering—that some of them showed a tendency to exceed their briefs. He called a spade a spade. The Supreme Court is not the Oracle of Delphi. The Constitution has granted it a role, which is of protecting the Constitutional tenets, rule of law, and such matters.

Rahul Gandhi had made statements in 2002 and a few days ago, saying India lost some 2,000/4,000 sq-km of territory to the Chinese in the 2022 fight. He had quoted sources, which were naturally from outside of the establishment; and he said Prime Minister Modi must give a reply. Later, the PM denied such loss of land. Both their statements were in order. Yet, it is natural that a defamation case reached up to the Supreme Court. The court may handle it in a fit manner. But dignity demands that judges respond to such situations in a dignified manner. The reputation of an august institution is at stake. At the same time, the statements of Rahul Gandhi and PM Modi, put together, confused the people as to who was right. That confusion continues. Notably, after the 1962 War, when Jawaharlal Nehru was the PM, China was reported to have grabbed Indian land measuring 38,000 sq-km from India's Aksai Chin region. Nehru's explanation that those were barren lands; where no grass grew, had been taken with a pinch of salt. Loss of land is a serious matter, be it then or now. Unlike Nehru, it's natural for Modi to create a smoke-screen and avoid speaking the truth. The claim, as part of the petition, that the morale of the jawans was hurt or affected by such statements about the losses, may have a grain of truth. Yet, in a democracy, people have the right to know what has happened. Neither the military nor courts need to project themselves as sacred cows.

Sex and our teenagers

By Toki Blah

Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, imagine they are in love. They already feel themselves to be adults though both are still in senior school. They enjoy being together by themselves. The physical contacts between the two, bring in thrills they never knew existed before. Both are curious about sex. Since no one has ever tried explaining it to them before, they begin experimenting with it themselves. They experiment with the sexual emotions that begin to surge through their young teenage bodies. It feels great. They feel like adults but they are quite sure of themselves and what they are doing. The two feel they know everything that they need to know about life. If this is the world of adults then they want more of it. Then one day the girl misses her menstrual period. They talk about it between themselves and decide its nothing to worry about.

Life continues to flow by on magic wings. The following month the menstrual cycle of the girl refuses to oblige. Worry begins to set in but they have no one to turn to for advice. By the 3rd month things have not improved and panic sets in! What to do? Where to turn for help? Friends perhaps, but these run away in greater panic and confusion. Teachers? Parents? No way! The boy begins to avoid the girl. The girl on her part, bereft of all help turns to God for help. Frantic church attendance and prayers begin. Only God can deliver her from what she now believes is sin. But to no avail and her pregnancy begins to show. The boy, her lover has disappeared! She has been abandoned! She is on her own! One can only imagine the terror, the trauma and the confusion her young mind has to undergo while trying to come to terms with something she was never prepared for.

So what happens next? She had to confess to her parents, who by the way were daily wage earners with 5 children of their own to feed. Just ensuring rice in the kitchen everyday was an ordeal and now this? The girl drops school to help in looking after her other siblings as she tries to manage her own confinement. Prenatal care involving medical checkups and advice during pregnancy, was too expensive. The parents just didn't have the

financial resources for such luxury. So the girl's illiterate mother stepped in as obstetrician—gynecologist and as the midwife when the time of delivery arrived. So this teenage girl, yet to attain adulthood, with no education or skills for survival, enters the scene, as a single mother with no backup support system. She is on her own! She and her baby now have, by hook or by crook, to survive in this wide, cold uncaring world.

The reader is entitled to ask "Where is this child-mother? Please tell us so that we can help!" Well this story is not about an individual. Its about what is happening to a generation. To our children and grandchildren. Its happening to thousands of our young boys and girls. This sudden jump from childhood to parenthood is occurring all around us, in both the rural and urban set-ups. You come across haunted looking girl-mothers with a baby on their back, totally unprepared for the burden they carry, almost everywhere you turn. Salil Gewali in his July 23, ST article "Story of A woman and her Child" gave us a detailed, horrifying peek into the horrors of single motherhood. Do read it.

The question here is, "What do we, as a society do about it?" If we are prepared to face the truth, then as a society we have to accept we have simply done nothing about it. Annually, thousands of youngsters, like the two mentioned above, simply disappear into the cracks of society. Forgotten, ignored and abandoned. Instead of being assets of society, they simply add to the dismal rising graph of poverty. We, especially the Khasi-Pnars, pretend its not happening or if its happening then just sweep it under the carpet and it will take care of itself! Well sad fact is it won't. It's not only a social stigma but a social threat that the Jaitbynriew just cannot afford to shrug off any longer. Then to add to our sorrows another sex related threat is looming or has already set in. The Health Department has set off the alarm that this year there are more than 400 AIDs affected babies born in the state. Such is the seriousness of the matter that the Government is seriously considering making HIV/AIDs tests manda-

tory before official marriages. And rightly so! AIDs has the history of wiping out entire communities in Africa. Can a tiny miniscule tribal community like ours take a chance on this deadly virus? I guess not.

The intention of the Government here is welcome but what about live-in couples or teenagers practicing unprotected sex? Can we as a society afford to continue pretending that these things are not happening? This is not a call for stigmatizing anybody. Instead it is a call for Khasi Pnar society to start seriously thinking about an issue that holds such a threat to our very survival as a community.

Its now very clear that we just can't allow uninformed children experimenting with sex. Its too, too dangerous! Not only for them but for society as a whole. So is Sex Education, at the family level or school level, the answer to our anxieties? Many recoil from the idea and the reason for this is not far to seek. In the Khasi-Pnar dialect we have no biological terminology or specialized vocabulary for sexual organs. The words we tag our sexual organs or the sex act itself are also used as curse words with obscene overtones. Words we hesitate or shy away from using in polite conversations let alone express in front of our children or young ones. The main reason perhaps for Khasi society to oppose the introduction of Sex Education in the classroom. The main reason that it prevents parents from discussing and preparing their adolescent wards about adulthood.

Sermons in Khasi also prevent the Church perhaps from taking the bull by the horns. The best the pulpit has so far pronounced is that "premarital sex is a sin". Youngsters out of sheer curiosity then turn to social media for better graphic demonstration on the subject, and there's nothing you can do about it. However, trouble with social media is that while it vividly and unabashedly demonstrates the sex act it does not teach about the consequences, the end result and the responsibilities that can arise. It is here that teenage experiments with sex usually stumble and falter and ultimately lead to the

unfortunate outcomes mentioned above. Taken however from a different perspective, it is this aspect perhaps that can provide us with the answers we seek.

Now if society is not prepared for Sex Education at the school level, there's little sense in pushing for it. We will encounter only a brick wall. However I tend to believe that no one will oppose a strong push to create awareness on the consequences and responsibility that early pregnancies and teenage parenthood are likely to cause. Teenage pregnancies and abandoned single mothers are fast becoming social liabilities that to consider it a taboo to speak about them is not only shirking social responsibility but a sin against the child itself. Teenagers however will continue to be curious about sex. Can't stop that. What they need is to be aware of where to draw the line. Well if teaching the curious about sex is not acceptable can we get round the problem in another way? How about counseling the sexually curious teenager? Now counseling or "Ban sneng ban kraw" is genetically wired into our blood as Khasis. As elders we counsel by making them aware about the consequences and responsibilities that come if a red line in sex is crossed. It's a culturally comfortable learning platform for both the counselor and the counselled.

Our youth are not dumb. By class nine or ten they would already have formed a nucleus of an idea of what they want out of life and what they want to be. Being poor, unemployed, needy, destitute and single mothers is definitely not part of that design. Pointing therefore to the negative impact unplanned parenthood will have on their plans can help them keep within the red line mentioned above. This perhaps is the role which parents, teachers and the pulpit can actively take part without resorting to usage of uncomfortable words and expressions. Lets keep in mind that "Prevention is always better than cure". Counseling will simply consist of wise elders passing on wisdom to a younger generation. Culturally acceptable and its our duty as elders to prevent our future generations from disappearing into the unforgiving cracks of modern society.

Is Bangladesh today caught between identities?

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

One year can hardly be long enough to define a nation's history. However, in the past one year since nationwide protests compelled former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee from Dhaka, Bangladesh has been torn asunder to a point where it is difficult to recognise not only what it has become, but to even wonder why the country ever came into being and separated from Pakistan 54 years ago.

The basic hypothesis behind the inception and birth of Bangladesh, beginning in 1952, was language and, by extension, its unique Bengali cultural identity. The 1952 language riots happened less than five years after the partition of the subcontinent of India into the countries India and Pakistan. Islam was, and certainly is, an inherent part of that identity, but the defining feature of the identity that the people sought was cultural, defined by the language they spoke. It was also the first significant rift in the "two-nation" theory which led to Partition.

The people of erstwhile East Pakistan chose Bengali and not Urdu as their language, their basic identity. The United Nations opted to honour the struggle for linguistic identity of the people of what is now Bangladesh by designating February 21 (when, in 1952, people were killed in Dhaka for protesting against the imposition of Urdu) as International Mother Language Day.

That is why, since the

current Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) head Khaleda Zia, as the man who brought about the independence of Bangladesh as precious as best. The history of the birth of Bangladesh is too recent and too well-documented to merit much manipulation.

However allegedly repressive Hasina's rule may have been, it remains a fact that she ensured that the country emerged from the depths of poverty and became a viable economic entity, in which the participation of women and vital social indicators like maternal and infant mortality reached impressive levels. The global Covid pandemic hit the Bangladesh economy, like most other global emerging economies, very hard, leading to unemployment and economic problems. Hasina's harsh handling of the popular protests as economic problems compounded made her unpopular. Further repression instead of sensitive handling of the crisis spiralled to a point where she could not remain.

Equally undeniable, despite the barrage of criticism that has come in India's direction since Hasina fled Dhaka, is the fact that India was instrumental in providing the necessary support and sustenance, including with the lives of its many soldiers, for the creation of Bangladesh.

When the Bangladesh interim administration, headed

"The people of erstwhile East Pakistan chose Bengali and not Urdu as their language, their basic identity. The United Nations opted to honour the struggle for linguistic identity of the people of what is now Bangladesh by designating February 21 (when, in 1952, people were killed in Dhaka for protesting against the imposition of Urdu) as International Mother Language Day."

widespread agitation to remove Premier Hasina gathered momentum last year, leading to her physical removal from office on August 5, 2024, it remains unclear why icons associated with the Bengali language have been razed there. The recent attacks on the ancestral homes of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, who are Indian but are also both global icons of Bengali culture, indicate considerable confusion in the thinking that is guiding Bangladesh policy since Hasina fled Dhaka. Has Islam and the Islamic identity subsumed the Bengali identity and culture of Bangladesh?

Many of the focal points of popular anger immediately after Hasina fled were related to India: Hindu temples, the Indian cultural centre; that was understandable, because India became identified with the enemy which had not only helped Hasina perpetuate her rule, but also the country where she had sought and received shelter. But breaking busts of Tagore, a global icon of Bengali literature whose lyrics adorn the national anthem of Bangladesh?

As the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal frames charges against Hasina and seeks to punish her with death for her crime of killing hundreds of those, including students, who protested against her regime, what remains inexplicable is the razing of the home and statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the man whose role was both central in and crucial to the idea and creation of Bangladesh. His picture has been removed from Bangladeshi currency, to ensure that people are not reminded of the man daily.

That his daughter is Hasina cannot, however, detract from or deny the seminal role that Rahman played in the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign country. Efforts to portray Maj Gen Ziaur Rahman, the late husband of

Chief Advisor Mohammed Yunus, attempted to woo Pakistan back into the country, with trade and strategic linkages, it appeared that was the intent. The effort to keep the Hindu-majoritarian government of India out appeared popular, but has provided no economic relief. Nobel Laureate Yunus caretaker government, while trying to navigate a very narrow path as it struggles to move forward and remain a democracy, has realised that it can't afford to antagonise its biggest neighbour.

After months of antagonism aimed against India as he struggled to restore law and order and contend with challenges of a stagnant economy, Yunus appointed Riaz Hamidullah as High Commissioner to India, restoring top level diplomatic relations. Recently, taking a leaf from the deposed Premier Hasina's book, Yunus embarked upon what could be dubbed "mango diplomacy" to offer a hand of friendship by sending the famed 'Haribhanga' mangoes to the Indian leadership, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Elections are tentatively scheduled by mid-2026, Yunus has claimed. It is perhaps the only way to resolve myriad contending claimants to power. Civil society remains a very strong factor in Bangladesh, and is a potent force for preservation of democracy.

However, before elections can augur a stable result, the people of Bangladesh have to decide which identity they seek to espouse; for the Bengali one, linkages with India will, perforce, be necessary. If, however, the Islamic identity is what Bangladesh seeks to project for itself, the people will have to seriously wonder why they needed to separate from Islamic Pakistan. The verdict is pending.

(The writer is a senior journalist)

Letters to the Editor

Is the Meghalaya Government Truly Committed to Youth Development?

Editor,
A closer look at the Junior Rural Development Officer (JRDO) recruitment reveals several anomalies. Government of Meghalaya often portrays itself as a champion of youth empowerment, investing significant resources in various youth development initiatives. But recent events surrounding the recruitment process for JRDO positions have raised troubling questions: Is this commitment genuine, or merely for show? How much longer must young people be taken for granted? This wave of frustration and disappointment emerged in response to the recent exam conducted by the Community and Rural Development Recruitment Board. To understand the root of this discontent, it is important to examine the context and timeline of the JRDO recruitment process.

Timeline of Key Events:
August 26, 2019: The Department of Community and Rural Development issued a notification for recruitment to 28 Junior Rural Development Officer (JRDO) vacancies.
July 27, 2022: These 28 positions were filled under "3(f)" provisions which is temporary or ad-hoc appointments under Rule 3(f) of the Meghalaya Service Rules following interviews conducted in March 2022.
November 5, 2024: The

government approved the creation of the Meghalaya Rural Development Services Recruitment Board (MRDSRB). Shortly after, the board announced recruitment for 35 JRDO vacancies but this time for permanent posts rather than temporary appointments.

March 29, 2025: The preliminary exam, comprising 100 multiple-choice questions (MCQs), was held. April 21, 2025: The answer key was released, revealing a highly unusual pattern: over half of the correct answers were option 'B'.

Specifically, 11 questions used 'B' as their answer which is an odd distribution that raises questions about the exam's fairness and design. Normally, MCQ options should be randomized to avoid any such patterns that candidates could exploit.

July 30-August 1, 2025: Interviews were conducted, and the final results released on August 1st showed a startling overlap with the 2022 batch where 25 of the 35 selected candidates were the same individuals appointed under the earlier temporary 3(f) posts.

Why This Matters: Transparency and Fairness in Public Recruitment Such a significant overlap raises legitimate concerns. Was this recruitment process truly competitive and transparent, or was it simply a formality designed to regularize the earlier ad-hoc appointments? If the goal was to ensure fairness and provide fresh opportunities for aspiring youth, how did this come to resemble a predetermined outcome? Recruitment boards like MRDSRB

are expected to uphold high standards of impartiality and transparency. The peculiar answer pattern in the preliminary exam and the near-identical final selection undermines confidence in the process. Was the recruitment board merely a rubber stamp, created to legitimize past appointments without genuine competition?

Furthermore, these uncertainties damage the morale of countless young aspirants across Meghalaya who dedicate years preparing for competitive exams, hoping for a level playing field. The state's poor track record in producing successful candidates in national-level exams like the UPSC only exacerbates these frustrations. How can motivation thrive in an environment where even state-level recruitment is questioned?

A Call for Accountability and Fairness This letter does not seek to assign blame but to raise essential questions and concerns shared by many hopeful candidates. We urge the government to: Ensure complete transparency in recruitment processes. Provide clear explanations regarding unusual patterns in examination papers. Engage independent bodies, such as the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC), to conduct future recruitment to guarantee fairness. Restore the trust and confidence of the youth, who are the backbone of Meghalaya's future.

If the government is truly "Pro Youth," it must demonstrate this through actions that are beyond reproach, not just announcements or symbolic initiatives. Fair recruitment processes are

fundamental to empowering young people and building a stronger, more equitable Meghalaya.

If Meghalaya truly aims to empower its youth, it must foster recruitment practices that inspire trust rather than suspicion. Only through transparent, equitable exams can we motivate young aspirants, honour their dedication, and secure a brighter future for the state.

Yours etc.,
I Pakyntein,
Via email

Need for Balanced Mobile Phone Policy in Schools

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to express my concern regarding the strict ban on mobile phones in many schools, including those in Shillong. In the year 2025, such a policy seems regressive and unfair, especially considering the growing importance of connectivity and safety in a student's life.

Many students travel long distances to attend school. For them, carrying a mobile phone is not a luxury but a necessity—crucial for location sharing, contacting parents, or dealing with emergencies. Denying them the right to carry a mobile phone after school hours can pose genuine safety risks.

Recently, the Delhi High Court passed a judgment emphasizing that schools should not entirely ban students from carrying mobile phones. Instead, it advised that schools create secure facilities to store phones during

class hours and incorporate education on the responsible use of technology. Such a balanced approach respects both discipline and the realities of today's world.

It is time for educational institutions in Shillong and elsewhere to take note of this progressive judgment. Schools can and should enforce rules on phone usage during school hours, including fines or disciplinary action for misuse. However, an outright ban on carrying mobile phones is not the solution. It ignores the evolving needs of students and fails to reflect the digital age we live in.

In conclusion, school policies must align with the times—focusing on student growth, safety, and responsibility rather than outdated notions of discipline. Denying students access to basic tools of communication after school hours could potentially endanger them and limit their development in a technology-driven world.

Yours etc.,
Roney Lyndem
(Counsellor),
Via email

India's economy far from dead

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Young 'dead' economy" (ST, August 4 2025), Donald Trump often uses provocative language to push a narrative or apply pressure. Calling economies "dead" may be aimed at delegitimizing partnerships or trade alliances that contradict his policy goals. A spotlight on how India's current economic

trajectory diverges from the "dead economy" narrative. India's economic pulse vs. dystopian narratives

Indicator	Current Status (2025)	Global Benchmark	Key Challenges
GDP Growth	~8.5% (2024-25)	~3.5% (Global Avg)	High inflation (6.5%)
Unemployment	~7.5%	~5.5%	Structural issues in rural areas
Inflation	~6.5%	~3.5%	Supply chain disruptions
FDI Inflow	~\$100 billion	~\$150 billion	Geopolitical tensions
Export Growth	~10%	~5%	Global trade uncertainty
Government Debt	~90% of GDP	~60%	High interest rates
Renewable Energy	~15% of total	~10%	Policy inconsistency
Infrastructure	Significant investment	Global leader	Quality control issues
Human Capital	Improving literacy	Global leader	Skills mismatch
Healthcare	Improving access	Global leader	Quality of care
Environment	Significant investment	Global leader	Policy inconsistency

As an Opposition member Rahul Gandhi may critique what Trump says but a reality check shows that India's economy is far from "dead." In fact, it is one of the fastest-growing major economies globally, though challenges like high tariffs, MSME stress and geo-political friction do exist.

German Ambassador Philipp Ackermann challenged Donald Trump's description of India's economy as "dead" but described India as "a market of now and the future." He emphasised the need for "stability and predictability" in international relations and trade.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

"Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work."

—Aristotle

The Shillong Times

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Cabinet Reshuffle Imperative

THE MDA Government has completed 2 years and 5 months in office. The public expects a rejig where ministers who have not performed well in their respective departments would have to cede space for others to replace them. After all, a government is not about individuals holding power but of using that power and authority to make peoples' lives better through a more empathetic governance system where peoples' needs are addressed and those farthest from the seat of government in Shillong can feel its impacts. If corporates use key performance indicators (KPI) to measure the efficacy of their workers especially at the higher levels where performance is linked to profits why cannot the same yardstick be adopted by governments? Considering that every government will either be voted back to power or voted out depending on its ministers' performance it is even more crucial that some yardstick for efficiency measurement is adopted.

The MDA-02 government in its second term has taken several decisions in key sectors such as entrepreneurship among young risk-takers, in various sectors, the CM Connect programme etc., there are departments that need course correction. The Environment and Forest Department is sluggish and almost blind to the destruction caused to the environment. Even the Public Works Department is a slow-moving coach where projects have longer gestation periods apart from the quality of roads remaining decrepit. The Education Department has been in the eye of the storm with several unresolved issues that need a firm handling instead of blasé statements from the minister. The Public Health Engineering Department needs to be held to account since the Jal Jeevan Mission programme has seen only pipes being laid with no water flowing through them even in peri-urban localities like Laitkor etc.

Governance in Meghalaya is Shillong-centric while the villages continue to labour under a system that barely addresses their needs. That after 50 years of statehood Meghalaya should be having schools where classes cannot be held when there's heavy rainfall because rainwater enters the classroom is a shocking reality. It shows that MLAs representing those constituencies don't care because they don't speak about such lapses in the Assembly. If education was a priority for our elected representatives they would have laboured at length on the poor educational infrastructure during the Assembly sessions but that is not heard. That is because these MLAs don't know what's ailing the education system in their constituencies. True that the majority of MLAs from the Garo Hills are from the ruling party - the NPP and are therefore bound by their party rules not to raise such embarrassing issues in the Assembly. But unless the Chief Minister removes poor performers and brings in new faces who could deliver better, then the state is doomed to be governed by inefficient ministers whose pre-occupation is to better their own prospects even while the governed slip down the poverty line. Considering that poverty is real and 'in your face' in Meghalaya, the Chief Minister ought to have a minister in charge of Poverty Alleviation. Let's see what policies this minister will come up with.

National Games: Scant Training Facilities & the Future of Sports in Meghalaya

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Meghalaya is gearing up to host the 39th National Games in 2027. Certainly, the National Games will bring along a whole package of development in sports infra and development in the State, especially in centres where the games are going to be held. Of late, the Chief Minister has personally taken great interest in key areas like sports, arts and entrepreneurship for the development of the youths. While his efforts are widely appreciated, what is happening on the ground and the lived experiences tell a different story.

Ambitious Meghalaya: Meghalaya has expressed its readiness to host the 39th National Games in 2027. The Chief Minister himself had briefed the President of Indian Olympic Association on the state's preparedness. Recently, the government sanctioned the first phase of grant-in-aid of ₹39.17 crore to 26 sports associations to support their preparations. The state's athletes are optimistic, hoping the Games will boost sports development and create brighter futures.

However, the total government investment in athletes remains unclear, and so far, no corporate sponsorships have been secured. Is the grant provided by the government sufficient to produce medal winners? In the discipline of badminton, it is well-known that achieving national or international success often requires significant investment, often around one crore rupees per shuttler for personalized training and development. How do we expect our shuttlers to compete with the likes of P.V. Sindhu or Ashwini Ponnappa, who have incurred expenses exceeding one crore for their training?

Furthermore, hosting a badminton tournament with over 150 players would cost approximately ₹5-8 lakh. This amount covers only professional technical support and basic awards for winners and runners-up.

Scant Training Facility Leads to Disruption: As of today, Meghalaya has scant training facilities for various sports disciplines. Even Shillong has minimal facilities, leave alone the state of the art, for athletes to train or prepare for any regional or national championships. They would have to be content with whatever is available and the ones that they have access to are in bad shape and not conducive for professional trainings. The lack of sports infrastructures has also led to disruption of

one sports event by another, like it had happened recently in Shillong, when the Badminton Promotional Tournament held from 24-26 July 2025 was disrupted by the match cum opening ceremony of the 134th Durand Cup 2025, as both these events were held within the premises of J. N Sports Complex.

The disruption was un-called for and one fails to understand as to why both events cannot be held simultaneously, without disruption? No one is contesting the fact that football is the most popular sport in the State and is considered as the priority sport discipline. Its history dates back to 1891 when the Bengali community first founded the Shillong Town Club to be followed by the establishment of the first Khasi Club known as the Christian Athletic Club or C.A.C, which was formed with the patronage of some British Missionaries in the last part of the 19th Century. This City had produced the first batch of prominent Khasi football players like Jogendro Roy, Wilson Reade, Raju Giri, Willief Lewis, Rihin Singh, Hamuin Roy and Dr Brojogendro Diengdoh.

At the same time, Badminton is ingrained in the culture of Meghalaya, particularly in places like Shillong and Jowai. However, Tura has also emerged as the new hub for badminton and shuttlers like Sixthirth M Marak and others, are potential medal winners. Badminton is not merely a pastime game, but a significant sport discipline in the State. If one peruses Meghalaya's State Sports Policy 2019 will find Badminton as one Sport discipline recognised by the State for nurturing and development.

It is important to draw the attention of the concerned authorities and other sports enthusiasts, to the incident which had caused disruption to the Badminton Promotional Tournament held from 24 to 26 July 2025 at JN Indoor Sports Complex, Polo Shillong. This tournament was organized by the Badminton Promotional Group, Shillong, with the sole objective to provide more platforms for budding shuttlers (as young as 7 years) of the State and also to facilitate training to enhance their skills.

The tournament attracted a large number of participants from across the State, with shuttlers coming from as far as Garo Hills and South West Khasi Hills to compete.

The event officially kick-started on the morning of 24 July with a simple inauguration and was scheduled to conclude with the closing ceremony on 26 July. Unfortunately, on the night of 25 July, the organizing committee received a directive from the Directorate of Sports and Youth Affairs. The letter instructed, the organizers to conclude all matches and vacate the premises by 12:30 PM sharp on the 26 July, citing the need for preparations for the opening ceremony of the 134th Durand Cup, which is to be held in Shillong and commence at 1 PM.

The above order is a direct response to the letter the Organizers of the Badminton Promotional Tournament had written to the District Administration East Khasi Hills, not only to prevent any disruptions but also to inform and offer cooperation in order to avoid interference with the preparations and the grand opening of the Durand Cup 2025. Despite offering cooperation and timely suggestions to resolve any issues, the sports authority decided to issue an order that was, in effect, impossible to fulfill. The Badminton Promotional Tournament was conducted with a high level of professionalism and here are some statistical facts that explain why it is not feasible to conclude all matches by 12:30 PM on Saturday, 26 July.

The tournament received an overwhelming response from both budding shuttlers and senior players. A total of 229 participants, 276 entries, 256 matches and 20 events were conducted. According to the schedule, approximately 18 semi-final matches and 20 final matches are to be played on Saturday, 26 July. Based on records provided by the match controller, the average duration of each match ranges between 22 to 25 minutes. Therefore, the semi-final and final matches alone would require approximately 8 to 10 hours to complete. Even if we start the semi-final matches at 6 AM, it would still be impossible to finish all final matches by 12:30 PM as directed. The directive was therefore unreasonable, causing unnecessary disruption, stress and anxiety among the organizers and participants. Many participants who travelled from distant locations had to remain an extra day to wait for the finals, which were ultimately held on Sunday, 27 July 2025.

The reference to the above incident is not maliciously

made or to cast aspersion on the Directorate of Sports or any individual. However, it aims to foster better cooperation and to reduce conflict and disruption in the future. It is important not to undermine the efforts of individual citizens whose love for sports has yielded positive results across various disciplines. Indeed, Shillong faces a shortage of space and sports infrastructure, but space constraints should not cause disruption or discouragement, especially to athletes.

The Scintillating Finals on Sunday: Due to ultra-religious conservatism and orthodox beliefs, organizing a non-religious, particularly non-Christian, event on a Sunday in Shillong is very challenging. As a result, the organizing committee faced considerable stress while deciding to conclude the finals of the Badminton Promotional Tournament on a Sunday and to convince that it is neither sinful nor immoral to hold the finals on a Sunday.

With no other viable option, the organizers decided to defer the finals to Sunday, 27th July 2025, with special permission from the State Sports Council. Consequently, we witnessed the scintillating final matches across almost every event, showcasing the prowess, endurance and skill that the State's shuttlers have developed so far. Although these players have yet to reach the national standard, they certainly possess significant potential.

The Dream for 50 Medals: Meghalaya is setting a target of winning 50 medals at the National Games 2027. This is daunting, but there are talented athletes who can be groomed to attain medals and accolades for the State. However, there are also other reasons known to various sports associations but not publicly disclosed, that could prevent Meghalaya from reaching this target or result in a blank medal tally.

Given the limited time of two years, how much investment can Meghalaya realistically make to prepare its athletes to become medal winners? Additionally, what amount can the state afford to invest in providing athletes across different sports disciplines with state-of-the-art training facilities?

While Meghalaya stands to gain immensely from hosting the National Games in terms of sports infrastructure development and fostering a new sports culture, sustaining and maintaining these infrastructures will pose significant challenges.

Sohra at the Crossroads: A Paradise Struggling Under the Weight of Its Own Popularity

By Shemphang H Phanhuh

For generations, Sohra—renowned for its lush cliffs, living root bridges, roaring waterfalls, and ethereal mist—has stood as a symbol of Meghalaya's natural glory. It is not merely a location on the map but a place of deep cultural memory and environmental sanctity. We, the people of Sohra, have always held our land in reverence. But today, that reverence is being tested—not by time, but by unchecked tourism and the silent but growing threat it brings: waste.

In recent years, the Government of Meghalaya has rightly identified tourism as a potential engine of economic growth, investing crores of rupees to improve infrastructure and promote destinations like Sohra to national and international audiences. These efforts have succeeded. Sohra now sees thousands of tourists every week—many of them drawn by its breathtaking beauty, unique climate, and warm hospitality.

But beauty without balance can become a burden. As tourism increases, so does the waste left behind—a crisis growing quietly but dangerously. From plastic bottles and food wrappers to packaging and disposable utensils, the very landscapes

agement plan tailored specifically for tourist destinations like Sohra. This includes: Mandatory waste segregation at homestays and restaurants.

Regular and systematic waste collection in all localities and tourist zones, managed by local shnong authorities in coordination with government departments.

Recycling units for plastic, glass, and compostable waste.

Strict enforcement of fines for littering.

Awareness campaigns for both tourists and locals.

If crores can be spent on roads, viewpoints, and tourist accommodations, then surely a portion can be invested in basic recycling infrastructure. Small-scale plastic recycling units, shredders, and waste processing centers can be installed in key locations. These are not just machines—they are investments in long-term sustainability. Tourism without waste management is not development; it is negligence disguised as progress.

Let us not forget: even household waste alone is already a challenge in Sohra. Many shnong struggle to find space and resources just to manage the daily garbage



that attract tourists are now becoming contaminated by their careless disposal practices. The cliffs remain majestic, but now with plastic clinging to their edges. The footpaths through our sacred groves now often carry not just pilgrims and trekkers, but trails of litter.

What is particularly alarming is that while the number of homestays, cafés, and small businesses has grown rapidly—bringing in welcome income for local families—there has been no proportional growth in waste management infrastructure. Most of these establishments produce waste daily, and with no structured system to segregate, collect, or recycle it, the problem has been quietly pushed out of sight: into nearby forests, down streams, or into shallow pits behind homes.

This is not sustainable. And it is certainly not safe—for our environment, for our health, or for the future of tourism itself.

If we focus only on promoting tourism without preparing to manage its consequences—especially the problem of waste—then we are not building progress; we are inviting collapse. We must understand that promoting tourism is not just about attracting visitors, but also about protecting what they come to see.

If we continue down this path, we will be remembered not as caretakers of a paradise, but as the generation that allowed it to decline in the name of short-term profit.

As a community, we must ask hard questions. Are we building without planning? Are we welcoming tourists without preparing for their impact? Are we chasing income while ignoring responsibility? The time has come for Sohra to choose: do we continue to promote tourism blindly, or do we first build systems that ensure its sustainability?

To begin with, we need a comprehensive waste man-

agement plan tailored specifically for tourist destinations like Sohra. This includes: Mandatory waste segregation at homestays and restaurants. Regular and systematic waste collection in all localities and tourist zones, managed by local shnong authorities in coordination with government departments. Recycling units for plastic, glass, and compostable waste. Strict enforcement of fines for littering. Awareness campaigns for both tourists and locals. If crores can be spent on roads, viewpoints, and tourist accommodations, then surely a portion can be invested in basic recycling infrastructure. Small-scale plastic recycling units, shredders, and waste processing centers can be installed in key locations. These are not just machines—they are investments in long-term sustainability. Tourism without waste management is not development; it is negligence disguised as progress. Let us not forget: even household waste alone is already a challenge in Sohra. Many shnong struggle to find space and resources just to manage the daily garbage

from local residents. So what happens when thousands of tourists arrive every week, each contributing more waste—plastic wrappers, bottles, food packaging—without any accountability or system in place to handle it? The truth is, most of this tourist waste is not even considered in official planning or local coordination. We are trying to solve a local problem, while ignoring a national-scale footprint that keeps growing each season. If the waste from 500 households is overwhelming, how can we justify ignoring the waste from 5,000 visitors?

Our focus must shift from merely attracting tourists to managing tourism wisely. That means investing in systems that ensure waste is reduced, reused, and recycled—not dumped into forests or rivers. Additionally, every homestay, lodge, or café should be held accountable for the waste it generates. Tour operators must be briefed on responsible tourism practices. Tourists must be educated—through signage, guides, and digital platforms—about the importance of preserving the very land they have come to admire.

But this is not a fight for the government alone. We, the people of Sohra, must lead. Let us not just be hosts—we must be stewards. Every plastic bottle we pick up, every tourist we educate, every child we teach about recycling—is a step toward reclaiming our dignity as guardians of one of nature's finest gifts.

Let us remember: Sohra is not just a tourist spot. It is our home, our heritage, and our responsibility.

We stand at the crossroads. One road leads to short-term gain and long-term damage. The other demands responsibility, but promises resilience and renewal.

Let us choose wisely. Let us choose Sohra.

Letters to the Editor

Back to turning roads into parking lots!

Editor, Thanks to the brilliant decision of the state government's think tank, the days of roadside extortion and chaotic parking will soon return to Shillong, but in a legalised form. This statement is borne out by past experience. In the earlier decades, a significant number of multi-storied parking lots were constructed by the Urban Affairs Department with the objective of clearing the narrow roads of Shillong of the menace of on-street parking and its accompanying problems. This was done after a lot of thought and study. Now, with a stroke of the pen of a brilliant strategist, the entire policy is changed. Parking lots are being converted to hawkers' markets, and roads are becoming parking lots. We will soon be back to the days of restricted road widths and everyday arguments and fights with the parking fee collectors. In no time, the roads of Shillong will be a free-for-all scene with all localities coming up with their own rules on roadside parking and parking fees and vagabonds and miscreants turning into fee collectors. Is the Government so des-

perate for money that roads, which are meant for the movement of vehicles, are being converted into parking spaces? After all, every day we hear of hundreds of crores being sanctioned for this project or that by the Government of Meghalaya, so why this decision now? If this decision is a part of the Traffic Policy, then the Policy is wrong and needs to be reviewed. In all probability, this Policy must have been drawn up by some outstanding expert. After all, we are a consultant/expert-run state, and people are dumb.

The strategy should have been to create more off-street parking facilities and free the road of street parking, allowing for free and smooth movement of vehicles. While we talk of decongesting Shillong on one hand, on the other hand, we continue to reconstruct new office buildings without a care about where the vehicles will park. The area around the Third Secretariat is a clear example. It is sad that we do not learn from past experiences, or is it that people making such decisions now were not around to experience what had happened before?

Anyway, things happening around reminds of the song Que sera sera, whatever will be will be, the future is not ours to see.

Yours etc., B.Dutta Shillong 1

Trolling Hurts: Message from a Local Artist

Editor Artists have always faced criticism, but in today's world, it has turned into something much worse trolling. Whether you are a singer, dancer, or actor, people on social media now feel free to say anything without thinking about how it affects us. This has caused many artists to feel depressed, anxious, and even led some to take their own lives. Most people think trolling only happens to big stars from Bollywood or TV, but that's not true. It is now happening in our own city Shillong. Sadly, I experienced this myself. One night around 2:00 a.m., I was checking my phone when I saw a comment on my YouTube channel. It was in Khasi and said: "Chi! Ym ler re rwai tang jingwai Dkhar. Balei joh Kmie Kpa Dkhar ne?" ("Chi! It's not good that you only sing Bollywood songs. Are your parents not Khasi?") Another person wrote: "You are a shame to our Khasi Jaitbynriew (community)." Then someone messaged me directly saying: "Who will pay money to some idiot like you for your singing?" There were many more comments, some too vulgar and rude to even repeat.

As an artist, it was painful. I sing because I love music. I don't believe music should be limited by language or community. But here I was, getting hate just because I sing Bollywood songs and not only Khasi songs. It makes me sad to see how some people have become so quick to judge and insult. In our society today, many feel they can say anything online without caring how it affects others. They forget that behind every artist, there is a human being with feelings.

Trolling is not just "fun" or "a joke." It can damage someone's mental health, self-confidence, and peace of mind. No artist deserves that. We cannot stop everyone from trolling, but we can create a system that protects artists. Here are some of my suggestions:

*A way to report online bullying more easily and take quick action.

*Mental health support for artists, especially young or upcoming ones.

*More respect and encouragement from society instead of hate.

I believe it's time for all artists singers, dancers, painters, and performers to stand together. We need to speak up against trolling and support one another. When we unite, we are stronger.

To my fellow artists, if you've ever been trolled or bullied, please know that you are not alone. Your work matters. Your voice matters. Don't let anyone make you feel small for following your passion. Let's create a society that lifts people up; not one that tears them down.

Yours etc., Evanisha Pathaw. (Singer/Poet). Via email

Why Meghalaya is stagnating

Editor This is with reference to Napoleon Mawphniang's article titled-The Great Distraction(ST August 4, 2025). This whining about the presence of outsiders and the constant harping on identity as impediments to the progress of Meghalaya has been an ongoing chorus for many decades. It is not a new phenomenon.

We fought for a separate state with the hope that our progress would be in leaps and bounds. It did not happen. Forty odd years ago we resorted to violence and 'outsiders' who remained here were hounded out of the state. We said we would now move ahead much faster once they are replaced by our own people. It did not happen.

Bah Mawphniang feels that the constant harping on identity, culture, tradition are

mere distractions and that we should concentrate on issues like corruption, governance, education, health care and so on and move ahead. I would like to stress that these issues have been thrashed out for years and years—every time a government changes - but there has been little improvement if at all. There are some good men at the helm but they are in the minority.

Personally, I think progress is impeded by the total lack of empathy. Once the elections are won and the lofty seats are occupied a huge chasm divides the elected and the electorate. It happens almost overnight and it's shameful. Suddenly, there is very little communication and a total lack of care and empathy. To add to this is the absence of love for and pride in one's jaitbynriew and the genuine desire to take it forward.

That is why the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are in this condition in every aspect. We must cultivate a sense of responsibility, of self-worth and accountability.

Yours etc., Bijoya Sawian, 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.

"Let your dreams outgrow the shoes
of your expectations."

— Ryunosuke Satoro

The Shillong Times

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End of India-US bonhomie

THERE, obviously, is pain on the face of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the US slapped a 50 per cent tariff through two executive orders on imports from India. Hints are that India, in return, has decided to hold back the \$3.78 billion defence contracts vis-à-vis planned acquisitions from the US. India, which had signed a deal with Russia to purchase oil at cheap rates by sidestepping the US sanctions against that country, is now caught in between the muscle-flexing by two superpowers. Clearly, the claims of the prime minister's diplomatic successes with the high and mighty on the global stage fell like a pack of cards. Diplomacy is more than a rubbing of shoulders, a smile, or the crack of a joke.

This adverse turn is bound to have serious implications for the Prime Minister at a time when there, reportedly, is loud thinking in the RSS about the continuation of Modi in this chair for a longer term. Modi's own prescription of an age bar for senior leaders has come back to haunt him at this precise hour. He's reaching the age-bar of 75 in September. The main claim to Modi's success as prime minister has been his eminent engagements with world leaders, including "friend" Trump. Yet, a closer scrutiny would show his diplomatic outreaches in the past have not produced desired results. Rather, they boomeranged on him — as in the case of his initial infatuation with China's Xi Jinping, who was among the first to be "courted" by Modi shortly after he became the prime minister in 2014. Hosting Xi in Modi's native Gujarat with pomp, and later in a seaside resort near Chennai, did little good to India. Xi moved on to do muscle-flexing via Doklam and later the Galwan Valley. Claims are that China under Xi annexed thousands of sq-km of Indian land. Modi denied this, but the issue is still under discussion. At another time, Modi had caught on to Trump and paraded him around in Gujarat. This too ended up in what looks like a "disaster" for India.

It is natural for the PM to now court Russia's Vladimir Putin, who is tied to Xi too in a friendship. At the same time, the PM is extending an olive branch to the Philippines with the South China Sea in the backdrop. Overall, Indian diplomacy led by the PM — and not the external affairs minister under the three Modi terms — seems to be going round and round. "Friends" are turning foes. Despite all efforts of Modi, the US continues to engage Islamabad both at the political and military levels and is extending them favours in a flurry. At a crucial hour during Operation Sindoor, when Pakistan had its face to the wall, it was the US President who announced a ceasefire and extricated the Islamic nation out of a terrible situation. An obedient response to Trump's call from India has left many questions unanswered even in Parliament.

Letters to the Editor

Urgent need for Trauma Centres along the Highway

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to highlight a tragic incident that underscores a critical gap in emergency trauma care infrastructure along the Guwahati-Shillong highway — a failure that cost a young man his life.

In the early hours of August 6, 2025, Mr. Arshad Hussain (33 years old) was involved in a deadly road accident near Umsning. He sustained multiple serious fractures and was in critical condition but alive and conscious after the incident.

He was taken to the Community Health Centre (CHC), Umsning, where he remained for a long time. While CHCs serve an important role in primary healthcare, including maternal and child health, they are not equipped to handle poly-trauma or critical emergencies. In such cases, immediate transfer to a specialized trauma facility is essential, especially within the "golden hour" — the first hour after trauma, which can be the difference between life and death.

Unfortunately, no such trauma referral or emergency evacuation occurred at that

moment. It was only after this prolonged delay that the family members managed to transport Arshad via ambulance towards Shillong. The delay was further compounded when Woodland Hospital refused to admit him, citing unavailability of beds — a deeply irresponsible act, considering that emergency trauma cases need stabilization first, not a bed assignment.

By the time Mr. Hussain finally reached Supercare Hospital around 5:20 AM, nearly 3 hours after the accident, he had already lost significant blood. Despite emergency interventions including CPR and medication, he was declared dead at 5:55 AM.

This was not simply a result of severe injuries; it was a failure of our emergency trauma response system. CHCs are not trauma centres, and they must not delay referral in critical cases. There is a lack of dedicated trauma infrastructure along this busy national highway.

Private hospitals must not turn away emergency patients without triage and stabilization. The Guwahati-Shillong highway sees high traffic volumes and frequent accidents, yet lacks functioning trauma centres from Byrnihat to Shillong. This is unacceptable.

Therefore, I urge the government and health authori-

Law, Lies, and Livelihood: The Fight for Street Vendors' Rights

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

In his latest article, "Restoring Public Space: A Love Letter to Law and Logic," (ST Aug 4, 2025) Lyzander Sohket has gone and done it again. He has lied again, which is incredible since I thought he would have learned his lesson from the first time around. Why he would do that, considering the fact that he should know by now that his lies would be caught again, is incredible. But that is personal proclivity, and it's up to the readers to judge for themselves what to make of such behaviour. I make no claims to being infallible. I have made plenty of mistakes but I am very careful not to misquote the facts, because in this day and age of information overload, getting the facts wrong is stupid.

The first lie is about the non-existent subsection 10 (1), claiming that the Act in question, i.e., Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, does not use numbered sub-sections, so the first paragraph should be considered as sub-section 1. The logic is astounding (i.e., false) and misleading, since the preceding section of the Act before the non-existent 10 (1) has two subsections, 9 (1) and 9 (2). So, the first lie. Then he claims that the 2025 judgement Malkit Singh vs State of UT Chandigarh has reiterated a previous observation on the case concerning Gurnam Kaur, arguing that while street vending is a protected livelihood, it is not an absolute right. This is again incredible, since the 2025 judgement does not mention Gurnam Kaur or make the observations he claims. In fact, it supported the right of the street vendors and refused to evict them. This is the second lie.

And now Lyzander has gone and lied for a third time. He did this in his last article, where he again quoted a passage from the Malkit Singh vs State of UT Chandigarh, distorting it to mislead. This is the passage in the article in which he has again tried to mislead the public — "I also find it amusing how Mawroh has tried to build his case around a recent judgment by the Punjab and Haryana High Court, only to cherry-pick lines that suit his argument. He quotes the Court's sympathy but skips the part where the case was dismissed for lacking legal basis. More inconveniently, he omits the fact that the Court imposed a Rs 50,000 fine on each petitioner for wasting judicial

time." So, he is accusing me of cherry-picking paragraphs from a judgment, which is ironic considering this whole discussion started with him doing the same with the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, where he cited a non-existent subsection, and then tried to defend it instead of accepting his mistake. The paragraphs I cited formed the core of the judgment, and the readers can check it for themselves. Like I said in the past, the judgment is only 14 pages long.

Then Lyzander talks about the court imposing a fine of Rs 50,000 on each petitioner for wasting judicial time. This is correct, but he appears to be suggesting that the fine was imposed on the street vendors. Otherwise, he would not have mentioned it. Again, readers, please go read the 2025 judgement Malkit Singh vs State of UT

The fine imposed on the two associations/Unions was then asked to be deposited for the welfare of street vendors and their families. The passage below is the original one from the judgment: The writ petition is, accordingly, dismissed with costs of Rs. 50,000 each on both the Unions to be deposited with the Municipal Corporation.

Chandigarh by yourself. The petitioners who brought the case were Manimajra Vyapar Mandal (traders' association) and the Residential Welfare Association, Manimajra (residents' association), and they wanted the Court to evict the hawkers, which it refused because it was against the law. The fine imposed on the two associations/Unions was then asked to be deposited for the welfare of street vendors and their families. The writ petition is, accordingly, dismissed with costs of Rs. 50,000 each on both the Unions to be deposited with the Municipal Corporation, U.T. Chandigarh, for the welfare of the street vendors and their families. It is not possible that Lyzander cannot read a simple sentence. He can, but being a pathological liar, he is again trying to mislead the people.

In my last article I had asked Lyzander the following questions: Have the TVC elections been held? Have all the certificates been given?

Aren't street vendors complaining that the authorities gave certificates to illegitimate vendors while ignoring legitimate ones? Are authorities evicting or relocating people without completing the due process in the Act? Some vendors agreed, but what concerns remain for those who did not, and has the government addressed these concerns according to the Act?

In his response, Lyzander agreed that there have been some irregularities where genuine hawkers have not been given licenses. For those who survive on what they can earn on a particular day, this is a big blow. I am distressed to think how they have managed to survive for all this time without being allowed to do business. Being poor is not a very pleasant thing, especially when you have a family to feed and expenses to take care of without the generational wealth. Lyzander ignored the

questions on whether the law has been followed in terms of the composition of the TVC or the relocation. Recently, this very same newspaper carried news of a hawker admitting that the relocation has resulted in loss of income for her. Is this not a violation of the law?

There are many other fallacies in Lyzander's article, but I will not go into those because it's a waste of time. He will then come back after a few weeks, having planned what to lie about next. The core issue is whether the law has been applied in letter and spirit. And since he has not found an opportunity to lie about them, he has conveniently decided to ignore those questions. I have come to realize that Lyzander will never answer questions where he cannot lie. Therefore, I am done with this discussion, and I am hoping that the High Court of Meghalaya will, in the end, do justice. If not, I hope the Supreme Court will. Till then, to the readers, I request: please go read the

articles on whether the law has been followed in terms of the composition of the TVC or the relocation. Recently, this very same newspaper carried news of a hawker admitting that the relocation has resulted in loss of income for her. Is this not a violation of the law?

Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 and the 2025 Malkit Singh vs State of UT Chandigarh judgment.

In my discussion with people who are against the hawkers, despite being reminded of the 2014 Act, they are adamant that even if the law exists it should not be implemented because the state is lily. This exceptionalism, however, does not work in relation to laws to which they agree with, for example, the regulation that non-indigenous non-tribal groups cannot own land in areas under the Sixth Schedule in Meghalaya despite the latter having lived in the state for almost two centuries. Here, they want the law to be implemented in letter and spirit.

I agree with the provisions under the Sixth Schedule because it is very crucial for ensuring the survival of our indigenous communities. The day we lose control of our land is the day we become a minority. Considering how we treat our own minorities, I don't want our people to be in that position. In the same way, livelihood is also a very important concern, and the 2014 Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act is also a very progressive law which I support. It protects the livelihood of the most vulnerable members of our society, while balancing the interests of the other stakeholders. That's why the law provides for a democratic and fair composition of the TVC (Town Vending Committee), which the Government has not implemented. Let's not forget that we are among the poorest states in the country and more than 70% of our people are landless. Even if we are so heartless and privileged-as to ignore the suffering of our brethren, at least let us not be hypocrites who pick and choose which law should be followed.

In the final analysis I would like to say this: those who are convinced that in relation to the hawkers, the law should not be followed, you are basically advocating for lawlessness. You are setting a precedent where people's privilege and bias should be above the law. Be careful what you wish for. Life has a nasty habit of making our wishes come true.

(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)

Urban Affairs is about. As citizens of Shillong; as prime stakeholders, we remain totally in the dark about what is happening to us. The city is sinking. Are we supposed to sink with it? We can ill afford to have such a man at the helm of Urban Affairs. The sooner he is replaced the better it will be for the Urban Department, Shillong and its citizens.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Parking lots a dire necessity

Editor,
I agree with what B. Dutta, parking lots are being converted to hawkers markets and roads are becoming parking lots, I think this idea should be scrapped because it's another burden/problem for the general public who needs some space for parking for a few hours to visit a doctor or to buy essentials or fetching their children from schools, but traffic police should restrict tourist vehicle and those vehicles registered outside our state to park for long periods of time.

Yours etc.,
Mathew Kharnaor,
Via email

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

When the watchdogs give up: Indian Media & Democracy

By KN Kumar

Democracy prospers when citizens are well-informed about their environment. Public and private media outlets, therefore, play a crucial role in highlighting important issues, questioning those in power, and fostering discussion and debate. However, in India, many media outlets have shifted from serving as watchdogs to supporting the government and corporate interests, sometimes diverting attention from real issues and spreading narratives that benefit the powerful. This article examines how India's media has lost its independence and why this endangers democracy.

This isn't about individual journalists failing but about a deeper structural issue. How media is owned, funded, and regulated creates incentives that encourage loyalty to powerful interests and discourage honest reporting. Major news outlets are owned by large conglomerates, and their business interests often rely on government contracts, which can result in conflicts of interest.

Additionally, government advertising budgets worth thousands of crores give the state leverage to reward friendly outlets and starve critical ones. This financial dependence leads to self-censorship, with media avoiding difficult stories either to survive in a competitive environment or to stay in favour. Data shows that government spending on advertisements across all media tends to peak during or before election years, especially for general elections (Lok Sabha) and, to a lesser extent, state assembly elections. This pattern is clear from increased expenditure in years like 2013-14 (before the 2014 general election) and 2018-19 (before the 2019 general election), driven by campaigns promoting government schemes and achievements. These can appear as veiled political propaganda—the line between public awareness and political promotion is very thin. The result is a public with less reliable information, shallow debates, and a democracy more vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. Of course, there are exceptions, and conscientious citizens value them, but they are few and increasingly rare.

Several connected factors have turned India's media into a propaganda tool:

(1) Major Indian media outlets are owned by large conglomerates like Reliance Industries (60-65 outlets), Times Group (10-15), Zee Entertainment (49), Sun TV Network (35-40), DB Corp (10-15), India Today (5-10), HT Media (5-10), Jagran (10-15), and Adani Group (NDTV and the Quint). Together, they control an estimated 500-1,000 influential media outlets across print, TV, digital, and radio, dominating India's media landscape. Smaller players such as ABP, Eenaadu, Mathrubhumi, and Malayala Manorama contribute to this concentration, often with family or political ties. Independent outlets like The Wire, The Print, Scroll, Caravan, and EPW exist but face significant obstacles—financial constraints, legal pressures, and limited reach—making true media independence rare.

India's low global press freedom ranking (161st in 2023) and the close links between corporate and political interests highlight the difficulty of maintaining unbiased journalism. However, this reflects a broader global pattern where a handful of corporations dominate media, such as the Big Six in the U.S. and News UK in the UK. The issues of corporate influence, political bias, and digital disruption are universal, though India's low press freedom ranking and regional political connections add unique complexities. India's situation is therefore not an anomaly but a clear example of global trends. Even so-called independent outlets are often accused of bias, such as 'The Wire's' perceived left-leaning stance. A Media Ownership Monitor study (2019) notes that while national media ownership appears diverse, regional markets are highly concentrated, and political affiliations further undermine independence.

Indian media was not always like this. During the Emergency of 1975-77, publications such as The Indian Express resisted censorship, famously publishing blank editorials as a protest. In the 1980s and 1990s, inves-

tigative journalism uncovered major scandals like the Bofors arms deal and the Harshad Mehta stock market scam, demonstrating the media's power to hold the powerful accountable. But these were exceptions. Over time, structural changes—such as media consolidation, increasing costs of printing, heavy reliance on advertising, and close ties with politicians—undermined this independence.

(2) The rise of 24/7 news channels in the 2000s marked a turning point. These channels started prioritizing spectacle over substance, with prime-time debates turning into shouting matches. Anchors sometimes act as propagandists and focus more on emotional battles rather than presenting facts objectively. Television news exemplifies this decline most sharply. This kind of journalism treats viewers as consumers, not citizens, prioritizing ratings over truth.

The impact is clear. A 2023 study by the Centre for Media Studies found that 70% of prime-time TV coverage focused on divisive topics like religion or nationalism, while only 15% addressed policy issues such as jobs or healthcare. This imbalance skews what citizens (or voters) care about. Unfortunately, the rise of TV journalism has also affected more serious journalism in print media. Newspapers, once bastions of serious reporting, are struggling as well. While outlets like The Indian Express maintain some independence, many have fallen under the same pressures as TV. Investigative journalism has declined, replaced by opinion pieces or recycled government press releases. In 2023, just five media groups controlled 60% of India's print circulation, reducing diverse perspectives. Coverage of critical issues—like Parliament, policy, or rural India, where 65% of the population lives—is minimal unless it involves Delhi or sensational events such as protests or natural disasters. Additionally, there is a significant urban bias.

(3) Digital platforms offer a glimmer of hope. Some independent outlets like 'The Wire' have revived investigative journalism, exposing issues like electoral bond opacity and government surveillance. However, digital media face significant challenges. They generate less than 5% of media revenue in India, struggle with funding, and face government hostility, including lawsuits and tax raids. Algorithms also favour sensational content, making it difficult for serious reporting to reach wider audiences.

Other democracies provide lessons for India. In the UK, the BBC is funded by public fees and run by an independent board, helping it stay neutral (there are questions about the BBC's impartiality too). Germany's ARD and ZDF operate similarly, maintaining editorial independence. In contrast, India's public broadcaster, Prasar Bharati, often acts as a government mouthpiece despite laws meant to guarantee its autonomy. Countries like Turkey and Hungary serve as warnings, where governments control most media through advertising and legal pressure, weakening democracy. These examples highlight the need for reforms to prevent India from following the same path.

The Threat to Democracy
You want to understand what's happening around you, but you're unsure if what you're receiving is true. All you can do is rely on the stories constantly fed to you, which may lead you to make a wrong voting decision. This creates a cycle that grows denser and more sinister. The decline of the media has serious implications for India's democracy. When news outlets prioritize profit or succumb to fear of punishment, they stop holding those in power accountable. A 2024 survey revealed that 62% of Indian voters depend on TV for political news, yet only 20% feel confident in distinguishing facts from propaganda. This loss of trust discourages good people from engaging in politics, leaving leaders unchecked. Elections turn into spectacles, and important issues are overlooked. Without a strong press, democracy weakens, as citizens are inundated with noise instead of reliable information. And our world runs like this only.

ties to take the following steps:

*Establish well-equipped trauma centres every 15-20 km along the highway, especially at key accident zones like Byrnihat, Nongpoh, and Umsning.

*Ensure emergency referral protocols are followed strictly by CHCs and PHCs.

*Mandate ambulances with paramedics trained for trauma support.

*Enforce policies to prevent private hospitals from denying life-saving emergency care.

Arshad's tragic and preventable death must serve as a wake-up call. This is not just a personal tragedy; it is a public health failure. Without urgent action, more lives will be lost, not to injury, but to delay and denial of care.

Yours etc.,
Zaki Anwar Siddiqui,
Shillong-2

Meghalaya Urban Affairs — Anything but Urban!

Editor,
Attention is drawn to B. Dutta's, Letter to the Editor titled "Back to turning roads into parking lots" (ST Aug 8, 2025). Another cry of anguish, about the deteriorating

civic governance in Shillong, this time from a former Director of Urban Affairs, a person who should know what he is talking about. As concerned citizens we also share similar concerns as we see the city disintegrating before our very eyes. Potholed roads; traffic snarls that get worse by the day; newly laid roads dug up by God knows who; leaking water pipes, localities turning into slums; poor and shoddy, health care especially for the urban poor; absence of waste disposal mechanisms; pathetic state of public transport systems. I mean these are issues that aren't supposed to happen, but they are actually increasing in frequency. The city is turning from a supposedly pristine hill resort into a living urban nightmare! Who's to blame? Lets try and find out.

Shillong has a Municipal Board which has gone kaput. Superfluous to ask why. MUDA was created for streamlining Shillong development, but became a casualty to KHADC bullying. Today we have one man who is CEO Municipal Board; Secretary MUDA and part time Director Urban Affairs at the same time. Yes a busy man running round in circles accomplishing nothing! Then there is Chairman MUDA. Only the wisdom of silence emanates from that chair. Must have taken a vow of silence as a form

of political penance! None are the wiser as to what this oracle of wisdom really does. Then next to the top we have the Commissioner of Urban Affairs. This guy is supposed to be a senior bureaucrat - Adviser to the Minister Urban Affairs. Well seeing the preference of the IAS nowadays for kowtowing, its difficult to know if he advises or is himself being advised. The British TV serial "Yes Minister" can have such injurious effects on the spinal columns of bureaucrats.

Then we come to the man at the top of the pyramid. The man mandated with providing a Vision on the development of Shillong. The only thing one hears being trumpeted nowadays is the Smart City project. Now what's so smart about a city that struggles with garbage disposal; a city that uses its roads as parking spaces; where going to and coming from school is a daily nightmare; where pavements masquerade as markets; rivers are converted into stinking sewers; where green lung space is sold to the highest bidder. The only factual event is that Urban Affairs and its grand schemes exist only in the air. The whole of Shillong and we its citizens are in the pits. Urban Affairs and its Minister is a failure. The Minister might be a big dog in the party but as a minister he is a flop. He has no clue what

"You can close your eyes to reality but not to memories."

— Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

The Shillong Times

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Attrition in BJP's North East Chapter

THE North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) - a political coalition formed on 24 May 2016 with much enthusiasm by the BJP had a clear intent of uniting non-Congress parties in North East India. Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma was appointed Convenor of this political front. The founding political parties of the NEDA included the Naga People's Front (NPF) Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF). Later other parties that formed governments in coalition with the BJP such as the National Peoples' Party (NPP) of Meghalaya also joined the Alliance. Since its formation NEDA has not made much headway. It did little to alleviate the sufferings of the people of Manipur when the ethnic violence erupted. Efforts to broker peace between the warring parties - the Kuki-Zo and Meiteis and bring about a rapprochement were not even attempted.

In fact, not much is heard about NEDA these days because Assam which is playing the lead role in this Alliance happens to have border conflicts with nearly all the states bordering it such as Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. Some of these border skirmishes have led to violent confrontations resulting in deaths. NEDA was supposed to be the Agency to get chief ministers of the states that share borders with Assam to sit across the table and talk things out in a spirit of give and take. But that has not happened. Neither has there been a common development agenda for the region so that they develop together and no one state is left behind. As the Convenor of NEDA the Assam Chief Minister is supposed to take a more mature stance and consult all the other partner states in the illegal migrant eviction issue which has become the tinder box in Assam. Without a proper action plan between the neighbouring states they now fear that the eviction process would result in inflow into their states. There is tension now between Nagaland and Assam on this issue. If the evicted alleged illegal migrants start taking shelter along the Meghalaya border, there will be tension in this state too. What is the point of a political front of all seven states if there is no conversation about solving common problems?

The exit of senior BJP functionary Mhonlumo Kikon who has been in the BJP since 2013 and has also been the Party's its national spokesperson is a clear sign that senior BJP members in the North East are not happy with the BJP and NEDA. The manner in which the two nuns from Chattisgarh were accused of forced conversion without any proof and then thrown in prison has sent shockwaves in the region, especially in Christian majority states like Nagaland and Mizoram. The current climate of oppression of religious minorities has forced BJP leaders to reconsider their alliance with the Party. Kikon is not easily replaceable because he carries weight as an articulate leader, writer, poet, a loyal karyakarta and prabhari (in charge) of Mizoram during its election. Will the attrition claim more casualties? Only time will tell.

How Shillong can become the Walking Capital of the World

By Swapnil Tembe

Two and half years ago, when I came to Shillong, I was excited to be a part of the Education department. I was thrilled to join as the Director, School Education & Literacy which I felt offered this wonderful opportunity to bring change in the complex domain of school education. The office of DSEL is in Laitumkrah which is about 3.5 kms from my residence. And I thought that it would be just a 10-15 minutes' drive. Little did I know about the complexities of traffic in Shillong. On the first day it took me nearly 40 mins. The way to DSEL office passes through the Don Bosco Square which is like the convergence point for several big schools of Shillong. And if you go there during the starting and closing time of schools, you would probably witness the peak of population density of the State for sure.

I consoled myself that perhaps it was just a one-off thing, and it would not take that much time every day. That was just wishful thinking and I was instantly proved wrong. In fact, sometimes it took even longer than that. After a couple of months, I realized that this is a common occurrence on many stretches of the city as the roads are quite narrow and the number of vehicles are significantly higher than the carrying capacity. Then the other major factor is that there are literally no designated parking places. Ergo, half of the road spaces are utilized for parking. Moreover, it rains a lot here in Shillong which probably influences people to go for four-wheelers rather than two wheelers. Given the terrain and the safety concerns, cycling is also out of question. Initially I considered buying a bicycle but was advised not to in light of the road safety concerns here in Shillong.

So one fine day, the frustration of getting stuck on the road culminated into an inspiration to walk. I decided to walk to work all the way from Kench's Trace to my office. It took me 45 mins which was almost the same time I was taking with the vehicle. Shillong already has decent stretches of defined footpaths and definitely the perfect weather for it, although global warming seems to be changing that lately. Besides, most of the places are at a walking

distance in case you stay somewhere in the heart of the city. That day, while walking back from office I realized that this 1.5 hours of walking was like a great workout too. I remembered that once our Honorable Chief Minister had initiated something on these lines where he walked to work on a Wednesday. Taking inspiration, I resolved to walk to work every Wednesday. It is amusing how people go to the gym with their vehicles and then walk on the treadmill. Simple walks like these can definitely make that redundant.

Over the several walks that followed, I realized that many people walk long distances every day. But these are the people who perhaps have no choice. They do not have a personal vehicle, and they cannot afford even the public transport options which are available, though scarce. They are in a way forced to do that. But change would only come when people having all the resources with them, still decide to walk instead of taking their vehicles. I met several walking enthusiasts during my walks across the city. Some had been walking for decades, and they loved it so much that they would not even stop their walks in the rainy season. Walking in Shillong rains can be fun but you have to learn the art of maneuvering your umbrella on those congested footpaths.

One day it occurred to me that to promote walking in the city, we must get all these people together. Some sort of club may be, I pondered. There are so many clubs for cycling, biking, hiking etc., so why can't there be a club for walking? And hence, we started the Shillong Walking Club with the vision and mission to promote walking in the city. Shillong's main issue is the traffic congestion almost in all areas. And we thought walking can play a significant role to reduce that. Everyone knows there are certain cities in Europe,

and elsewhere which are like the cycling capitals of the world. They have dedicated lanes for cycling and so many other incentives that most of the population uses bicycles. Why can't we make Shillong the walking capital of the world then?

Shillong Walking Club is an idea which got people with similar thought process together. It is still a volunteer driven model where people with love for walking contribute in whatever way possible. The members came up with a wonderful logo which captures the fundamental idea and identity of the city. We came up with T Shirts and Hoodies with the SWC logo which became so popular that the demand could not be met. We presented these hoodies to our Honorable Chief Minister and all the senior government officials to spread the message further. We also started a social media handle to keep spreading awareness on walking.

As a club, we have identified several stretches of footpaths which need immediate attention and several stretches of roads which are not even having one. We have enlisted these and submitted a petition to the Urban Affairs Department to initiate repairs and construction of new footpaths.

The SWC also identified several key issues which the walkers and pedestrians face across the city. Many footpaths/sidewalks in our area are cluttered with waste and debris which makes it difficult and hazardous for pedestrians to walk especially after rain. Some areas to mention are Polo, PB, Cjvil Hospital, Motphran, Laitumkrah etc. Regular maintenance and cleaning by the Municipality is essential to ensure safe and accessible pathways for pedestrians of all ages and abilities. Many portions of the sidewalks are damaged which also discourages people to take walks specially in the evening once it gets dark. The presence of well-marked crosswalks and pedestrian signals at busy

intersections is crucial for pedestrian safety. Having these pedestrian signals at traffic junctions will also signify the attempts to promote walking in the city.

Signages may be installed for important offices indicating the distance in terms of walking minutes like its done at the bigger airports. That way people can see that the place they want to go is just a 30 mins walk away. Walking routes should be displayed alongside the roads also indicating the amenities available on those routes. One App can be developed for promotion of walking in Shillong with all the needed information at one single place. The App may also prompt people on how much they have reduced their carbon footprint by choosing to walk instead of taking a vehicle to work or to market. The App can generate some kind of crypto currency which people may unlock by walking more and more and the same be used to get discount on listed stores and outlets. One of the major reasons for people not taking walks in the evenings or once its dark is the security concerns as most of the sidewalks are not well lit. This simple nudge using Solar Street Lightings shall definitely bring more people onboard for walking.

Since the inception of SWC, I have met several people during my walks and in office, who have shared that walking has immensely improved their health indicators. Many of them have seen improvement in their cardio-vascular health and many have improved their BMI. In this age, when most of the jobs require us to sit for long durations, these walking breaks can really be beneficial. I was never really into walking. Running has been one of my passions and I have done several long distance runs as well but now I am also in love with walking. And my knees definitely love walking over running. I believe that if more people join this movement and if we develop facilities for walkers over the next few years, it will play a significant role to reduce the number of vehicles on the road and also to improve the health indicators for people residing in Shillong.

So next time you have to go somewhere not very far in Shillong, consider taking a walk. For a greener and healthier Shillong.

Empowering Pollution Control Boards & Need for Robust Safeguards

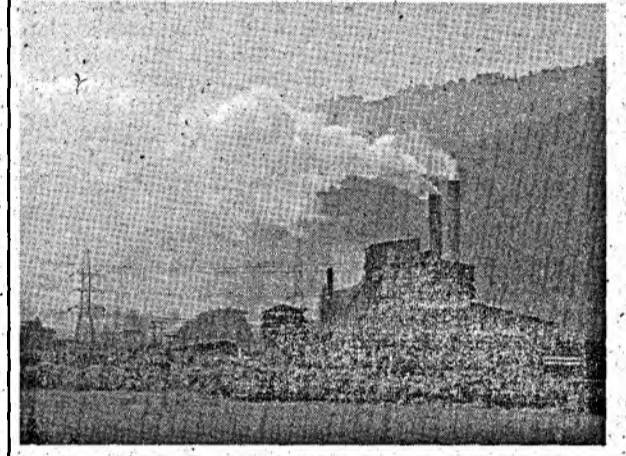
By Vedant Choudhary

The Hon'ble Supreme court gave its judgment in Delhi Pollution Control Committee v Lodhi Property Co. Ltd earlier this week. Through this judgment, the Court has widened the scope of powers available to State Pollution Control Boards under section 31A of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 and 33A of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974. State Pollution Control Boards (Boards) would now be within their limits in issuing orders directing violating industries to pay compensatory or restitutionary costs. This piece argues that while it is appropriate that this power be conferred onto the Board, it would have to be accompanied with sufficient safeguards and particularly a robust appeal mechanism to ensure justice.

Sec 31A of the Air Act and Section 33A of the Water Act were introduced in 1988 as measures to enable the

losses, or damage caused to the environment by a violating industry. It is also only appropriate that this power is granted to the Boards since only the Board possesses the technical expertise in determining the quantum of damage and the costs to make good the losses. However, the court has also taken note of the fact that since Boards are not judicial bodies, this power can be exercised by the Board only after the Central Government introduces appropriate guidelines and directions which can ensure that the Boards while passing such orders does not violate the rights of any parties.

While Guidelines and directions, detailing the principle and procedure to be followed by Board in issuing compensation orders may appear adequate, it is difficult to believe that guidelines no matter how well drafted, would be able to instill judicial mind into the Board, or ensure judi-



Board to more effectively prevent air and water pollution. These sections grant the Board wide sweeping powers to issue any direction for the prevention of

cial wisdom in the Board's decisions.

On the contrary to guidelines and directions, an effective alternative to the same could be, introducing

"The Supreme Court has upheld the power of the Board to direct compensatory costs to violating industry. The court has reasoned that remedial jurisprudence must be expanded to keep pace with the expanding scope of fundamental rights, therefore regulators must be empowered to enforce measures to make good the losses, or damage caused to the environment by a violating industry."

air, and water pollution. By virtue of Chapter VII of the Water Act, and Chapter VI of the Air Act the Board is empowered to impose penalties to violating industries. In the present case however, the issue was slightly different, in addition to penalties, is the Board empowered to direct the payment of compensatory or restitutionary costs to violating industries?

A foundational principle of India's environmental law jurisprudence is the "polluter pays" principle. As the name suggests, the principle propounds that it is the violating industry that will make good the losses caused by it, in other words any damage caused by an industry will be compensated for or restituted by the industry causing the damage. The Polluter Pays principle has been a basis for a number of landmark environmental cases in India, the earliest being the Indian Council for Environmental Action v. Union of India, 1972 (Bichhri Case). Therefore, there is no doubt that in a case of damage to the environment courts in India are empowered to direct the violating industry to pay costs to compensate for the entire damage caused. However, the question before the court was, whether Boards which are not judicial bodies, and most certainly cannot be equated courts, can issue such directions for compensation, or restitution?

The Supreme Court has upheld the power of the Board to direct compensatory costs to violating industry. The court has reasoned that remedial jurisprudence must be expanded to keep pace with the expanding scope of fundamental rights, therefore regulators must be empowered to enforce measures to make good the

mandatory judicial members in the Board. A cursory look at the composition of the Board (given under section 4 of the Water Act) shows that there is no mandate to appoint even a single judicial member to the Board. While the Board comprises members representing the state, bureaucracy, corporations, and other sectors like fisheries, and agriculture, there is no mention of judicial members. Considering that such wide sweeping powers have been granted to the Board and that it would now be performing judicial functions it is only appropriate that at least half of the members of the Board comprise judicial members. However, in order to make space for judicial members, the Board would have to be resized and reconstituted, failing which it could lead to jumbo-sizing of the Board. An alternative to introducing judicial members, albeit not as effective, would be giving judicial training to members of the Board. This can be modeled on the manner in which members of the Juvenile Justice Board are trained under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. In addition to all these measures, it is also necessary that a strong appeal mechanism is provided to parties aggrieved by the decision of the Board. Following amendments introduced in 2010, aggrieved parties can file an appeal before the National Green Tribunal from decisions of the Board under section 33A of the Water Act. However, there is no such provision under the Air Act. With the widening of powers of the Board, and the Board being merely a quasi-judicial body, it follows that the appeal mechanism against its decisions must also be strengthened.

Letters to the Editor

Good move by Transport Dept

Editor, I could not help but succumb to the urge of writing this note of appreciation towards the Transport Department for the important notification it had issued vide No.Com/Trans/MVACT/77/2019/Pt/4 of 18th July 2025.

For over 3 decades the state roads had been overburdened by the oversized overloaded trucks and other goods carriers. So rampant is the plague that we see trucks extend their body size to the optimum to accommodate goods double the prescribed limit. Modified oversized vehicles practically crawl on roads adversely affecting the roads.

Because of such activities (i) roads get worn within months of their construction or repair (ii) the vehicular traffic moves at snail's pace affecting commuters thus creating a long line of traffic jam (iii) these outlawed vehicles also pose a serious threat to other vehicles that use the roads as they uncontrollably overturn at any slight disturbance or tyre burst.

It is a sight to behold; these vehicles do not dare to enter Assam to reach their depot or stockyards due to their oversized body structure and overloading.

For instance these trucks instead of going to their destinations via Athiabari and Boko then Guwahati and other destinations ahead, choose instead to travel all the way from Shalang to Shillong to reach Byrnihat via Mawryngkneng and Shillong Bye Pass. Some of them try to use the Mairang road - Rani Road and then divert to Umling toll gate via Lai Lad, all for the sake of avoiding entry into Assam because of the oversized structures and the overloaded conditions of their vehicles.

The Madanring - Itsyrtwat road is a good example to understand the gravity of the damage oversized vehicles do to the roads. The said route gets regular attention of the PWD yet repairs turn futile due to such vehicles. Moreover, this road is open to heavy vehicular traffic throughout the day, including ten and twelve wheelers, due to the massive construction works that are going on in New Shillong Township. Hence the move of the Transport Department is a step in the right direction because all roads in the state both old and new big or small are the important lifelines for growth.

Moreover, with the government taking road development and improvement on a war footing, it is necessary that the mentioned notification is implemented strictly or else all the efforts of making good roads will go down the drain.

Kudos to the bold move. Yours etc., B. Pynrope Shillong - 6

India's inherent strength cannot be ignored

Editor, Apropos of the editorial "End of India-US bonhomie" (ST August 8, 2025), India should reassess its \$3.78 billion defence contract with the United States of America particularly in light of recent geopolitical tensions and tariff escalation. The country has signed a \$3.5 billion agreement to procure 31 MQ-9B drones from the US, with 15 for the Navy and the rest split between the Army and the Air Force. The Defence Acquisition Council has already greenlit Rs 1.59 lakh crore (\$18.5 billion) in domestic procurements this year alone, reinforcing the "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) agenda. India is emphasizing co-development and co-production over direct imports. This includes negotiations for joint production of GE F414 fighter jet engines with Hindustan Aeronautics. A \$520 million contract was also signed with General Atomics to establish a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility in

India, aligning with India's push for domestic defence infrastructure.

The Trump administration recently imposed a 50% tariff on Indian goods, citing India's oil imports from Russia and India has rightly called these actions "unfair, unjustified and unreasonable," and vowed to protect its national interest given the hypocrisy of the Trump administration which itself imports nuclear and chemical fertilizer from Russia while EU and Turkey import oil. India's stand on Russian oil imports is non-negotiable, prioritizing energy needs for 1.4 billion citizens. Holding back or renegotiating the defence contract sends a message about India's strategic autonomy.

Modi's diplomatic outreach has been bold, expansive and deeply personal but recent developments suggest that its outcomes are mixed, especially in the face of transactional geopolitics. Despite personal rapport with Trump, India now faces a 50% tariff hike over Russian oil imports. Modi's refusal to compromise on energy sovereignty has led to stalled trade talks while the government's stand on agriculture and dairy is appropriate given the American agriculture and dairy industry which is highly subsidised. Modi's diplomacy has undeniably expanded India's global footprint. But in a world where economic leverage often trumps personal rap-

port, India's assertive stance especially of energy security and trade sovereignty is being tested. I do not agree with the editorial that the Prime Minister's "diplomatic outreaches in the past have not produced desired results." In fact, the outreach which has not failed is entering a phase where strategic recalibration is essential.

Yours etc., VK Lyngdoh, Via email

Sex education is critical

Editor, The write up by Toki Blah captioned "Sex and our Children" (ST Aug 6, 2025) was very educative and interesting. Yes, we often come across instances of teenagers engaging in sexual encounters for want of proper guidance by parents, elders and the society too. Teenage is said to be the turning point of a child's life. At the onset of puberty, a boy/girl starts soaring high on their wings of sweet imagination. Life looks like a bed of roses during the teenage years. Advice from the parents and elders of the family are considered as hurdles. They seek to know and understand their biological changes and are tempted to experience it through sex. It is the age where they are often seen blundering their way through life. An impulsive act can

lead teenagers to make decisions without considering the consequences. But it is also true that teenagers are not so naive that they would not understand the consequences of their blunders. Despite that many teenagers fall into such thoughtless acts and repent for life.

It is not wise to squarely blame parents over their children's upbringing. It's hard to expect poor parents who toil and sweat through the day for two square meals to also have the time to guide their children and keep an eye on them. Even children from affluent families are seen falling into the rut of teenage pregnancy. It is a social problem that needs to be discussed in society. Counselling our children has become popular in recent days and it can help in correcting our children from taking the wrong step. Parents are also requested not to put pressure on their children to score high grades when that will be things go from bad to worse.

Yes sex education at the higher secondary level school is imperative.

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

Elephants make deliberate gestures to ask for things

Elephants are known for their intelligence, strong social bonds, and good memories. But do they communicate to show real intention? A new study suggests they do. The research showed that elephants gestured to ask for food when a person was around and that they kept gesturing when they didn't receive all the food. These are signs that the elephants are trying to communicate with intention.

We spoke to lead author Vesta Eleuteri, a PhD candidate, to learn more about what this means and why it matters.

Why did you study how elephants use gestures to communicate?

Most of the research on elephant communication is on their calls and chemical signals, likely because of their extraordinary hearing and smell. How elephants communicate with gestures is comparatively less studied. But there are descriptions of elephants using many different body movements and displays in different contexts, which suggests a key role of gestures in elephant communication.

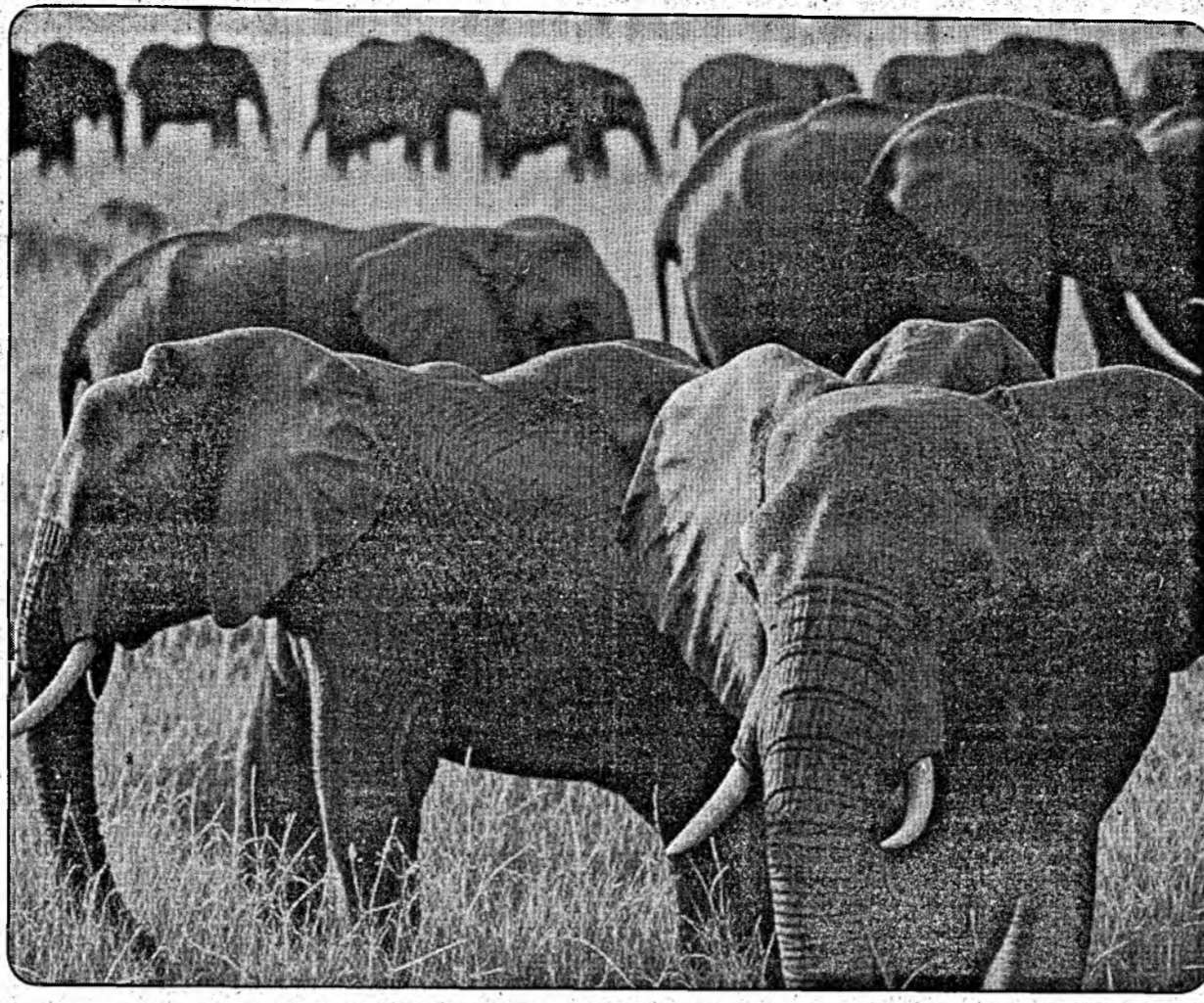
But whether elephants gesture intentionally to others to communicate goals in mind has not been systematically explored before. My colleagues and I study the cognition and communication of animals to understand how complex cognitive skills evolved, which is what this article is based on.

In our study led by the University of Vienna and in collaboration with the University of St Andrews, the University of Portsmouth and City University of New York, we show that semi-captive elephants use many different gestures intentionally to ask a human to give them apples (their goal). We found that the elephants used 38 different gesture types intentionally. The elephants kept gesturing when they only got half the apples (only partially reached their goal), while they changed gestures when they got no apples (did not reach their goal), both key behaviours to establish intentional use.

Why is it important to know whether their communication is intentional?

The ability to intentionally communicate goals in mind using a variety of gestures might help elephants navigate their complex social lives. By showing that semi-captive elephants gesture intentionally to humans using many different gesture types, our study builds on the evidence that this ability is not unique to primates, but that it has repeatedly emerged during evolution.

Here we consider intentionality as "goal-directed intentionality", which is the ability to communicate goals we have in mind to others. This was in the past considered to be a unique human skill. Today we know that all the other apes and even some other primates (although in a less flex-



ible way) communicate intentionally using over 70 different gesture types to communicate many different goals in mind. Some examples include gesturing for things like "come here"; "give me that"; "groom me".

In non-primates, this intentionality was shown only in a few animals, from guppy fish to Arabian babblers. But typically this was done with one or two gestures and for specific goals, like "follow me".

Elephants are distantly related to humans in evolution. We last shared a common ancestor with them over 100 million years ago. But, like apes, they are highly intelligent and live in complex societies where they have many different types of relationships (from kin to allies, friends and strangers). Also, there are descriptions of elephants using many different body movements and displays during many different contexts. These include when they greet, affiliate, play with each other or even when they travel together.

What gestures did the elephants use, and how do you know they were on purpose?

The elephants in semi-captivity often reached their trunks or swung them back and forth towards the human or the tray with apples. This made it clear they were communicating that they wanted the apples. To know whether the elephants were using their gestures intentionally, we applied the behavioural criteria first created to study the development of intentional communication in human infants. These are: audience directedness, persistence and elaboration.

Signallers should use gestures when there is a recipient and appropriately according to whether he/she is looking or not (audience directedness). For example, if the recipient is not looking at them, they should use tactile gestures instead of visual gestures that the recipient would not see.

After gesturing, signallers should wait for the recipient to react and, if the recipient does not react as they wanted, they should keep gesturing (persistence) or change gestures (elaboration) to

clarify what they wanted.

I can make an example. If I want to ask you to pass me the salt (my goal), I first should consider whether you are looking at me and, if you are, I may reach my hand towards the salt (audience directedness). If you don't react or pass me the wrong thing, like the pepper, I should keep gesturing (persistence) or should change gesture by, for example, pointing towards the salt to clarify I wanted the salt from you (elaboration).

You worked with semi-captive elephants; do wild elephants act the same?

We and many other elephant experts have observed wild elephants gesturing apparently intentionally to each other (and even to us!) many times in the field. Nonetheless, we cannot confirm their ability to gesture intentionally merely from our observations. Science is there to systematically test with data the intuitions or feelings we get from observations.

Whether wild elephants use the same gestures we observed in this semi-captive group is an interesting question that needs to be explored. The same goes for assessing if different elephant groups or populations use different gestures. Based on previous descriptions, wild elephants should use, intentionally, a few of the gestures we found (trunk reaches or swings) but maybe they don't use some of the "more creative" ones like the "blow leaf in the air" our elephant Pfumo had fun using.

What's next for your research?

We want to systematically test whether wild elephants gesture intentionally to each other, describe the repertoire of their intentional gestures and the goals (meanings) they use these gestures for (they may say to each other: "travel with me", "move away", "stop that"). We have thousands of videos collected in two elephant populations in South Africa that I am video coding for gestures and their intentional use.

It will take time to define the repertoire and meanings of elephant intentional gestures. But we hope to someday do this and to compare the gestures of different populations to understand if elephants may have different "gestural languages".

Studying animal communication offers "a window" into our own language, into our minds, because it allows us to understand what, if anything, makes language unique. Showing that animals have so much in common with us makes people empathise more with them and care more about them, which is important for their conservation.

Most importantly, studying animal communication is crucial because we can understand animals better and, if we know them better, we can take better measures to safeguard them.

(The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, August 10, 2025

'Birthdate Forecast'

The Moon forms a 150-degree aspect with Mars in your solar return chart, indicating a blend of challenges and achievements. Your career or business path will experience ups and downs, sometimes putting you in demanding situations. However, your unwavering dedication and resilient spirit will ultimately lead you to success. Expectations from peers and superiors will run high. Financially, this year may pose struggles—money may get tied up or delayed, requiring careful budgeting and adjustments. Be especially cautious about your health; there's susceptibility to skin issues, digestive problems, heart concerns, or diabetes. Regular health check-ups and strict attention to diet are strongly advised. In personal life, couples will enjoy happy moments, and the marriage of a family member is on the cards.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week brings forth a powerful and energetic approach to resolve professional projects in hand. As you travel you will find that it brings luck to another aspect of your life. Some of you may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make choices between career and family goals. The challenge is to find a healthy balance to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Meditation is needed for gaining deeper insight into personal relations and complex situations.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine luck and good management. This tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel or contact with people of different cultural backgrounds. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and more strategic in the manner you go about doing so. Fundamental changes in your domestic situation and career orientation are likely. New friendships are likely to emerge during this time, supportive and easygoing ones.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You feel energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. As you accept the individuality of people around; this would help to resolve conflicts and differences. You feel the need to be appreciated by family members, and the need for togetherness with others, comes into play. New contacts with others may also occur. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach to your life and you cultivate true friendships. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Personal relations are rejuvenated and your romance moves more rapidly as you relate well on an intellectual level as well and move towards a long-term commitment. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding. You are also likely to form business relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You are able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility during this period. Walking and gardening can be therapeutic pastimes.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This is a magical time for romantic relationships. You initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with difficult professional and family matters. It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and other relatives. At times life becomes extremely distracting and work and other financial or professional commitments take over. You would give attention on fitness and health related programs.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) People are attracted to you for your intelligent and sharp mind. Your social life is enviable as you interact with interesting people. You need to remain in touch with

personal relations or you stand to lose valuable emotional support. You feel on top in domestic issues and spend quality of time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. A light and playful attitude takes you to high places and to important people. Don't allow old fears to get to you but confront important issues and people that are likely to change. A happy surprise awaits you.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Trust your feelings and intuition about people and situations when taking decisions. Work and pleasure can be combined. You connect with well known personalities and artists. You could find relationships with others confusing and hard to define. Although you may enjoy an increase in your intuitive capabilities, you can also be too open to influence so that fears or delusions impact your ability to see your life clearly. This could also be a time when you are more creative, yet not always in a reliable or organized manner. Explore, look for adventure and keep your eyes open for opportunities this week.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You feel fresh and re-energized this week. You may take up new assignments and a project that would call for creativity and new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. There may be gains from property and fixed assets. You are nurturing and caring in personal relationships. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition in others and in yourself.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This is a special time for romantic relationships. Your credibility is important at this time and efforts at self-promotion might be made now. It is time to come back to your inner center to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum. With the ability to handle your emotions successfully, there is less stress on both your mind and body. Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual this week, so set some time aside. Also, parse your schedule so that you don't take on too much and that you don't wind up handling more errands and odd jobs than you meant to. The key to success is adopting a realistic, practical, and disciplined approach to your life which comes easily to you. Certain elements of your social and financial lives are stabilized, secured, and more reliable. You may solidify a romantic relationship under this influence.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This period proves good in terms of investments and speculations. It's a good time to join religious organizations and groups. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. Circumstances may be such that you need to handle money more carefully or this may simply come naturally to you now. You would focus to regain mental balance and emotional harmony. Travel will be meaningful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. You have new attitudes towards love matters, finances, and social relationships. Your creative urges are powerful indeed. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are indicated. A period of hard work and effort is also in store. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges. Beware of over indulgence of any kind by maintaining balance in all areas of life. Walking can be a therapeutic pastime.

Move over Mercury: Chiron is in retrograde

By Laura Nicole Driessen

You might have seen an interesting phrase popping up in your social media feeds lately: "Chiron is in retrograde." If you're anything like me, you've never heard of Chiron before - and I'm a professional astronomer.

So what is Chiron, and what does it mean to be in retrograde? The short answer is that Chiron is an asteroid-slash-comet orbiting somewhere past Jupiter and Saturn. And until January 2026, it's going to look like it's going backwards in the sky. If you can spot it.

But there's a bit more to the story.

What is Chiron?

Chiron's official name is (2060) Chiron. First things first: it's pronounced "kai-ruhn", with a hard K sound.

It was discovered by astronomer Charles Kowal in 1977. This was long after the system of Western astrology was developed, which probably explains why people who check their daily horoscopes are also blissfully unaware of its existence.

It was initially classified as an asteroid, or a rock in space. In 1989 astronomers discovered Chiron sometimes has a tail or "coma", which tells us that it's actually a comet or a "dirty snowball". Since then, Chiron has been classified as both an asteroid and a comet.

In 2023, more than 45 years after it was first discovered, astronomers confirmed Chiron has rings. This makes it the fourth non-planet in the Solar System to have rings. (The planets Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune have rings, as do the asteroid Chariklo and the dwarf planets Haumea and Quaoar.)

Chiron orbits the Sun in an oval-shaped orbit. The closest it gets to the Sun is about 1.3 billion kilometres (about eight times the distance between Earth and the Sun) and the furthest it gets from the Sun is a whopping 2.7 billion km (about 19 times the distance between Earth and the Sun).

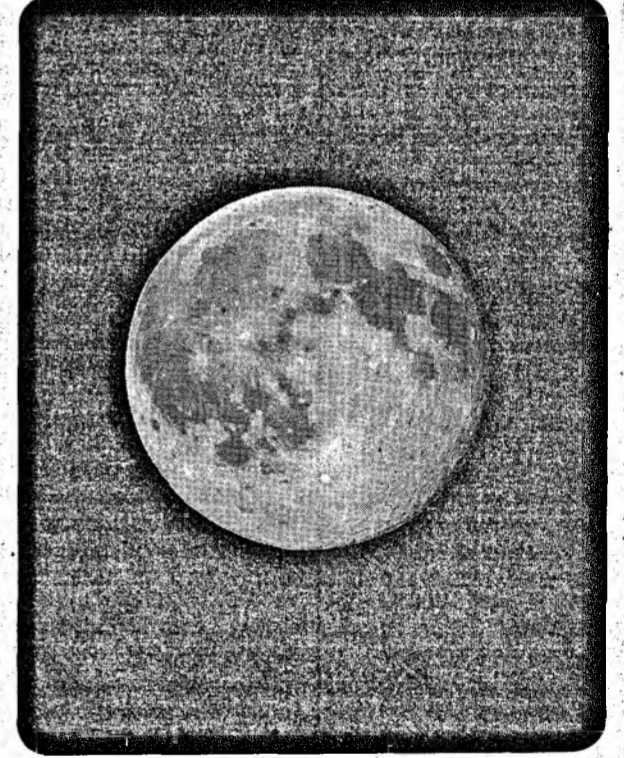
This puts it between the orbits of Jupiter and Uranus, cutting through the orbit of Saturn.

Centaur in space

Chiron is a member of the Centaurs. This is a group of small Solar System bodies that orbit the Sun between Jupiter and Neptune. Their orbits are highly unstable: they change over time because of gravitational interactions with the giant planets.

In Greek mythology, centaurs were creatures with the lower body and legs of a horse and the torso and arms of a human. Chiron was the oldest centaur, the son of the Titan Kronos. He was considered the wisest centaur.

Fans of Percy Jackson and the Olympians may also recognise Chiron as the director of Camp Halfblood.



Chiron in retrograde

In astronomy, retrograde motion is when something is going backwards compared with everything else.

Apparent retrograde motion is where an object in the sky, such as a planet, appears to be going backwards when we look at it from Earth. The object hasn't actually changed direction; it just looks like it from our perspective.

All the planets (and Chiron) orbit the Sun in the same direction. This means the planets typically look like they are moving in a west-to-east direction across the sky. But when Earth "catches" up to a planet (or a planet catches up to Earth) and overtakes it, the planet temporarily appears to move in a west-to-east direction in the sky.

This temporary illusion is apparent retrograde motion. It's just like when you're driving in a car and overtake a slower car, that slower car looks like it's going backwards as you overtake it.

Chiron went into retrograde (that is, apparent retrograde motion) on July 30, 2025 and will go back to normal on January 2, 2026. But unless you have a telescope or do some long-exposure photography, you'd never know which way Chiron is travelling. Chiron is very faint, so you can't see it with your eyes.

The ancient astrologers didn't know about Chiron, but I like to think they'd appreciate a centaur in space with a ring on it. (The Conversation)

"A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity."
—Ralph Nader

The Shillong Times

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Disinformation, silence

CURIOSLY, when it comes to official analysis about the losses in Operation Sindoor, there are only claims but no counter-claims. The claims may or may not be correct, but Pakistan's military chief Asif Munir has made a statement, saying the estimated losses Pakistan suffered in the military action by India were "less than expected." India, which reported victory in the three-day offensive against Pakistan in May, is not in a mood yet to "disclose" vital details even in Parliament. Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi too talked in riddles when he addressed the IIT Madras, saying Operation Sindoor was a "strategic grey zone mission," which he likened to a "game of chess." The audience got no fresh information about the war and was left to draw inferences from his statements like, "We played chess and they too played chess." But, he compensated this with a clear verbal offensive against Pakistan's decision to elevate its army chief Asim Munir to the rank of five-star general and field marshal. What Pakistan does in matters of military ranking does not warrant an open response from a high military authority in India.

On the other hand, curiosity also centres around the visit by Munir to the United States for the second time in two months after the launch of Operation Sindoor-- which was followed by a mysterious 'ceasefire' announcement from the US President. Munir, during his present visit, met both the political and military leaderships there, which is not unusual. The general trend is that the US engages Pakistan at both political and military levels through separate meetings, knowing full well that the military dictates to the political leadership in this Islamic nation. The clear message of the present meeting is a further strengthening of the relations between Pakistan and the US, even as Islamabad is a trusted ally of China at multiple levels. A highlight of Munir's last visit was a private luncheon with President Donald Trump himself.

With such alliances strengthening, Trump's "announcement" of a ceasefire at a crucial phase of Operation Sindoor now looks more like a virtual insult to India. In a matching flurry, Trump has bared his fangs also by initiating an aggressive tariff war on India. By adopting a "strategy of silence" in these evolving situations vis-à-vis the US, the Modi establishment is doing a disservice to the nation. While Pakistan is making official statements about its "less than expected" losses in the Operation Sindoor, India is silent and perhaps losing against the rival's "disinformation" war. Why should Munir getting a promotion become our concern? As a nation, India cannot afford to miss the woods for the trees.

Tread softly because you tread on our dreams

By Janet Hujon

Wards Lake was a staging point, a resting place between two areas of city chaos. Our pace instinctively slowed, our eyes rested as we relaxed into an interval when the non-stop bombardment on our senses eased. The Lake is part of the story of old Shillong. Her waters mirror the ideals and love we have for our city, and her paths have been marked by countless feet drawn down to enjoy a brief respite from the din outside and maybe the disquiet within. Our haven, our symbol of city-pride.

The Lake occupies a special place in my childhood memories of Shillong. Our pleasures were simple then. Throwing chickpeas into the water to lure huge open-mouthed carp to the surface was a novelty that never grew old. The sight of orange fish monstrous in our eyes, emerging from green watery depths, mouths wide open was frighteningly magical. Were they really real? Sorry chickpeas...you just didn't have a chance. Alongside this drama in the waters, serene water-lilies, those symbols of rebirth and enlightenment, offered themselves to our gaze. Whether we chose to linger in the garden or walk through the hollow cradling the lake, it was a reminder that calm was within reach.

It was however after dark that Ward's Lake came into her own. The roar of traffic did not dominate Shillong's roads then as it does now. Car headlights were discreet and respectful, the lamp posts on the lake's periphery and over the bridge created circles of pale-yellow light just enough to pick out outlines of flower beds, trees and of course that white wooden bridge. The now overused, power-depleted 'iconic' would have been my adjective of choice to describe that pearl-structure under the kind moonlight. The silence intensified the effect and, on such nights, there was nothing like it in Shillong.

But some memories are only too easily torn apart. 'Hell-bent' is the only phrase left to describe the government's plans to rapidly turn Meghalaya into a tourist hotspot. Wards Lake is to have a 'major revamp' and the answer to how major lies in the planned attractions - 'a musical fountain accompanied by a light

and sound show'. Beguiling distractions like 'beautification' 'sustainable', 'cleanliness' and 'plastic ban' are thrown into the mix clearly intended to appeal to any green detractors. (See ST: July 9 & 14).

Are people so in need of entertainment that we have to resort to this? Has 'peace and quiet' gone out of fashion and is noise the only way to make a statement? Given all the natural wonders in our hills and valleys why would this be a selling point? Why can we not listen to the music of Nature as did Bob Dylan for whom Nature is an orchestra. In his heart-rending Lay Down Your Weary Tune a litany of images appealing to the eye and ear are a voyage into the shared soul of humankind and natural creation. The song is a plea to listen with wonder:

The morning breeze like a bugle blew/ Against the drum of dawn.../ The ocean will like an organ played.../

The crashing waves like cymbals clashed/ Against the rocks and sand...

The crying rain like a trumpet sang/ And asked for no applause.../ The branches bare like a banjo moan/ To the winds that listen the best.../ The water smooth ran like a hymn/ And like a harp did hum...

The poet recognises and makes us feel a power greater than himself, a power greater than all ourselves put together. Listen to the hymn within this sermon, hear both its triumphal and poignant strains and ask yourself if a musical fountain might just be that 'weary tune' we need to lay down.

A light and sound extravaganza would spell doom to insect life because '... artificial light at night is another important - but often overlooked - bringer of the insect-apocalypse'... It affects 'every aspect of insect lives...from luring moths to their deaths around bulbs, to spotlighting insect prey for rats and toads to obscuring the mating signals of fireflies'... All this is aided by habitat loss, chemical pollution, invasive species, and climate change.

(https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/22/light-pollution-insect-apocalypse) Being noc-

turnal, moths and their place in ecology, rarely enter our field of vision or thought. Yet moths are key pollinators, a food source for creatures like birds, lizards, toads, frogs, spiders, and are decomposers of organic matter. Moths form a vital link in the interconnectedness of all life on earth and their decline signals a breakdown in the health of the living world.

Yet the natural world in Meghalaya is fast becoming just a sideshow starring the government and the people each with well-defined roles - protagonists and compliant audience. The actors write the script, the people read it (maybe?) and promptly fall asleep until the performance is over. But they do seem to have one thing in common - both exist within their own bubbles detached from the natural world. If the revamp is labelled 'major', surely it requires minute scrutiny and discussion. This is not a structure in someone's private garden but is going to represent all of us on the tourist map.

Why then is this assault on our senses and sensitivities not recognised as such? Mere talk about the arrogant 'high level' is fast becoming tiresome since they continue to thrive unscathed in their fortresses, mindlessly manufacturing slow-ticking (if one wants to be optimistic) time bombs to wreck our beautiful world - yes ours not just theirs: The Khasi saying 'Ksan Rympei rem dorab' - 'winners at home but defeated in court' - says it all.

I am all for a plastic-free Wards Lake but why restrict the good work to Wards Lake. More importantly, where does the plastic go? More overburdened landfill site is probably rolling its eyes in agony. Plastic does not die guys - it is immortal. It will continue to deposit poison long after we are gone.

Incidentally if anybody cares, Meghalaya has its very own State Council of Science Technology and Environment (SCSTE) which thankfully hosts outreach programmes focussing on 'discussion and collaboration' on 'the urgent issue of plastic pollution and innovative solutions to minimise plastic usage'. See <https://meghalayatimes.in/nehu-world-environment-toward-sex-weakening-their-decision-making-abilities-and-fuelling-a-rise-in-teenage-pregnancies>.

Needless to say, in today's digital age, you don't have to hunt for trouble; trouble now streams straight to your screen at lightning speed in various avatars. Even under the care of teachers, our children are not safe.

This July, we were shocked by news that a 38-year-old man from East Khasi Hills district was arrested for repeatedly raping his 15-year-old stepdaughter, resulting in her pregnancy. Earlier this year, a Delhi court convicted a man of the brutal rape of his 17-year-old daughter, forcing her to carry the pregnancy for six months. In Firozabad, a 51-year-old predator received a life sentence for raping his daughter from the age of 12, marrying her off when she became pregnant, and attempting to assault her again.

We've heard of teenage pregnancies caused by men, but now, we're confronting the horror of fathers impregnating their own daughters. What could possibly be more horrifying, more beastly than this? Kudos to Toki Blah for raising awareness - especially now, when public intellect and empathy seem to have gone numb to truly feel the pain and pangs of teenage sexual victims.

Yours etc.,
Sali Gwali,
Shillong

India's judicial independence questionable
Editor,
The editorial "Cool down,

day-2025-celebration/

Discussion and Collaboration are critical if we are to heal our wounded world. Government departments tasked with decision-making for the land and her people should no longer act in isolation because Meghalaya's healing can only come from a holistic approach.

It is time for outreach to travel beyond university workshops, conferences and newspaper reports. Instead of flashy appliances, likely to malfunction, crores from tourism coffers should fund a deep understanding, not just mere awareness - scratched record moment coming up - of the dire consequences of plastic poisoning, reckless tree felling and mining.

But hope is within reach. Meghalaya's clouds have a silver lining with more than a hint of green. The article 'From Ruins to Resplendence' is a lesson in altruism, intelligent application of knowledge, cultural documentation, preservation and collaborative community building.

<https://theshillongtimes.com/2025/07/25/from-ruins-to-resplendence-lone-teacher-inspires-locals-to-transform-school-in-remote-ekh-village/>

(ST July 25) Every line in the report chimes with notes of collective pride and joy for here we have proof that someone inspired others. Relying on his own financial, moral and learning resources, Batskhem Thabab set out to establish a green school and succeeded. "Bamboo cases replaced plastic cases, areca palm leaves became plates... science lessons merged with gardening and language was taught through storytelling and songs". What's not to like and admire. Rooted and dynamic Thabab has crafted a fable for our times. All appointed and self-chosen protectors of the jaitbyriew's culture take note, for this is what intelligent and comprehensive education is.

This 'school of the people' should be the blueprint for how Meghalaya can become a 'State of the people'. Fifty years, and counting, is a long time to wait for a break from harmful, ostentatious government 'tradition'. *Adapted from WB Yeats: 'Aeðh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'

your honour" (ST August 6, 2025) made interesting reading. It is apparent that in a country with weak checks and balances, judicial independence, often independent but less confrontational with legislators, tends to exceed their briefs.

This exhibits "a weak or undermined separation of powers," according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) as India's score is 4 similar to that of the United Kingdom and Russia. In the United States, Germany and South Korea the score is 10 which means "full separation of power with mutual checks," while in France and Japan the score is 7 each indicating a "functioning separation of power with occasional interference." BTI is a comprehensive global ranking system that evaluates how well countries are managing the transition towards democracy and a socially responsible market economy. The publisher Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German foundation publishes a report every two years covering 137 countries. The purpose is to assess the quality of governance, political transformation and economic transformation in developing and transition countries.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Education under siege: Exposing the heartless privatization agenda in Meghalaya

By Tynshain K Lyngdoh

The Meghalaya government has publicly declared war on the youth of our state through their shameless push towards privatization. At a time when unemployment rates are soaring, contractual jobs offer barely ₹15,000 as monthly salaries, and families are struggling to make ends meet, these institutions are planning to make education a luxury item affordable only to the wealthy elite. This is not policy reform - this is Educational genocide targeting the poor and middle class.

The perfect storm of student misery

While our youth face the harshest job market in decades, with degrees becoming worthless due to lack of employment opportunities, the government and college managements are conspiring to make education even more expensive. Students graduating with degrees are lucky to find jobs paying ₹15,000 per month, yet these same institutions want to charge lakhs of rupees in fees annually. This is economic terrorism against the youth of Meghalaya. The government's silence and complicity in this privatization drive shows complete disregard for the economic reality facing our families. How can college fees increase to ₹1,50,000 per year when the average graduate struggles to earn ₹15,000 per month? This math doesn't work for anyone except the greedy college managements and their political patrons.

Government betrayal reaches new lows

The Meghalaya government's betrayal of student interests has reached unprecedented levels of callousness. While claiming to support education, the government is actively enabling college managements to abandon UGC-sanctioned posts and embrace privatization. This is not governance - this is active participation in the systematic destruction of educational accessibility. The government's deficit grant-in-aid system was designed to keep education affordable, yet now they are allowing institutions to opt out of this very system that protected students. Where is the accountability? Where is the protection of student interests? The government has become a willing accomplice in depriving pricing education for 80% of Meghalaya's population.

College managements: Greed personified

College managements in Meghalaya have transformed from educational stewards to profit-hungry vultures feeding on student misery. These institutions, built with public money and sustained by taxpayer support, now view students as cash cows to be milked for maximum profit. Their abandonment of UGC-sanctioned posts is not about institutional improvement - it's about eliminating accountability and maximizing exploitation. These managements show zero empathy for students struggling with unemployment and underemployment. Their greed has made them completely blind to the economic crisis facing our youth.

Brutal reality for students

For a student from a family earning ₹15,000-25,000 per month, current college fees represent a significant but manageable sacrifice. Parents work multiple jobs, cut expenses, and make financial sacrifices to educate their children. However, privatization will transform this manageable burden into complete financial ruin. When fees increase from ₹15,000-20,000 per semester to ₹75,000-1,00,000, families will be forced to take loans that will burden students for decades. Students will graduate not just unemployed, but also debt-ridden, creating a generation trapped in financial slavery. This is the future our government and college managements envisage for our youth.

Meritocracy under attack

Privatization represents a direct assault on meritocracy and social justice. Currently, admission to colleges is based on academic merit and entrance examination performance. However, privatization will replace merit with money power, ensuring that only wealthy students can access quality education regardless of their academic abilities. This transformation will create a caste system in education where economic status determines academic opportunity. Talented students from poor families will be systematically excluded from quality education, destroying the social mobility that education is supposed to provide. The government and college managements are actively working to create an educational apartheid system.

Employment crisis multiplied

Meghalaya's youth already face an employment crisis of unprecedented proportions. Contractual jobs paying ₹15,000 per month are the norm rather than the exception. Unemployment rates among graduates are soaring, with many qualified individuals unable to find work matching their educational qualifications. In this context, making education unaffordable through privatization creates a double tragedy. Students will invest huge sums of money in education only to face unemploy-

ment or underemployment upon graduation. This represents not just individual tragedy but societal waste of human potential and resources.

Government hypocrisy exposed

The Meghalaya government publicly claims to support youth development and educational advancement while actively enabling policies that make education inaccessible. This contradiction reveals the government's true priorities - protecting the interests of college managements and political elites rather than serving the people. Government ministers make speeches about youth empowerment while their policies systematically disempower the youth through unaffordable education. This hypocrisy cannot continue without fierce public resistance and accountability.

Death of social mobility

Grant-in-aid colleges have historically served as engines of social mobility, allowing talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds to rise above their circumstances. Privatization will kill this crucial social function, ensuring that economic status at birth determines educational and career opportunities throughout life. The government and college managements are actively working to preserve and strengthen social inequality rather than addressing it through accessible education. This represents a fundamental betrayal of democratic values and social justice principles.

Faculty exploitation and academic decay

The abandonment of UGC-sanctioned posts will lead to massive faculty exploitation as private managements replace experienced, qualified professors with cheap labour. This systematic destruction of academic quality will further devalue degrees and harm student prospects in the job market. Students paying lakhs of rupees for education deserve qualified faculty and quality instruction. However, profit-driven managements will prioritize cost-cutting over quality, ensuring that expensive privatized education delivers sub-standard academic value.

The accountability black hole

Private institutions operate with minimal accountability compared to publicly funded colleges. Without proper oversight, there is nothing to prevent private colleges from becoming diploma mills that prioritize enrolment numbers over educational quality. Students and parents will have no recourse when promised educational standards are not delivered. The government's role in enabling this accountability vacuum shows complete disregard for student protection and educational quality assurance.

Economic justice under attack

At its core, this privatization drive represents an attack on economic justice and equality. The government and college managements are actively working to create a two-tier educational system where quality education becomes a privilege of the wealthy while the poor are relegated to sub-standard alternatives or complete exclusion. This economic discrimination will have long-term consequences for Meghalaya's social fabric and democratic health, creating permanent divisions based on economic status rather than merit or ability.

Need for ruthless resistance

The time for polite protests and diplomatic appeals has passed. The government and college managements have shown they care nothing for student welfare or public interest. Only fierce, uncompromising resistance can stop this educational heist. Students, parents, faculty, and concerned citizens must organize ruthlessly to expose this betrayal and force withdrawal of privatization policies. This is not about opposing change - this is about opposing anti-people policies disguised as reform.

Conclusion: A call to arms

The Meghalaya government and college managements have declared war on the youth of our state. Their privatization agenda, implemented during an unprecedented employment crisis with graduates earning barely ₹15,000 per month, represents one of the most heartless policies in recent memory. This is not about educational improvement or modernization - this is about maximizing profits by exploiting student desperation and family sacrifice. The government's complicity makes them equally guilty of this educational betrayal.

We demand immediate withdrawal of all privatization policies and restoration of UGC-sanctioned posts. We demand affordable, quality education for all students regardless of economic background. We demand that our government serve the people rather than collude with greedy institutions to destroy educational accessibility.

The youth of Meghalaya will not be sacrificed for profit. We will fight this educational genocide with everything we have.

Letters to the Editor

Menace of traffic nuisance

Editor,

I am extremely overburdened by the persistent menace of traffic nuisances in the capital city of Shillong. On the night of August 4, 2025, at around 9:45 PM, I happened to travel from Police Bazar to Nongthymmai.

While commuting from the Gurdwara area towards St. Anthony's College and further towards Shillong College, I encountered a concerning incident. A motorbike was being driven rashly in a no-entry zone and proceeded to climb up Jacob's Ladder, blatantly violating traffic rules.

When I reached Don Bosco Square, I encountered another vehicle - this time a car - coming from Hopkinson Road towards Don Bosco Square, again in clear violation of traffic rules.

I am deeply concerned about these repeated incidents, especially during nighttime. Such negligence is leading to an increasing number of accidents, posing serious risks to public safety.

Today, I came to know that on the very same night, an underaged scooter rider rammed into a senior citizen in front of Yalana Hotel tragically killing him on the spot. Is this not enough to raise alarm? Why can't we have proper night-time traffic vigilance across the city of Shillong? Why are we continuing to break the law so carelessly?

Let us strive to live as responsible and civilized citizens and abide by traffic rules. I sincerely urge

the Traffic Department to take immediate steps to curb such reckless behaviour - especially by ensuring that scooters and bikes do not violate traffic laws by riding against the flow, entering through no-entry zones, or flouting one-way rules. Strict enforcement and visible night patrols are the need of the hour to prevent further loss of life.

Yours etc.,
Benjamin.R.L.,
Via email

Sex, teenage pregnancies and their aftermath

Editor,

If people remain silent in the face of rising social sickness, then we ourselves are to blame. In this respect, I offer my heartfelt thanks to Toki Blah for his recent article titled "Sex and our teenagers" (ST, Aug 6, 2025). It holds up a mirror to a troubling reality facing today's generation, a truth that frightens many, especially the victims, who must bear the weight of lifelong trauma, emotional distress, and even poverty.

When short-lived sexual encounters, even of one-time, among teenagers, for various reasons, become a turning point that derails countless young lives, as the writer has highlighted - forcing them to bid farewell to the brighter side of life - it becomes the duty of each of us to stay vigilant. Tomorrow, the same fate could befall someone close to us.

Let us be logical and reflect on the realities shaping the inner world of our

young children, realities that often lead them into harmful indulgences. Their well-being is our well-being. It must remain our top priority. Therefore, we must watch carefully at every step. We need to stay alert to whether our young ones are falling prey to sexual predators, even within schools.

Now let's look at it from nature's perspective' also. What nature wants from us and why. If we try to dismiss it, then nature dismisses us. Yes, would you hand a fragile glass to a child who is not mature enough to hold it? Even an adult entrusted with such a fragile object must handle it with extreme care. If it falls, it may hurt not only the holder but others nearby. In the same way, why has "nature" endowed human beings with sexual feelings as early as 13 or 14 years? Is it nature's design to put them in a quagmire of agony? Certainly not. Nature is supremely intelligent. Every aspect of its creation has a purpose. That is why human beings are gifted with intellect --- the power to discern good from bad, right from wrong.

But today, that power of discernment is steadily eroding. Wrong influences overpower young minds, especially when smartphones become dearer to children than their own parents. The result? A generation gap vulnerable to exploitation and emotional turmoil.

In addition to intellect, nature has also endowed us with another "faculty" -- an inner compass to regulate our wrong appetites and preserve the integrity of our species,

especially when carnal impulses threaten to overpower reason. It always guards us in a very subtle way, like the fear of falling guards a child near the edge, and the fear of punishment guards an adult from stealing or committing a crime.

At this moment, I will avoid discussing that regulating faculty. However, I can drop a hint here because my silence will make me guilty of complicity. What if electromagnetic scientists like Michael Faraday, Maxwell, and Nikola Tesla had ignored the need for insulators. We would have our technological advancement short-circuited. Now we would have still been groping in the darkness.

We often seek to transgress the order of nature, forgetting that its laws are not adversaries but guardians of balance and harmony. To defy them is to invite chaos. Perhaps many of our youngsters have outsmarted "nature" by knowingly or unknowingly remaining fixated solely on base content, lacking even a trace of discipline, and feeding their minds with an endless stream of obscene material, and thereafter, catastrophe follows catastrophe. Most importantly, they have rarely paused to understand how nature has designed and programmed the mind and sensory faculties. They are least aware that with every ounce of "dopamine-induced" pleasure while viewing explicit content, the mind becomes weaker and weaker. Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson has aptly warned that easy access to explicit content online is shaping unhealthy attitudes

Yours etc.,
Sali Gwali,
Shillong

"Information is the resolution of uncertainty."

— Claude Shannon

The Shillong Times

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VPP taunts the Congress

INDIVIDUAL actions cannot define the stance of a political party. The Voice of the Peoples Party (VPP) spokesperson's comment that the Congress was a government in the opposition reeks of disrespect for fellow MLAs and political arrogance of being the only political party that checkmates the Government. The departure of Ronnie V Lyngdoh from the Congress and his joining the NPP is his personal decision. Most turncoat politicians make the usual claims that they can serve people better if they are in the Government. This belies the role of parliamentary democracy where development is the job of the government and not that of individual MLAs. Elected representatives are supposed to follow up on schemes related to their constituencies and to relentlessly pursue with different departments when such are not implemented. In fact, development is the task of the government and it should proceed smoothly without need for interference by MLAs. No government has the right to starve any MLA of any scheme just because that MLA is in the Opposition

Very often the government adopts a strategy of depriving the Opposition constituencies of meaningful developmental projects. This pushes opposition MLAs to strike deals with the party in power to defect if 'favourable offers' in cash or positions are offered. In the name of development, overnight such MLAs fall prey to the ruling party's machinations and defect and support the government. Once the Opposition is fragmented its members are no longer in position to raise their voices against the administration and thus the government has free reins. There is a tendency to believe that MLAs play a role in how state funds are spent. This is not true. They do informally play a role in the administration of their constituencies, but they don't have a say in public expenditure. Therefore, they must use their role in the assembly to scrutinise the annual budget, participate in budget consultations, raise issues in the house using reports of the CAG and the Accountant General to ensure that public money is spent wisely. This also requires extensive preparation which our MLAs hardly have time for.

Both MLAs from the ruling party/coalition and the Opposition are expected to submit questions that the government is obliged to answer. During Question Hour (the first hour of every Assembly sitting), MLAs pose questions to the government about any aspect of governance. Questions are of types — Starred (where ministers offer an oral answer on the floor of the House) and unstarred (where ministers can issue a written response). While an MLA can, with permission from the Speaker, ask a supplementary query following a minister's response to a starred question, the same cannot happen for unstarred questions. In other states where the Panchayati Raj Act is in place, roads, water supply, waste and sanitation are within the purview of the Panchayats and not of MLAs. In Meghalaya neither the District Councils nor the Dorbar Shnong have the resources to address these basic needs of a constituency. Hence MLAs and even MPs have to address civic needs and this puts undue pressure on them. Things have to change and MLAs have to know their brief.

Letters to the Editor

Why block job prospects for architects?

Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to express my deep concern over the indifferent attitude of the government in blocking all posts for architects across various departments. This prolonged inaction has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of thousands of architecture graduates and postgraduates, many of whom are now nearing or have already crossed the age limit for government employment. While public sector opportunities remain closed, the government continues to award major design and planning contracts for public projects to private firms. These firms, in turn, employ architecture graduates on a purely contractual basis with meagre pay, heavy workloads, and grand promises that rarely materialise into fair treatment or career growth. This situation is not only unjust to qualified professionals but also a waste of local talent, as these young minds are forced to either work under exploitative conditions or seek employment outside the state.

The question that arises is - Where does the accountability of the government lie? If public funds can be used to pay private contractors, why cannot the same funds be utilised to create permanent architect positions within

government departments? Such negligence risks an entire generation's professional aspirations, undermining both the architectural sector and the public infrastructure it serves. It is high time the government took proactive steps to lift the freeze on architect posts, initiate transparent recruitment drives, and ensure fair working conditions for all qualified professionals.

Government departments, which should ideally be the primary employers and nurturers of this talent, have blocked or left vacant sanctioned architect posts for years. This raises a pressing question: If the State already has a pool of trained, local architects eager to serve, why is their potential being overlooked in favour of outsourcing?

This is not merely an employment issue; it is a question of justice, efficiency, and the State's commitment to harnessing its own talent. By sidelining our own graduates, we not only waste years of education and public investment but also dampen the aspirations of an entire generation.

I therefore urge the Government to: 1. Immediately unfreeze and fill all sanctioned architect posts in various departments through transparent recruitment. 2. Review and relax the age bar for candidates affected by prolonged vacancy of posts. 3. Prioritise local architect graduates and postgraduates in government projects instead of outsourcing

Of Inflamed Minds, Inner Displacement, and Cracked and Broken Paths

By Yona M Nonglang

The wall on which the prophets wrote/Is cracking at the seams/Upon the instruments of death/The sunlight brightly gleams/When every man is torn apart/With nightmares and with dreams/Will no one lay the laurel wreath/When silence drowns the screams?

"Confusion will be my epitaph/As I crawl a cracked and broken path/If we make it we can all sit back and laugh/But I fear tomorrow I'll be crying..."

"Between the iron gates of fate/The seeds of time were sown/And watered by the deeds of those/Who know and who are known/Knowledge is a deadly friend/If no one sets the rules/Is our collective fate, therefore, in the hands of fools?" (italics in Bold paraphrased for the sake of context).

These poignant lines from the rock band King Crimson's song "Epitaph," were what came to mind while listening to a discussion on Doordashan Shillong (https://youtu.be/VkBubvcgGpG?si=ly_84x_wgGpFnrZ) where four gentlemen tried to unpack the implications of the recent PIL by the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) that challenges the long held Khasi maxim of Tipkur, Tipkha.

Surprisingly, or not, the SRT sent no participant to the discussion—their missed opportunity to enlighten the public on their PIL move, since that was the media platform with the broadcast capacity to the entire Khasi Hills. So, the discussion ended up one-sided since all three participants were firmly against the PIL, with why "unsettle the settled" their agreed understanding.

Indeed, why, the SRT's move to unsettle our tipkur-tipkha tradition at this point in time? Is it because this is the most opportune time for them, with VPP at the helm in the KHADC? The party known for our respected Christian fundamentalist, Member of Parliament who is rumoured (apologies if it's just a rumour) to have personally discarded his matrilineal roots? The same party with a blowhard supremo who has not only been mocking our matrilineal tradition at public forums, but who has also been displaying his fallacious sanctimonious habit of proof-text, in public, to further inflame the religious sentiments of his Christian fundamentalist base?

While we're supposed to respect others' personal religious faith, we have to raise this issue because of the messianic evangelical nature of these leaders' religious fanaticism that will not make them rest until they have reshaped the rest of us after their own image. So did SRT reject Doordashan's in-

itation to participate in that post-PIL discussion because it no longer feels the need to explain itself to the community because it finally has power on its side?

About a year ago, however, the SRT did send their representative to a 4Front media discussion on more or less the same topic (https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=MOTNEuW1bB4). And that representative's gutter arguments for the change he and SRT wanted to bring about were so scandalously lumpy, it was difficult to swallow the idea that this was actually the face of the group that wants to "reform" our community by daring to question the profound wisdom of our esoteric founding forebears who implemented our Tipkur, Tipkha policy in the first place.

In fact, "inner displacement" was the only diagnosis one could come up with after careful listening to the low-brow arguments for change from a gentleman who came across as spiritually, mentally and emotionally displaced by both patriarchal Christian fundamentalist fanaticism and chauvinistic Khasi nationalistic fervour—with an uninformed reading of the Christian Bible and the aforementioned equally inwardly displaced VPP supremo as his reference sources for his arguments for change!

The way this same gentleman also mocked our rich tradition of orality as mere ignorant gibberish was shockingly appalling. Had he bothered to do his research on the beautiful brain science behind oral storytelling, I doubt he would have verbalised such patronising and ignorant gibberish himself. To paraphrase the Socratic dictum δνεξέταστος βίος ο βίωτης νόμος (ho de anektastos bios ou biotos anthropo) in Plato's Apology, the unexamined lives among us, left to their machinations, are dangerous to our very survival as a people, aren't they?

As if patriarchal societies have no broken families, spousal and child abuses, and addiction issues. As if they have reached the point where they no longer suffer economic, social and political polarities, violent unrest, and so forth. The statistics, if we bother to find out, are there to tell the real story, aren't they?

But, what if, - a big what if at that - SRT's foolishly defiant move to undo our Tipkur, Tipkha succeeds? What will we be left with if we consign our cherished legacy into the ashes of history through some short-sighted act of legislation, passed by ill-advised, purlind, chauvinistic, power-drunk legislators, who lack the capacity to

understand that their sacred duty as policymakers is not constitutionally uphold, not violate, the sacrosanctity of our inherited customs and traditions established by our clear-eyed and farsighted founding generation of policymakers who came up with the profound moral maxim of Tipbriew, Tipblei; Tipkur, Tipkha; Kama! ia ka Hok; the very sacred ground where our community's substructure and superstructure stand?

That if we ever dare to profane that hallowed ground through some reckless and obtuse policy change, both our substructure and superstructure will come crashing down? Who will we be and where will we go after that? We've heard of disappearing and wandering communities that have lost their ground, haven't we? Will that be our self-inflicted destiny too?

Therefore, isn't it time this generation asks itself how our community's Tipkur, Tipkha, this Mei-Meikha-centered-centrality, this non-patriarchal lineage legacy, evolved in the first place? Isn't it because of our esoteric forebears' recondite-ness, that gave them their policymaking clarity? Their vision for an empathetic, nurturing and non-chauvinist social framework? And their moral intelligence that understood the importance of that feminine-centred centrality?

Shouldn't we also be more appreciative of our founding forebears' progressive mindset? That they created legislations that elevated our women's status socially and economically? Especially the youngest and most vulnerable amongst us? And what better exercise in collective character development than at the same time shouldering those same youngest and most vulnerable members of the community with their fair share of responsibility, to both immediate and broader family, even as they're the chosen custodians of both clan lineage and family heritage?

And, shouldn't we also thank our ancient knowledge system, inspired, perhaps, not just by our enlightened forebears' lived experience, but also their keen observation of their domain too, that might have led to their philosophical and scientific understanding of that amazing biological fact: seed can't sprout without life-giving Mother Earth and Mother?

Indeed, their profound understanding that there can be no life without one or the other? And we would, therefore, collectively, be better off, if we elevated both, because it would have been foolhardy and sacrilegious to

sideline them? That a militant, chauvinistic impulse to "subdue" them would kill their marvellous life-giving rhythm and energy that have been sustaining us and our beloved Hills for millennia?

That, as long as we hold on to what our enlightened and far-sighted forebears put in place, we will always be here, small in number though we are, but sure of our identity as a people, here in our own world, out there in the larger world too, just like other fellow matrilineal kins everywhere, whose primordial primogenitors were not "Adam" and "Eve"? That, in spite of genocides, culturicides, and ecocides, at the hands of European white supremacists and their present day local ideological offsprings, we indigenous people are still here, aren't we, still resisting pressures to abandon our customs and traditions by defiantly staying true to who we are?

So why hold in contempt our beautiful legacy of female-centred centrality? Why the willing self-sacrifice at the altar of chauvinistic patriarchal supremacism? Wouldn't that be our worst ultimate form of self-betrayal? But that's the legacy colonial white supremacist "education" and "religion" have been leaving in their wake, isn't it? "Natives" who are no longer sure about themselves. But, very sure about being someone else.

Just look at what we have become. A people at sea, adrift in this senseless vortex of political, economic, ecological, moral, cultural and identity disorientation. While we regurgitate paternalistic, divisive, and dangerous, ideas, of our erstwhile colonial masters. Because we've been straying, and estranging, from our own Sohpetbneng and our own primordial primogenitors narratives?

Indeed, isn't estrangement, from our own Sohpetbneng, the reason for our present state of disorientation, self-doubt and self-betrayal as a people? Our Sohpetbneng, that, until almost two hundred years ago, was our sole collective spiritual anchor that connected us all to that sacred higher purpose of existence—of reverence for the Creator, of care for Mother Earth, and for one another, together as a community, to ensure a harmonious world for generations to come?

But to a majority of us, our very own Sohpetbneng narrative is now just another embarrassing and irrelevant old story we've cast aside, isn't it? Hence the daredevil attempt to unsettle the very sanctified ground of our shared existence as a community, whose founding forebears' wisdom is timeless?

made a start with Khyndai Lad and few hawkers have been provided with stalls at the MUDA parking lot but parking lots are no solution. Chargeable street parking will not be able to cater to the numerous vehicles in the town besides the fact that the parking fee is equally high.

It would indeed be a matter of time before chaos and mayhem emerges. Agreeing with B. Dutta, many more multi-storied parking lots should be constructed in order to decongest the roads and allow for a smooth movement of vehicles. For those at the helm of affairs, who face no traffic jams nor require proper space to park their vehicles, the best possible space to relocate the hawkers to, are parking lots but certainly not for us the general populace. As a suggestion, if the government could speed up the matter of relocation of the residents of the Sweepers Lane to the Shillong Municipal Board land at Bivar Road without any further delay and establish the area as a designated vending zone, being a market place the hawkers would be able to carry on their business more comfortably and profitably.

Yours etc.,
Jainraj Chhetry,
Tura

Parking spaces cannot be compromised

Editor,
I cannot help but agree with B. Dutta's letter: "Back to turning roads into parking lots." I had always been very vocal about the need for hawkers to have designated spaces of their own to trade freely without spreading their wares at footpaths, corners, all possible spaces and even on the road. However, I was equally vocal that parking lots cannot be designated vending zones for the obvious reason that the size of the road is still the same while the number of cars hitting the same roads are on the increase on a daily basis. The attempt to convert parking lots into vending zones was contemplated by the government for a very long time and it has materialised this time. Though the government has

Confessions of a King - A Toilet Lover

By Kyntiewborlang Kharakor

This op-ed was conceived when I was in my wash-room throne; typed it in my workspace and then again, polished it in the next wash-room session. My 15-20 minutes' time in the throne is not wasted. I assure readers that the subject of this short write-up itself is silly, gross, or slightly a taboo, but it is worth sharing. I am a 'toilet-lover' or 'someone whose gut's have opinions and they're loud'. I prioritize awareness and education even at the cost of embarrassing myself. I have a thousand numbers of REAL (as opposed to REEL) Followers IRL. I intend to share this with my tiny followers as an article-writing sample and a lesson about living and eating healthy. My 'Flushy Fiend' had taught, and forced me to journey a complete lifestyle-change for the better (or worse).

It all started in NEHU one day: I was on the bus from Mawiong-NEHU. A sudden jerk of the bus in one speed breaker in Mawlai Nonglum sent shockwaves into my stomach instigating a Tsunami from within. Never in my life had I been so tense, it was a race against time—but time moved slowly. As soon as our Blue Elephant stopped in the Cluster Classrooms, I sped off to the nearest washroom to relieve myself. From that day, it had become a regular experience (not only in NEHU), which later turned into a habit. The urgency to use the loo increases—many times the only thing that comes out is frustrated sighs. I never realised the signs thinking that it was only a minor stomach infection, hence the medicines of Dr. Mukhim from the NEHU clinic only gave temporary cure.

Mother wondered that it might still be that nasty 'niangsohpet' that didn't heal because Kiaw Bah Spi's tonic didn't work on me like it did on my seven siblings. My father insisted, "It's just your head- Control it!" - he's somewhat right but I couldn't muster the courage to eat his spicy dishes as a test. My neighbour, (Late) Meieid, after kneading my stomach, rules out my mother's suspicion - 'a lump in your stomach!'. 'Bah B's traditional herbal medicines will surely help'. I dragged my foot towards the clinic, a stone's throw away from my house, after hearing Aunt Meime's loving concern. Finally, my wife yelled some sense into my spongy head - HOSPITAL. But again, I heard conspiracy theories about hospitals; "They'll only find excuses to send you to a Covid Ward and charge exorbitant rates! Might even treat you as a Covid patient... You'll definitely die!!". I held on to my pants for the entire first wave, until a family event in the next Covid wave rendered me bedridden for three days, with only sudden spurts of energy for frequent trips to the washroom. Hesitantly, I entered the premises of Robert's Hospital and met Dr Kharsyntiew - 'my saviour. After a series of "...scopies' and enduring the uncomfortable tubes on both ends, we found the culprit - Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). It is a common condition that affects the stomach and intestines which includes symptoms like cramping, belly pain, bloating, gas, and diarrhoea/constipation or both. It is an ongoing condition that needs long-term management. There is no possible cure so far. The causes of IBS aren't really known but a few factors can play a role like abnormal contractions of the muscles in the intestine, nervous system, severe infections, early-life stress or changes in gut microbes.

Research Phase
Life after this discovery changed drastically for me as I have to monitor what I eat and maintain a diary with complex charts of - 'Can have', 'Can have but 2/3 tablespoons only' and 'Strictly cannot have or you'll blow up.' There's not much options, but dairy (except Dahi), fried food drowned in oil (pakoras, food items with artificial colours), heavily oiled masala dishes, soups (fatty) and several others are major triggers that can erupt a nuclear war which will last for 2 - 3 days. This and the cool off period are the worst because the body is susceptible to another attack. Stress is a major trigger that can prolong flare ups and even cause it. Medicines help a lot in such times.
Twist
However, diet and stress are not the only major concerns. Gut brain axis also plays a key role. At times when I eat a certain trigger food item, my stomach doesn't react instantly and the opposite happens with my 'chart-approved and safe non-trigger' food item. Eating a plate of rice or snacks in my mother's house/my in-laws versus eating in someone else's house, travelling in a cab versus my father's car or my own personal bike - these are two completely different situations that determine my stomach cramp. The comfort or 'got-used-to' experience in the latter greatly appeals to my ailment. Training the brain (or fooling it at times) to adjust to new situations and environments is a daily challenge that I have to undergo. Travelling in a cab in Shillong's traffic is a wild daring adventure for me. It is extremely hard and embarrassing to explain to my people the reason for my refusal to attend an event or eat in a public gathering (funerals and other celebrations) or visit friends and family members. I often had to endure judging eyes, eyes that say - 'U riempah/u bam standard/u sarong kyreit/u kheinhop ba ngi duk'' or worse 'u tieng BIIH'.
Enlightenment
I turned 30 recently. Medicines are crucial in managing IBS. But why be dependent on it at such a young age. IBS is a FIEND that lives inside of me but it is also a blessing in disguise - a clarion call for a change in lifestyle. I found my life's mantra - GNC (Gym 'N' Church), after I contracted this disease. For mental and physical well-being, I turn to the Gym (and lately - "Shillong Times - Lyzander Vrs Bhogtoram). My brother introduced me to 'Genfit Gym Mawlai where I met a bunch of fighters who are struggling with personal demons like me. It is a safe-therapeutic haven where we chum physical wellness out of stress, and develop long lasting healthy habits and discipline. For emotional and spiritual well-being, nothing beats a regular silent solo meditation with God in a Chapel/Church. It is not a fool proof mantra, but personally for me, it works. I may not be able to get rid of IBS, but I can manage it in the long run. One of the greatest lessons it taught me was the ability to say "NO" - No to late night celebrations, NO to offers of drinks and smoke, NO to Fast food and NO to a lot of things which are not good for my body even if it offends people. If I get tempted or become reckless at any point of time in life, I know that my lovely FRIEND will always remind me to stay on the right track with harsher punishments as I grow old.

(The writer is a school teacher in St. Mary's English School, Laitumkhrh. While most teachers get headaches, Rowdy students give him diarrhoea.)

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

"From the deepest desires often come the deadliest hate."

— Socrates

The Shillong Times

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Dogs and humans

DOGS are humans' best friends. They guard us day and night. They act as companions to many; and are deeply loyal to their masters. They have their appreciable sides. All of these do not necessarily mean they should be let loose in the streets. The Supreme Court had a point when it ordered removal of street dogs from the Delhi NCR Region and their relocation from streets to shelters at the earliest. To many animal lovers, this however has come as a provocation. The court has its reasons; animal lovers have their reasons too. Between these, it is important that life remains normal in our streets. Fact is, dogs create a law and order problem. The need is to see how best this can be overcome without hurting the canine population.

Maneka Gandhi, prominent animal rights activist, has a point. As she said, if you remove stray dogs from the streets in the national capital region, dogs from neighbouring states would come and take the situation back to square one. Her citation of an experience in Paris in the 1880s is educative. When they removed dogs and cats from the city, rats invaded the French capital. In India, street dogs are a nuisance. Pedestrians, morning walkers/joggers, those who move around at night in urban or rural areas are all risking their lives due to the aggressiveness of dogs. If humans are aggressive, they are tackled by law. Not so for dogs. They invade public places, railway platforms, bus stations, and almost every place other than gated communities and unprotected areas. Their excreta is spread all over city streets, mainly in metropolitan areas like Kolkata, Mumbai, or Delhi's roads. Those who travel by cars are unaffected by this, while the pedestrians and scooterists are worst-hit.

Dogs, per se, are not the only problem that humans face from animals. There are states in the North East where human-elephant conflicts have led to loss of human lives and intrusion into agricultural fields. For farmers living in areas close to forests, these are a nightmare. The forest department has a policy to compensate families that have been attacked by animals but more often than not, the payment takes years, getting caught as they are with red tape and bureaucratic apathy. Many victims get nothing. Notably, dogs are having a different status in some north-eastern states, where tribal customs permit their being killed for meat. In some states, cows are killed for meat, while the Hindus mainly in the northern states attach divinity to them. Courts cannot tackle such socio-religious customs either way. There cannot be a uniform law spanning all communities, regions and societies in dealing with human-animal conflicts. If there are laws, implementation would be a problem. Dogs roaming around public places and attacking humans pose serious problems as they could infect humans with deadly rabies about which the apex court is seriously concerned; and rightly so. It is for the government to address the issue with all seriousness. Propriety demands as much. Vacillation cannot be a state policy.

Protecting and Promoting Local Artists in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A few days ago I came across a Facebook post by Mario Pathaw, an upcoming artist from Meghalaya, whose paintings have featured as murals on government buildings and whose design serves as the emblem of Meghalaya. I learned about his work when Raiot, an online webzine for which I was editing for a while, featured an extract from his graphic novel 'Tynrai Shwa ki Tnat (Roots before branches)'. He had created the book when he was still pursuing his Master's degree at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC School of Design), IIT Bombay. Since then, he has produced many artworks, which have brought him both recognition and work.

Comic books (graphic novels are a more expansive version) have a long history in the state. It began in the 1980s with artists like Bah M.K.D. Sohtun, Bah W.R. Dkhar, Bah Michael Lyngdoh, Bah Wengsingh Roy Dkhar and many more contributed to this genre. From among these stalwarts, Bah S. Koressterwell Majaw emerged as one of the most prolific comic book writers of that period, having written for over 10 Khasi Comics, with Shillong Seven Huts Publication as one of the popular publishing houses dealing with Khasi Comics. Mario is part of this hallowed tradition, and his graphic novel is part of the growing culture of combining text and pictures to tell a story, which has emerged from our hills. So, it was very sad to find in his Facebook post that he has stopped sharing his work.

Mario admitted that social media helped in creating an engagement with his work. Over the years, it gave him recognition and visibility, which brought more work. But this has come at an unfortunate cost. Over time, he has noticed that his artworks have been "plagiarised and misused, reproduced without ... (his) knowledge, consent, or credit". He has spotted them "on merchandise, in enterprises and emporiums" with whom he had never interacted. For him, this was baffling and heartbreaking. I also saw his artwork in souvenir shops. I assumed that the store had his permission. But after he admitted to his

work being used without his consent, I am no longer sure about it. What this does is deprive him of the rightful earnings that he deserves for creating original pieces of work, which took time and effort.

We talked about filing a copyright infringement lawsuit against the stores and individuals selling his artwork without his permission. While that might work to some extent, it may not completely stem the problem unless a platform displays and sells original works of artists from the state. After all, there are many artists like Mario who have made their living through art, and they also need a support system that works for all.

I am very interested in supporting the local visual artists; because I have friends (like Benjamin Syiem, a national award-winning artist) who are working in this sector and I am also an amateur artist myself with one of my childhood dreams was to become a comic book artist. I did political cartoons on a weekly basis for the Meghalaya Times for some time, and I have my page, U Jler, where I draw comics based on current affairs. My greatest delight was when I published my first volume of U Jler Comics and an illustrated storybook on the Khasi adaptation of the timeless story of 'The Little Prince'.

While I am quite proud of my work, I have a day job, and these were personal projects without the intention of actually making money. I am well aware of how difficult the sector is. There are unreasonable deadlines imposed by clients, delayed payments, and a shortage of work. It's not a very lucrative sector, and those who have made a living out of it are doing so despite the lack of money. But money is very important.

One platform where artists can showcase their work is exhibitions, and I have gone to a few of them over the years. The government organised some, while some are collaborative initiatives by the artists themselves. The recent one was an exhibition organised on 'World

Art Day' in All Saints' Hall by Careen J. Langstiehl, an accomplished artist herself, in collaboration with other local artists. It was wonderful to see artworks in different genres, meeting established artists like Benedict Hyniewta and Mario himself. One artist I really admire among all is Batliakor Laitthma, whose paintings are honest, and one can see her constantly improving and evolving. Unfortunately, I did not find her artworks in the exhibition, which just reveals the depth of talent that exists in the state. If not for anything, going to such exhibitions is immensely therapeutic.

Such exhibitions, however, are very few. There are platforms like the Winter Tales and Shillong Literature Festival where some artwork gets exhibited. But it is very difficult to get the artwork sold when people who come to such festivals have other things in mind. Therefore, I have always thought that a permanent space for art exhibitions, where they put artwork of artists from all over the state for exhibition and sale, could be a very good initiative. This space should be open to all artists. At any one time, there will be multiple artists displaying their works, but they will get to showcase only a fixed number of their artworks. In case they can get them sold, the artist can bring new pieces for display. Because the number of artists and their artworks will exceed the capacity of the space, every artist will have a time limit (say, a month), after which others can showcase their own work. After the time limit is over, those who have already showcased can only bring their work again after, let's say, three or four artists have already got their opportunity, unless there are no works to display. This will create an incentive for artists to bring their best work so that they can sell it, and not just use it as a showcase for their vanity.

The exhibition will also have space for the sale of merchandise, and the artists themselves or their agents will operate it. These stalls will also have information

on the legitimate stores or emporiums that may sell the artists' work. If one finds the artwork in locations not listed in the pamphlet or flyer provided at the exhibition, it means those locations are infringing on copyright. Customers can then call the artists, who will start legal proceedings against the guilty party.

As for the customers, this will be a mix of locals and non-locals, especially tourists, who should be encouraged to include the exhibition as part of their itinerary. The state also gets a lot of visitors who come to meet the government for investment or to provide loans. There are also workshops and seminars that happen all the time. The participants will be made aware of the exhibition, which they can visit before they return. I recently met the German ambassador to India at an event put on by Asian Confluence, a think tank based in Shillong. The ambassador was in the state for a project. And he is not the only one. So, footfall could only improve with time.

For a long time, people have known Shillong as the 'Cultural Capital of the North East' and Guwahati as the 'Financial Capital of the North East'. Much of the money Assam gets is borrowed, so they're in the same situation as Meghalaya. But despite this, there is no way we can ever compete with Assam in terms of attracting investments because of the size of the state in terms of area and population. But we can outdo it in terms of aesthetics and being a place where people can come not just for scenery but for art and culture as well. We have a lot of scope in terms of residences for writing because of the salubrious climate we have and a lot of materials for producing great artwork, whether it be stories from the past or the current affairs of the present. So, a permanent exhibition could just be one way in which we can boost the image of our state and help generate revenue. In the process, we also ensure young artists like Mario receive their due and no one exploits them.

(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)

Compassionate Intelligence in the Time of AI

By Sadhika Anand

They knew the cure, yet their silence overpowered their willingness to take action. This is a throwback to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study which was conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972. Hundreds of African American men with syphilis were misled about their diagnosis and denied penicillin while researchers conducted the study.

Despite having the knowledge, they failed to take proper action to solve the problem and act responsibly leading us to the term of compassionate intelligence.

What is compassionate intelligence? It is the ability to act with compassion, understanding and concern for others. Let me break this down. Compassionate means undertaking action to support people in grief and alleviate them from their suffering once you get a firm understanding of their situation. Intelligence entails the use of the mind to solve problems, navigate new situations and ideate. In the case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, there was a clear absence of compassionate intelligence which led to the loss of several lives.

When paired together, compassionate intelligence is the ability to use the mind to help other people's problems and design solutions as care for others. It helps us to foster long lasting connections, understand our friends better while becoming an emotional leader. Doctors are a prime example of compassionate intelligence: they pair their medical knowledge with emotional support, helping their patients undergo the most difficult and testing times of their lives.

The difference between empathy and emotional quotient might be confusing. Empathy is association and feeling with someone, understanding their emotions. Emotional quotient entails one to care and think about the emotions of others as well as themselves.

Compassionate intelligence is utilising your feelings logically to bring about change: a combination of emotional quotient, intelligence and action.

Interestingly, this term has become popular in the context of artificial intelligence where compassionate intelligence marks a difference.

With the advent of AI, we are experiencing a sudden change in the way the world works. Machines are learning to mimic our logic, play with our words and are slowly substituting our routine human efforts in a more efficient manner. With each task being automated to be performed by a computer, one really questions what it cannot do.

In times like these, we ask a critical question: is there any difference between an AI agent and humans? Some argue that humans have physical bodies and emotions which make them capable of forming beautiful connections with fellow mates and enjoy the warmth of friendship which seems impossible even with the most sophisticated AI models today. Therefore, the real difference is not in how we compute or calculate but rather about how we care.

Can AI agents ever possess compassionate intelligence? Let's look at the various AI models in different fields. We envision our future to have robot doctors. While the idea sounds brilliant, it takes away the human aspect of care associated with the process of a medical consultation. Although our technology can efficiently diagnose medical decisions, it presently lacks the human comfort and warmth one requires when they undergo a procedure - a reassurance in these turbulent times that everything will be fine. For example, in Japan, robots in elder care homes prove to be a good substitute for humans but lack the sensitivity and patience a senior requires from humans. Most seniors said they prefer the comfort of a human over that of a robot.

These concerns follow in education and mental health services. While students are switching to AI experts aiding them with education roadmaps and concept explanation, they lack the experience

and personalised guidance offered by a teacher. More often than ever, a child's main motivator is their school teachers who, inspire them to strive for excellence and help them with academic and emotional problems. Teachers report that with students switching to AI after the pandemic, their personal battles at home are often overshadowed which was a point of discussion before. Teachers used to help students with their personal challenges, making them more comfortable and adapting them to challenges. In light of these challenges, we must reconsider the roles we assign to AI and understand possible remedies for the same.

The answer is a bit complicated but can work with a hybrid model. Conventionally, this hybrid model can be achieved by supplementing a human with the service of an AI model. Rather than purely replacing humans with AI or vice versa, we must explore a hybrid model combining the intelligence efficiency of AI with the emotional capacities of humans. For context, we can enlist AI's help in the early diagnosis for a patient but the discussion of the treatment plan as well as conveying the diagnosis can be done by the doctor to provide comfort to the patient in these worrying times. For places like customer service or elder care where technology is becoming more prevalent, we can train our models to recognise change in tone and provide words of comfort whenever required. They can also flag major tone changes so that humans can take up the expected concerns and help out.

There is a rapid advancement in the field of AI but one aspect to explore further is the integration of emotions. Keeping this in mind, I propose an unconventional yet possible path forward. The world is moving towards the direction of creating robots with Gen AI intelligence and to this, we must add emotion. This will never replace humans but scale up human efficacy in providing personalised services. Perhaps, developing systems and training AI models on emotional data and giving it the ability to respond appropriately to emotional prompts could be a way forward. This aims to integrate our emotional quotient with technology, helping it develop empathy and a sense of justice contributing to a better society.

For fields like customer service, AI can flag major tone changes for human follow up. Furthermore, when developing systems input from all types of communities should be included such that there is no racial or gender bias when giving verdicts or when helping in job hiring. In robotics, facial expressions and gestures can be developed to bring comfort to the humans they work with specifically in fields like elder care and healthcare. Therefore, integrating emotions and AI sounds promising but there remain hurdles.

Researchers worry that AI agents might not be developed enough to handle complex feelings that humans face which can lead to problems in decision making. Additionally, this replacement in critical fields such as healthcare and eldercare may not be an optimum solution since these fields require the human element for one to feel comfortable. Even if we train our agents on the most complex of datasets, would the decisions they make be similar to ones of humans?

These were the two sides of the compassionate intelligence with respect to AI debate. In 2025, it is our responsibility to remember that our human feeling and warmth is what differentiates us from technology and rather than running away from it, we must hone it. The future of AI is not in replacing emotion but in integrating it - to develop machines that not only compute but care as well. (Sadhika Anand is a second-year B. Tech student at Plaksha University with a strong interest in entrepreneurship and tech. She's curious, driven to learn something new every day, and hopes to one day build her own AI-powered business that creates a positive impact on the environment).

Letters to the Editor

The Financial System: Our Modern Irrigation Network

Editor,
Imagine an ancient irrigation system — a network of channels that carried water from places where it was abundant to lands where it was scarce. This simple yet powerful idea allowed agriculture to flourish, enabled humans to settle in one place, and laid the foundation for entire civilisations.

Modern finance works in much the same way. Instead of water, it moves capital. It channels money from those who have more than they currently need to those who need it to build factories, start businesses, buy homes, or fund other ventures. And who makes this possible? Banks and other financial institutions — the intermediaries that keep the system flowing.

When you have excess money, you deposit it in a bank. When you need money, you approach the bank for a loan. The process runs like a well-oiled machine. But, as with the irrigation systems of the past, this service isn't free. Those who lend their money receive interest, and those who borrow must pay it. The financial system ensures fairness — it prevents lenders from charging exploitatively high interest

rates and also avoids paying depositors unreasonably low rates.

The price of capital — the interest rate — is largely decided by the banks, but within a narrow band. Bank A might offer 6 per cent interest on deposits and charge 8 per cent on loans, while Bank B might offer 7 per cent and charge 9 per cent. These rates, however, move up and down in cycles. Why? Because the ultimate direction comes from the country's central bank and policymakers, who review economic conditions — both domestic and global — before adjusting rates.

When rates rise, depositors benefit because they earn more from fixed deposits and savings accounts. But borrowers feel the pinch as loans become costlier. When rates fall, the reverse happens — borrowers cheer, but savers, especially retirees dependent on interest income, worry about reduced earnings. That's why headlines about interest rate changes often dominate the news.

For individuals, the impact of interest rates changes with life stages. A young person starting out typically needs capital to buy a home, a car, or household goods. At this stage, lower interest rates are welcome. Later in life, after building up savings, the same person may prefer higher rates to maximise interest income.

Governments, however, face a balancing act. Raising rates can slow borrowing and economic growth, while

cutting rates can hurt savers. The guiding compass is usually inflation. When the prices of goods and services rise, interest rates tend to rise too; when prices fall, so do rates. What matters is the real rate of return — the interest rate minus inflation. For example, earning 8 per cent interest when inflation is 4 per cent means your real return is 4. But earning 12 when inflation is 10 percent leaves you with only a 2 per cent real return.

So, the next time the Reserve Bank of India announces a change in monetary policy, don't react with undue excitement or worry. Interest rates are part of a slow-moving wheel designed to keep the economy in balance — ensuring that capital flows where it's needed most, much like the ancient irrigation channels that kept civilisations thriving thousands of years ago.

Yours etc.,
Dipankar Jakharia,
Via email

Merit List Transparency

Editor,
In the previous years the District Selection Committee (DSC), East Khasi Hills normally declares the final results of examinations for various posts by publishing the names of candidates in order of merit. However, this year, it is unusual that the DSC decided to publish only the Roll Nos of the persons selected in the Final Merit

List. The Final merit list being a very important document/record, as it is used to determine the seniority of persons selected for the post as specified in the service rules, the absence of names in the list is very concerning. Although the conduct of examinations and interviews has been conducted in a very professional manner, the last stage of the process, which is the declaration of selected persons, appears to lack transparency. The DSC is requested to take note of this matter and consider publishing the names of selected persons in future.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Smart ID Cards and uninvited entry

Editor,
Recently I was invited to a high profile meeting, in one of the 5 Star Hotels in Guwahati. I started early from Shillong because of the scare of being held up in a traffic jam along the GS Road. Hence I arrived at the venue earlier than expected. I proceeded to the reception area where my bona-fides as an invitee were confirmed through a Biometric Smart Card than through an invitation card. The organizers had asked for my biometric details days ahead of the meet, which I had submitted, and hence my possession of such a card.

I was the first guest to

arrive so I had time to waste and apparently so did the two receptionists. They offered me coffee and we started talking. Curious, I asked them what it was with the Biometric ID Cards? Why didn't the organizers simply depend on the usual ordinary cardboard invitation cards as was done before? Or easier through WhatsApp or email ID? The answer they gave was something that really impressed me. I'll try to reproduce it below for the benefit of the reader.

The receptionists said, "You see Sir, last meeting we held, a lot of uninvited hecklers also managed to get in and disturb the meet. It was a clear security breach. This time we decided that a stronger and more stringent invitation mechanism was required for better identification of invitees. Hence the Biometric ID 'Smart Cards.'" In today's digital world, especially with AI generating capabilities anyone with a computer and printer can produce any document, with all the required letterheads, logo, seals and signatures. No one will know the duplicate from the original. Paper based invitations are a Victorian concept. Totally outdated. Today, where ID is concerned, Biometric Smart Cards are the only way to prevent entry of fraudsters. This is the 21st century system of checking unwelcome guests." Well it was something I thought I had to share with the people of my state - Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Pakistan's Nuclear Threat to India

Editor,
According to the news "Pak Army chief issues nuclear threat to India during US trip" (ST August 12, 2025), the fact that the threat was made from U.S. soil is seen as a breach of diplomatic norms and an embarrassment for Washington. This could strain U.S.-India relations if not addressed decisively by American officials. The threat reinforces doubts about Pakistan's civilian oversight of nuclear weapons. It also suggests that the military, not elected officials, control strategic decisions. It raises alarms about potential nuclear access by non-state actors, given the military's ties to extremist groups. It also sets a dangerous precedent by issuing nuclear threats from a third country. This could prompt international scrutiny of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine and trigger calls for sanctions or diplomatic isolation if threats persist.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh
Via Email

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"Uncertainty always creates doubt,
and doubt creates fear."

— Oscar Munoz

The Shillong Times

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Anarchic Bangladesh: A Danger to Meghalaya

THE chain of events in South West Khasi Hills where illegal migrants from Bangladesh did not just cross the border but even turned violent with the locals there shows that things have reached a dangerous turn. In the 443 km long border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh large stretches are unfenced and the rivers form the boundary between the two countries. Wherever there are fences these are broken down by smugglers since informal trade continues to thrive right under the nose of the border guards. The fact that on both sides of the border there are hundreds of cattle grazing should tell its own story. It means cattle heads are smuggled in the cover of night from the Indian side to the Bangladesh side. This is because Meghalaya, which could have had a thriving meat processing industry for export, has not engaged in this business. Bangladesh on the contrary has done it. Cross-border smuggling has gone on for decades and people on both sides are interdependent on that trade. Fish, vegetables, processed fruit juices and Chinese goods come from Bangladesh while truckloads of sugar, onions, fruits, betel nuts and betel leaf regularly go from the Indian side. Attempts to police this informal trade have failed for several reasons, one being the human tendency for corruption.

Now that things have reached boiling point in Bangladesh and there are no signs of the violence abating nor of the economy picking up steam, people are desperate. The reason they cross over to the Meghalaya side and then proceed to other states where they can be employed as labourers is because they are in dire straits. The labour market laps up cheap labour that can be exploited to the hilt. Infrastructure creation requires a huge workforce and India at the moment is pushing towards bridge-building, road making and other projects across the states. In India's North East alone there are several key highway projects that are under construction and require a dedicated labour force.

The need for strong protective measures to prevent illegal migration cannot be over-emphasized as the scarce state resources meant for a domestic population cannot be allowed to leak to illegal migrants. These include services provided by the Public Distribution System among others. The fact that illegal migrants are quick at producing Aadhar and even the voters' ID card is a grim reminder that corruption has seeped into all sections of our polity. Yet this daily flood of immigrants who then very astutely become part of the local populace is a very troubling affair for states bordering Bangladesh. Tripura has often been cited as a classic case of indigenous Tripuris being reduced to a minority in their homeland. Assam is trying to purge out the Miya Muslims (Bengali speaking Muslims) because they have encroached into forest lands when they have already overrun the 'char' (river banks) areas. Preventing people from crossing borders is the toughest challenge as can be seen today. Better strategies to secure borders are imperative.

Letters to the Editor

Lessons from the Bangladeshi criminal attacks

The repeated brutal attacks by Bangladeshi nationals on residents or shops, even by knocking on doors, should serve as a loud wake-up call for every citizen in Meghalaya. The recent early-morning assault in South West Khasi Hills, where armed men, including a policeman wielding pistols and lethal weapons, was extremely horrifying, "Bangladeshi criminals, including cop, attack youth in SWKH" — (ST, Aug 10). Given the strained ties between India and Bangladesh at present, such incidents must push the state government to remain on high alert.

Yes, we cannot afford to overlook the lessons from Assam, our immediate neighbour. What happens in Assam can spill over into Meghalaya as well. For decades, illegal immigrants, not permanent citizens, in Assam have inflicted deep wounds upon indigenous communities. Backed by special support networks, they have seized forest land, encroached on temple trust properties, and even occupied ecologically

sensitive areas like Kaziranga National Park and Dibru-Saikhowa. This has worsened human-wildlife conflicts and stripped native people of their rightful resources. Those who do not want to believe me can check the facts for themselves.

Who can guarantee that Meghalaya will be spared the same fate if we continue to remain complacent? Our "vulnerability" is crystal clear — we share a long, porous 443 km border with Bangladesh, where extremist ideologies have been given dangerous breathing space in the past one year. How can we ignore the fact that in the past two years, the Assam government has arrested numerous illegal immigrants linked to Bangladeshi terror outfits like ABT/AQIS, with some suspected of having ties to the dreaded ISIS?

If West Bengal and several districts of Assam have already become unsafe for their natives, due to unchecked infiltration and years of political apathy, then every citizen here must remain vigilant. I believe that each individual has a role to play in safeguarding Meghalaya, whether tribal or non-tribal, as long as they are permanent citizens who genuinely love this abode of

The Khasi & Jaintia Hills have their own piece of history vis-à-vis the freedom struggle and the aspiration of the indigenous community for self-rule and self-determination. Between the period 1923 and 1949, the Hynniewtrep people were sharply divided on the political solution. Although, the debate is still on that the Hynniewtrep community could have bargained for more autonomy on the basis of the Instrument of Accession, it can also be construed that the community is now well placed and better off within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

Interestingly, in Shillong, there has been a noticeable enthusiasm among the majority of people, especially among the Hynniewtrep community, to celebrate the freedom on August 15. In residential localities, including those predominantly inhabited by indigenous community, residents are upbeat about Independence Day and the Tricolour flag is seen hoisted atop the roofs, roadside walls and poles, days before August 15. Such a scenario would have been unimaginable twenty-five or thirty years ago.

Political status aside, what is more pressing for the people of Meghalaya and the Hynniewtrep community in particular, is the increasing problem of poverty, landlessness, income inequality and marginalization. Reports had shown Meghalaya's per capita income among the lowest in the country. The State is plagued with low salary syndrome and this has further pushed the citizenry to the margins. Low income can lead to increased stress, anxiety and even depression. Financial limitations also lead to isolation, social exclusion and can even distort the close knit cultural and social fabric of the community.

Everything is Broken: Bob Dylan was apt when he penned the song, "Everything is Broken". The song paints a picture of a world overwhelmed by brokenness. The song reveals a breakdown and that everything is broken; "broken cutters, broken saws / Broken buckles, broken laws." This implies not only physical decay but also a collapse of order and justice. This brokenness extends to social structures and personal interactions from "broken lines" and "broken strings" to "broken words" and "broken voices". The song also evoked a deep sense of loss and hopelessness when the singer describes about the "broken hearts" and "broken bodies". India's freedom encapsulates economic freedom and empowerment, whereby its people must be free from the clutches of poverty and injustices. However, India today

Marginalized Citizens and India's Independence

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtul

is overshadowed by painful narratives about hunger, income or economic inequality and poverty. The Country is also marred by racial and religious prejudices. In democratic nation like India, it is the bounded duty of the State to strive for the welfare of the people and to ensure that social and economic justice is given to the people without discrimination.

Since the early 1990s, the Government of India's tall claims about liberalization, shining India, good governance and now the double engine style of ruling the nation, have not been able to solve the basic problem of food, clothing and shelter. Education and employment remain grave issues for many states. Women, indigenous communities, minorities, migrant labourers and the poor continue to suffer social discrimination, economic exploitation and disenfranchisement. Hindu fundamentalist groups are on the rise and the recent incidents of violence, hate and bigotry against Christians and Muslims is a pointer towards transforming India into a majoritarian state.

While Hindu fundamentalist groups, may be boasting of the brute majority and experimenting their Hindu Rashtra, there are millions of citizens in this vast country, including in Hindu majority State (s), who do not have access to safe drinking water, primary health care and universal elementary education. Only a few of the privileged class and some in the Upper Middle and Middle class, population are better off and are enjoying the bulk of the wealth and resources of the country. Indeed we are living in a divided and broken nation.

Street Vendors: Meghalaya's Marginalized and Who are They?

Recently, the unjust and illegal relocation of street vendors and hawkers at Khyndai Lad had generated heated debates in sundry social media platforms and newspaper outlets as well. Points and counter points have been brought to the fore depending on one's position on the subject matter. In the context of Meghalaya, Bhogtoram Mawroh had given a compelling definition in his article published in 2016, "The street vendors/hawkers come from the very poor and marginalized section of the society, whose consumption is very low, i.e., they have low demand. This section constitutes almost half of the state's population. Therefore, an increase in demand among this section will increase revenue significantly. Demand will increase once the purchasing capacity increases which has to fol-

low an improvement in their socio-economic status. This again can happen when the livelihood in which they are engaged in is supported.

Unlike the upper class whose consumption transcends state boundaries, the consumption of this section is restricted to the local economy. Also, many of them have links with the rural economy which also gets boosted because rural products find a wider market. This again boosts rural demand. All of these will eventually enhance revenue generation and make the state financially healthier. With improving socio-economic status, the street vendors/hawkers can improve their business and become future investors into the state economy. Unlike investors from outside the state, the benefits of investment will remain within the state. Therefore, the street vendors/hawkers are not the problem, they are in fact the solution in many ways than one can possibly imagine..."

The Struggle, the Law and Unlawful Implementation: It is imperative to describe the timeline and chronology of the struggle for the right to livelihood for the street vendors and hawkers in Meghalaya. Since June 2016, the Street Vendors and Hawkers came together as a collective under the Meghalaya & Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSVA), to demand for the implementation of the Central Law, i.e., The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation) of Street Vending Act 2014, in letter and spirit. They understood that this is a good law for the protection of their livelihoods and to regulate their businesses on the streets; pavements, walkways etc as prescribed by the Law.

On 21 December 2018, in the meeting with officials of Urban Affairs, the representatives of the MGSPHSVA, had made a power point presentation on the plan for street vending detailing the time and space management and existing city profile of street vending, and also suggested various vending zones. This vending plan is based on the premise that the plan for street vending cannot be done in isolation but has to be done in consonance with city planning which includes parking, pedestrian walkways and ensuring accessibility to the disabled.

In August 2022 the Honourable Meghalaya High Court had disposed of all the cases/matters related to street vending and hawking. In its final order issued on 24 August 2022, the Meghalaya High Court observed that

the State was contemplating to adopt the Central Statute. The State had formally done so and had also made rules for the implementation of the Central Law on street vending.

Following the order of the High Court, the Street Vendors and Hawkers under the umbrella organization, the Meghalaya & Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSVA), had been cooperating with the Shillong Municipal Board and Meghalaya Urban Development Department in implementing the law ever since.

The process of implementing the Law began on October 2022, in which the Provisional Town Vending Committee (PTVC) was constituted and the MGSPHSVA had elected four representatives to the PTVC. The members of the Association have been actively participating in the meetings and rendered full cooperation during the in-situ survey of street vendors and hawkers. However, from the beginning there were attempts to thwart the process which ultimately culminated in the unlawful and unjust relocation of Street Vendors and Hawkers which took place on 23 July 2025. This has resulted in mental distress and economic hardships on street vendors, especially those 106 plus longstanding and genuine street vendors who have been deliberately denied the certificate of vending.

From Empathy to Emancipation: The Meghalaya & Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association has rightfully decried the forceful relocation of street vendors from Khyndai Lad to MUDA Parking Lot on July 23 2025. The action had deliberately undermined the law and is in complete violation of due process, the High Court order dated July 3, 2025, and the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014.

The unlawful evictions had left over 106 surveyed Vendors and others with no place to vend and they have been deliberately denied of the Certificate of Vending. The aggrieved vendors are now protesting in-front of MUDA Complex at Khyndai Lad demanding immediate rectification and granting of vending certificates.

Therefore, on the eve of Independence Day, I would like to remind our fellow citizens that "the street vendors and hawkers are those citizens who are living on the margins and they need not only our empathy, but most importantly they need to be emancipated from poverty, uncertainty, anxiety, exploitation and enslavement.

In solidarity with the marginalized,

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Let's Start Walking Our Talk, Sir!

I read the news report with a smile—one of those polite, tight-lipped smiles you give when someone's trying to sell you something you already own.

The headline proudly declared: "Zelensky calls Modi; Modi tells him efforts should be made to find a peaceful solution to the war."

Ah! Great words. Noble words. The sort of words that sound like they belong engraved on a plaque right next to "Live, Laugh, Love" or "Save Water, Drink Coffee." But then I read the fine print—the bit that usually hides the truth like the "terms and conditions" no one bothers to read. Turns out, President Zelensky didn't just call to exchange pleasantries. He called to explain, very diplomatically, that if India stopped buying oil from Russia, it would help bring the war to an end.

In other words: "Dear India, the keys to peace are partly in your pocket."

And our Prime Minister's reply? "Yes, there should be peace." That's like your neighbour telling you, "Your broken drainpipe is flooding my living room," and you replying, "Yes, everyone should live in a dry house." The problem isn't the words—we're brilliant with words. We can churn out lofty statements faster than a politician's media team can tweet them. We talk of "peaceful co-existence," "justice for all," "inclusive growth," and "world's largest democracy." We have official slogans that sound like TED Talk titles.

The trouble is, the world—and our own people—are beginning to notice that our walk is limping far behind our talk.

It's one thing to say we want peace in a war 5,000 kilometres away; it's another thing entirely to make the difficult, practical choices that would actually help bring that peace about.

Likewise, it's easy to proclaim we're the "world's largest democracy" when speaking to a global audience; it's much harder to ensure that dissent is respected, the press is free, and the rule of law applies equally—whether it's for a poor street vendor or a rich industrialist. And here's the thing: credibility, once lost, is like that slippery bar of soap in the bathroom—easy to drop, hard to pick up without bending over and risking a fall.

The world no longer just listens—it fact-checks. The moment we make a statement, a thousand analysts, journalists, and social media warriors (many with more free time than wisdom) are ready to pounce. And they don't just listen to the words—they pull up the receipts. If the deeds don't match the declarations, screenshots start circulating faster than a political rumour in Delhi.

Now, some may say, "But Bob, the world doesn't understand our constraints, our compulsions, our internal politics."

That may be true. But here's what the world does understand: when words and actions line up, trust grows. When they don't, suspicion creeps in like damp in an old wall—and once that damp sets in, no amount of whitewash can hide the stains.

Even at home, we must be careful. You can't keep telling your people that justice is being served while they see a different reality on the ground. You can't tell citizens that all voices matter if some are told to stay quiet. You can't keep sending delegations abroad to "explain" our democracy if the headlines back home are doing the explaining for you.

The same principle applies whether we're talking foreign policy or domestic governance: don't just say it—do it. If you believe in peace, take the steps that promote peace. If you believe in democracy, strengthen it by protecting its institutions. If you believe in fairness, make sure it's visible not just in speeches but in street-level reality. Because words without action are like a beautifully wrapped box with nothing inside—they may excite for a moment, but the disappointment that follows is even greater. History doesn't remember the speeches—it remembers the steps taken after them. Think about it: nobody quotes Churchill for his wartime tea breaks; they remember the actions that matched his rhetoric. Gandhi's speeches didn't move the British Empire because of their eloquence alone—they were backed by nonviolent marches, boycotts, and actual sacrifice. If we want the world to take us seriously, we must start walking our talk—whether that means rethinking our oil purchases in a way that aligns with our declared values, or ensuring that "justice for all" actually means all.

And this is not just a matter for governments—it's a mirror for all of us. We all know people (perhaps even ourselves) who talk about honesty but fudge their taxes, who praise cleanliness but throw litter out of car windows, who speak of helping the poor but conveniently forget when the opportunity comes.

The credibility crisis doesn't begin in New Delhi—it begins in our living rooms.

So yes, Mr. Prime Minister, the world needs peace. But peace doesn't arrive by invitation—it needs effort, sacrifice, and sometimes, the courage to act against short-term gain for long-term good. The same is true for justice, for democracy, for every ideal we love to put on banners and podiums.

If we keep saying one thing and doing another, we risk becoming that person at a party everyone stops talking seriously—the one who says, "I'll be there at 7," but always arrives at 9:30 with an excuse and a grin. Let's put the rupee where the rhetoric is. Let's back the speech with the step. Because sooner or later, the world stops listening to people who don't mean what they say—and that's a risk no country, however large its democracy, can afford.

So, let's start walking our talk, Sir. The world is watching. And so are we...

(Robert Clements is a newspaper columnist whose column "Bob's Banter" has appeared in over 60 newspapers across the world. You can request for his daily column on Whatsapp by messaging him on bobspanter@gmail.com)

SC order on stray dogs

The editorial "Dogs and human" (ST August 13, 2025) made interesting reading. The Supreme Court on Monday August 11, 2025 ordered all stray dogs in Delhi NCR to be shifted away from residential localities to dedicated shelters, following an increase in stray dog attacks, particularly on children and the elderly, and endangering public health. The order, however, contradicts the Animal

Welfare Board of India's 2022 advisory, which clearly stated that stray dogs should not be relocated. While animal rights groups gear up to challenge the court, let's find out what veterinarians have to say.

The intent of the Supreme Court is valid but relocation alone is not sustainable. Dr Kunal Dev Sharma (Max-PetZ) New Delhi, recommends mass sterilization and vaccination drives, he calls for a stray dog census involving RWAs and feeders, rehabilitating aggressive dogs, the community should engage and waste should be managed. Dr Michelle Simoes (Pets of Paradise) calls the order "a death sentence" for community animals and expressed his concern that shelters may become overcrowded and unsafe. Rabies risk persists from other sources (e.g., unvaccinated pets) and advocates for TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) model used successfully in Goa. The expert consensus is that removing dogs will not eliminate rabies or aggression. Therefore, a humane approach is needed that is data driven, collaborative strategies involving vets, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and local authorities for long-term impact.

Relocating stray dogs rais-

es serious ethical and practical concerns, especially when we acknowledge that dogs or for that matter creatures are sentient beings — capable of feeling pain, fear, attachment and joy. Relocation is problematic as:

1. Stray dogs often form bonds with their territories, feeders and even residents. Forced relocation can cause distress, disorientation and aggression.

2. Most urban shelters lack the capacity, staff and infrastructure to humanely house thousands of dogs. Overcrowding leads to disease, neglect and suffering.

3. Many strays are vaccinated, sterilized and cared for by feeders. Removing them disrupts this balance and may invite unvaccinated dogs into the vacuum.

4. Experts like Dr. Michelle Simoes argue that relocation doesn't reduce rabies or bites; it merely shifts the problem. TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) is proven to be more humane and effective. TNR has been proven to be effective in Goa and Chennai.

Indian Law Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act recognizes animals as sentient and deserving of humane treatment. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and Office

International des Epizooties (OIE) recommend TNE and community engagement over mass removal. The Veterinary consensus advocates for sterilization, vaccination and behavioural rehabilitation not isolation. The bottom line is humane coexistence, not displacement, honours both public safety and animal dignity. Creatures too deserve respect as they are also able to have a subjective experience of life.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

On protecting and promoting local artists

This refers to the thought-provoking article "Protecting and Promoting Local Artists in Meghalaya" by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST August 13, 2025). The writer deserves appreciation for bringing to the forefront the challenges faced by our talented local artists, and for highlighting the need to protect, promote, and sustain their creative journeys.

We have in Meghalaya a wealth of local artists—unexplored, unnoticed, un-

recognised, and not encouraged—whose work deserves to be in the spotlight. They are not merely creators of beauty but custodians of our cultural identity and heritage. By narrating their struggles and aspirations, the author has reminded us that art can only flourish when given a platform, recognition, and fair opportunities.

It pains us all when the hard work of an artist is copied, claimed by others, or goes unacknowledged. Such acts of plagiarism or neglect not only discourage the creators but also undermine the cultural richness they strive to preserve.

I am reminded of the character Farhan Qureshi in the film "Three Idiots", who had a deep passion for photography but was compelled to follow a conventional path to satisfy family expectations. Like Farhan, many young artists in Meghalaya possess immense talent yet are forced to suppress their creative ambitions due to societal or economic pressures.

Mawroh rightly highlights that Meghalaya is home to numerous such talents whose work deserves to be in the spotlight. They are not merely creators of beauty but custodians of our cultural identity

and heritage.

On important state occasions such as Independence Day and Republic Day, these deserving artists should be given special recognition and honour. Such gestures, I believe, will not only encourage them but will also inspire our younger generation to value and pursue the arts.

As citizens, cultural bodies, and government agencies, we need to act on such calls—through regular exhibitions, state-sponsored art fairs, training initiatives, and digital outreach—to ensure Meghalaya's artistic voices are heard far beyond our borders. In doing so, we not only support individual artists but also preserve the living soul of our traditions.

The writer's sincere effort to amplify these concerns is commendable, and it is my hope that his words inspire collective action to safeguard and nurture the artistic spirit of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
Tura

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

“Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

— George Orwell

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ECI in the dock

THE Election Commission is under a cloud. What was once a well-respected institution, central to the vaunted democratic process, is now a shadow of its former self. Allegations are flying thick and fast, against the Commission's handling of elections. The intervention of the Supreme Court on Thursday, asking ECI to upload the list of 65 lakh Bihar voters whose names had appeared in the 2025 lists but are not included in the EC's present draft list is welcome. These lists, the court said, must be displayed on the district-level web sites alongside wide publicity to this exercise through the media. EC must also state the reason for each deletion.

The removal of so many names from the Bihar electoral rolls was done by the Commission as part of the “special” revision of the lists in the run-up to state assembly polls. While the rolls revision is a usual exercise, the Congress and other opposition parties were incensed by the wholesale manner in which the EC did it this time. The Commission has stated that 22 lakh of these persons had died. All these need to be verified. It is appreciable also that the apex court has insisted that the lists must be displayed at the village-panchayat and local body offices in the respective places/regions. Clearly, the credibility of the EC has been called into question. Under the circumstances, it is advisable on the part of the BJP and the state's ruling JDU to wholeheartedly support a review of the controversial EC exercise. Truth must prevail. In fact, the dissatisfaction about EC's functioning snowballed through the sprouting of other serious issues like the large-scale inclusion of “fake” names in the electoral lists as also massive duplication of names elsewhere in the past. Opposition Leader Rahul Gandhi was justified in highlighting this issue and raising the suspicion that the 2024 electoral victory of the BJP — though short of a majority for the NDA in parliament — might have something to do with manipulation of voters' lists. Significantly, he came up with proof vis-à-vis Karnataka, though some other allegations are yet to be proven. The BJP retaliated that such large-scale inclusion of fake voters had happened even in Rahul Gandhi's Rae Bareilly and sister Priyanka's Wayanad constituencies. All these accusations further dented the image of the EC.

Admittedly, fraudulent additions to voters list are made across constituencies before every poll, but the issue gains lethality when it emerges that a coordinated attempt has been made to subvert the people's will. Even the handling of the electronic voting machines had raised tempers especially in the 2024 general elections, followed by the assembly polls in Haryana, Maharashtra etc, which were mostly won by the BJP. We are a long way away from the days of TN Seshan, a senior bureaucrat who headed the Commission and supervised polls with dedication and a high sense of integrity.

Letters to the Editor

A Plea from Meghalaya's Youth

Editor,

One look at a recent government job advertisement broke my heart. It read: “Qualification: Master Degree, BE, B.Tech, MBBS, or PhD. Experience: 3/5 years. Salary: Rs 15,000.” I read it again and each time, the pain grew deeper. After years of study, is this the reward? Rs 15,000 a month, which is less than Rs 500 a day. Can you live in Shillong? Can you pay rent, buy petrol, keep your phone running, eat properly, or see a doctor when you are sick?

And while our youth lie awake at night, hungry and full of dreams, the same government treats Rs 15,000 as nothing but a transport allowance for defeated MLAs or party workers who are suddenly made Chairmen of government agencies. These people may have no qualifications, no experience, only loyalty to the party. And yet, they get lakhs in allowances, official cars, and bungalows. Meanwhile, that same Rs 15,000 is thrown at educated youth like scraps as if it can feed a family, cover rent, or honour years of struggle. Is this fair? Is this justice?

And yet, the same ad demands three years of experience. But where do we get experience when every

job says, “No pay, no support, but you must have experience to apply”? Are we meant to gain experience in our sleep? Many of us come from homes where one meal a day is already a blessing. We cannot afford to work for free. We do not have powerful connections or rich relatives. All we have is our education, our hard work, and the belief that this land would value us.

While we are told to survive on scraps, the Conrad Sangma-led MDA government spends crores of rupees on consultants imported from outside Meghalaya, paid salaries of Rs 3 to 5 lakh per month, sometimes more. These are the same jobs our own graduates could do. But instead of trusting local youth, the government brings in outsiders, pays them big salaries, and gives them control over our development.

Meanwhile, our youth sit in waiting rooms, begging for Rs 15,000 jobs. This is not just neglect. This is betrayal. This is a system where power, jobs, and decisions are held by a few insiders and foreign experts while the sons and daughters of Meghalaya are left out.

The same government that says “Meghalaya First” spends our money on strangers, but gives nothing to our own people. Is this development? Or is it discrimination in the name of progress? How long must we watch

Envisioning a New Meghalaya

By Patricia Mukhim

This article comes after a short hiatus as I had to sacrifice this space for what was considered to be more important issues at stake. As India celebrates its 78th birthday, it is important for us to introspect rather than just act out our parts as robots flying the tricolour everywhere. After 1-day many of these flags will be found on the streets of Shillong with no one to pick them up. As a people we have not reached that level of civilisation where we would honour the national flag to a point where we would not allow a single one to land up at landfills and rivers which is where we see them unfortunately. So the “Har Gar Tiranga” (every home should hoist a tri-colour) slogan should be followed by “Tiranga ko samaal kar rakho” (look after the tricolour).

In these troubled times when the slogan “vote chori” has rent the air and the Supreme Court has ordered that the 65 lakh names that were offloaded from the electoral rolls in Bihar should be uploaded on to the Election Commission of India (ECI) website with reasons for those names being aborted from the rolls, Independence Day seems like a banal ritual. For the ECI doing what the apex court has said is going to be quite a task but it will hopefully bring clarity and clear the name of the Commission which in recent times has been dragged through the mud. The systemic issues of double entry or of one person's name appearing at more than one state need to be rectified. In fact, the ECI should return to the era of TN Seshan and JM Lyngdoh when it could not be dictated to by the government of the day.

Indeed, we are at a juncture when press freedom is at its lowest and the fourth pillar of democracy faces its most challenging time in the country's history barring the Emergency days. Most media houses are today taking the path of least resistance and prefer to double down rather than take on the establishment. We have a Prime Minister who has not done a single impromptu press conference and we allowed that integral aspect of a democratic set-up to be passed over without as much as demur. How can a Prime Minister who is the head of the government and is answerable for how his government performs or does not perform its intrinsic duties, escape media scrutiny. How can we have a media that sings praises for the

Prime Minister and his closest aide, the Home Minister and refuses to ask searching questions from the duo? But that's what large sections of the media today labelled the godi-media are doing. It is left to Ravish Kumar and news portals like The Wire or to stand-up comedians like Kunal Kamra to tell us some bitter truths about the present government — truths that the mainstream media will not dare say. So in such an abysmal climate of media repression how can we even celebrate Independence Day with honesty and with full-throated pride?

However, lets not be too pessimistic and see what can be done at the level of our

that this important constitutional body has failed us by giving circuitous answers, many of which have to be re-interpreted or be done so by people with knowledge of the law.

On Thursday evening, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma actually walked to Police Bazar where he attended a function because the traffic was so unruly that vehicles were moving a few inches each time. One can easily be caught in a traffic jam for two hours before one reaches home every single day from one's place of work. It's a wretched situation that does not seem to have a solution because the Government has not been able to take a defi-

“In these troubled times when the slogan “vote chori” has rent the air and the Supreme Court has ordered that the 65 lakh names that were offloaded from the electoral rolls in Bihar should be uploaded on to the Election Commission of India (ECI) website with reasons for those names being aborted from the rolls, Independence Day seems like a banal ritual. For the ECI doing what the apex court has said is going to be quite a task but it will hopefully bring clarity and clear the name of the Commission which in recent times has been dragged through the mud.”

own state and how we can do it. A discussion in a local media channel looked at the reasons why we vote the way we do and whether public awareness about the purpose of an election is optimal after so many years of using our voting rights. The panellists were of the opinion that democracy is barely alive and certainly not kicking. A vibrant democracy is one where public protests happen regularly and people don't push everything to the MLA but also take responsibility by asking pertinent questions on government failures by taking the route of the Right to Information (RTI). How many people in Meghalaya actually use this route to question the government? Very few, and those few take a long time to get answers to their queries. Hence this means that even the State Information Commissioners are not delivering on their mandate. But have we ever taken on the SIC by approaching the higher level? Some who have used this space to air their views on the failure of the RTI have stated

nite call on this. Hard decisions are what a government that enjoys a majority should be taking. The NPP now has 33 MLAs and is well-placed to take tough decisions in the larger interests of the people of Shillong. One of these decisions is to enforce school buses on all schools within Shillong city and those in the peri-urban areas too. No school should be allowed to have its students flaunt their flashy vehicles that crowd up the roads twice a day. An order is an order and no school should be allowed to wriggle out of this order considering the STEM buses are doing very well on all parameters.

One hopes that the Chief Minister is aware that his state of Meghalaya is one of the poorest in the country. When this state started out its poverty levels were not stark, nor were the nutritional levels of its children. We never heard of a “High Level” group of stinking rich individuals some of whom are part of the present government and others who are business persons and enjoy

the patronage of this government. This “High Level” category are gobbling up all the land and selling that land back to the Government at a premium. Why is the MDA-02 Government allowing this to happen? Why is it so heartless and why does the heart of the Chief Minister not beat for the poorest of the state? In Meghalaya, we actually need a Department for Poverty Alleviation. The Community and Rural Development Department is too convoluted to be expected to address the growing poverty in Meghalaya.

In the past then the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) implemented its poverty alleviation project under the banner of the “North East Region Community Resources Management Project (NERCMP) in West Khasi Hills and West Garo Hills which were then found to be the poorest districts in Meghalaya, many who had mortgaged their land or sold it under duress were able to buy them back. Unfortunately when that Project was over the government never followed that same trajectory and the line departments never came of board.

If Meghalaya does not get its act together and address especially rural poverty which is exacerbated by a high population growth with women producing 7-8 children or more, no amount of resources will be adequate to service this population boom. Teenage pregnancies are at the root of Meghalaya's poverty; it's very high school drop-out rates; it's child malnutrition and above all its poor health indices. We need to get real and here the government alone will not be able to tackle the problem. Society needs to pitch in and engage with families and speak frankly and openly about protected sex. Pretending that we are holier than thou and cannot discuss sex; which the young are experimenting it and which burdens the young teenager who gets pregnant will not get us anywhere. Enough of being hush hush about sex when it is the bane of our society and reducing families to destitution.

The government has its role but we as a society too must play our respective roles and stop the blame game and the finger-pointing which is the easiest thing to do to escape responsibility.

On that note, I wish all readers an introspective Independence Day.

Shillong's Sustainable Mobility Imperative:

Charting a Path Toward Walkability and Cycle-ability

By Gervasius Nongkseh

The sight of the Chief Minister riding a bicycle has ignited widespread discussion among Shillong's residents, with many weighing in on the symbolic gesture and its implications. The unexpected move has drawn mixed reactions, fueling conversations on social media and public forums. The question that arises in our minds is “Can Shillong reinvent itself as a pedestrian and cyclist's paradise?”

Shillong has long been celebrated for its ethereal mists, cascading waterfalls, and historical charm. Yet beneath this bucolic facade the city grapples with a modern malaise—a rapidly deteriorating urban mobility landscape characterized by chronic congestion, uncivilized littering, reckless driving and an alarming erosion of public space. As global cities increasingly embrace sustainable transit paradigms, Shillong faces an existential question: Will it remain shackled to outdated car-centric planning, or will it seize the opportunity to reinvent itself as a model of walkable and cycle-able urbanism in India's Northeast? As vehicles choke the narrow road, it is high time that the government and people alike should think differently and act accordingly.

This is not merely a question of transportation policy, but of urban identity and civic survival. The transformation envisioned here—where pedestrians and cyclists reclaim the streets—promises not just environmental dividends but a fundamental re-imagining of public life. However, the path forward is strewn with formidable challenges, from infrastructural deficits to deeply entrenched land holding systems and cultural attitudes. Through an examination of Shillong's latent potential, systemic barriers, and necessary interventions, this analysis seeks to illuminate both the possibilities and the hard choices that lie ahead.

(i) Prospects: The Untapped Potential of a Hill City

Shillong's geographical and socio-cultural fabric presents unique advantages for sustainable mobility transition. Unlike India's sprawling metropolises, the city's compact urban morphology—with critical commercial, educational, and administrative nodes concentrated within a 10-kilometer radius—creates ideal conditions for active transportation. The bustling Police Bazar, the academic hub of Laitumkhrah, the Jewduh Market and the government precincts in Lower Lachumiere all exist within what urban planners term the “golden distance” for pedestrian and cyclist accessibility of only about 5 kms radius. A pedestrian and cycle-friendly Shillong could significantly enrich its tourism profile.

The city's temperate climate, with annual temperatures rarely exceeding 25°C, offers a natural advantage over plain cities where extreme heat discourages outdoor mobility. Notably, Shillong already possesses an organic walking culture, evident in the vibrant foot traffic along Jewduh market's labyrinthine alleys and the students traversing the streets near St. Edmund's and St. Anthony's campuses. This existing behavioural pattern provides a crucial foundation for institutionalized pedestrianization efforts.

Policy frameworks are gradually aligning with this vision. The Shillong Smart City proposal includes provisions for non-motorized transport (NMT) infrastructure and the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority is leaving no stone unturned to provide a pedestrian-friendly ambience for Shillongites. Perhaps most promising is the burgeoning cycling movement among Shillong's youth, manifested in events like the annual Meghalaya Cyclothon and the proliferation of cycling clubs. These developments suggest that the seeds of transformation have already been sown—awaiting only systematic nurturing.

(ii) Problems: Structural and Cultural Barriers to Sustainable Mobility

Yet despite the advantages, Shillong's transition faces systemic obstacles. The most visible is the abysmal state of pedestrian infrastructure. A walk around Shillong will tell us the true picture of the purported footpaths that are either dangerously dilapidated, or illegally appropriated by commercial establishments. The consequences are stark: pedestrians are knocked down by speeding bikes and cars from time to time.

For cyclists, the challenges are even more daunting. The complete absence of dedicated cycling lanes forces riders into deadly proximity with motorized traffic on Shillong's narrow, winding roads. The city's topography—with varying gradients in different places often—presents additional physiological barriers for casual cyclists. These physical constraints are compounded by a cultural mindset that equates automobile ownership with social status, a

perception reinforced by decades of urban planning that privileged cars over people.

The institutional landscape reveals equally troubling gaps. While the Shillong Municipal Board has passed resolutions supporting Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) development, implementation remains hamstrung by jurisdictional conflicts, budget constraints, and lack of technical expertise. Enforcement of existing regulations—whether against sidewalk encroachment or reckless driving—is notoriously lax. Perhaps most critically, the city lacks a long term and comprehensive mobility plan that integrates pedestrian and cycling networks with public transit systems, resulting in fragmented, ineffective interventions.

(iii) Challenges: The Imperative for Holistic Urban Transformation

Addressing these complex issues demands a mobility revolution—one that combines physical infrastructure overhaul with profound policy and cultural shifts. The first order of business must be the creation of a contiguous, barrier-free pedestrian network. This requires not just repairing existing footpaths but implementing universal design standards incorporating tactile paving for the visually impaired, weather-protected walkways, and intelligent traffic calming measures. International best practices from cities like Bogotá's renowned Ciclovía program could inform similar car-free zones in Shillong's commercial cores. Thanks to the efforts of the government, at least now we can walk with ease in Police Bazar.

As of now the city does not have dedicated cycle tracks. For cycling to become a viable mainstream option, the city must develop an interconnected network of dedicated, gradient-sensitive bike lanes prioritized along key corridors like GS Road, Laitumkhrah area, Nongthymmai to Rhino point and other places. Complementary measures should include a public bike-sharing system with electric-assist options to counter topographic challenges, along with secure parking facilities at transit nodes. The CM has spoken of these important plans and we hope to see these significant visions implemented. However, these physical interventions must be underpinned by robust policy reforms—from stringent enforcement of traffic regulations to the introduction of congestion pricing in the designated area.

Perhaps most challenging will be the necessary cultural transformation and status outlook. It amazes us when we see the PM of Canada and UK commuting with bicycles. How we wish that our leaders will walk the talk.

Public awareness campaigns leveraging local influencers, school programs, and community events must work to dismantle the automobile's social cachet while celebrating walking and cycling as markers of enlightened urban citizenship. Similarly, the media has a critical role in reframing the narrative—from reporting mobility issues as mere traffic inconveniences to treating them as fundamental questions of urban equity and environmental justice.

The Urgency of Now

Shillong stands at a crossroads—it can either continue grappling with traffic congestion and pollution or embrace a greener, healthier future by prioritizing walking and cycling. The prospects are promising; but the problems and challenges demand urgent attention. With coordinated efforts in infrastructure development, policy enforcement, and public engagement, Shillong can transform into a city where pedestrians and cyclists move freely and safely. The vision of a walkable and cycle-able Shillong is not just an urban planning goal but a necessity for preserving the city's charm and improving the quality of life for its residents. The time to act is now. Will Shillong rise to the challenge? The solutions exist; what is lacking is political will and civic mobilization to implement them at scale.

The stakes could not be higher. Beyond reducing emissions and congestion, creating a walkable and cycle-able Shillong promises great social benefits—healthier citizens, more vibrant public spaces, and a stronger sense of community. As cities worldwide demonstrate, such transformations yield economic dividends too, with pedestrian-friendly areas consistently outperforming auto-centric zones in commercial vitality.

The time for half-measures has passed. What Shillong needs now is nothing less than a new mobility compact—one that places pedestrians and cyclists at the heart of urban planning for a healthier city. The alternative is unthinkable: a once-graceful hill station choking on its own success. The choice is Shillong's to make. Let the discussion begin.

Let there be clarity of purpose

Editor,

Welcome to Tura, where the 6th Schedule promises autonomy and the municipal budget promises... a yearly wish-list with better column spacing. The MDC elections are looming, and once again the big quarrel is over who should collect Household Tax (HH Tax) or property tax—GHADC, the Tura Municipal Board (TMB), or some hybrid arrangement. The real question, however, isn't about labels on paper but what actually lands in the pockets of the people who pay.

Let's be blunt. The 6th Schedule sets up autonomous councils for tribal governance, but it does not magically dissolve urban responsibility or guarantee better services. GHADC may be the umbrella for broader tribal administration, while the TMB handles street-level duties like cleanliness, drains, lighting, and footpaths. In practice, the lines blur, and the result is a chorus of complaints from residents watching taxes rise while the basics fall short.

A hard truth many rightly eye: governance isn't a budget line; it's daily life. If conservancy workers drag their feet, if the head assistant and frontline staff treat service as a courtesy rather than a duty, and if sweepers juggle

dirt without actually clearing it, trust frays faster than a pothole widens. No amount of HH Tax or property tax should be waved in as a magic wand when the reality on the ground is clogged drains, dim streetlights, and sidewalks that double as obstacle courses.

That's why any tax scheme must be tied to visible, verifiable improvements. People aren't anti-tax by nature; they're anti-poverty-level service and opaque spending. Before any new or revised tax is introduced, there must be a transparent accountability map showing who does what (GHADC, TMB, state authorities), a clear plan for how revenue will be spent, and monthly dashboards tracking hygiene, lighting, drains, and footpath maintenance. And yes, the ethos must start at home: offices that model service-first behaviour, staff who show up and perform, and a culture that treats citizens with respect rather than indifference.

One living emblem of public service deserves a nod: the garbage-collector truck that greets residents with cheerful reminders about cleanliness. To the drivers and crew who carry that practical message—that cleanliness is a daily obligation—thank you. If more of us could borrow a fraction of that spirit—neighbours encouraging neighbours, offices encouraging staff, officials modelling account-

ability—we might actually see the town transform.

Footpaths tell a different story. In Tura, a good stretch of public space is claimed by shanty stalls and vegetable vendors. Encroachments aren't just a nuisance; they're a symbol of governance that hasn't fully claimed its urban responsibilities. If licenses and temporary permissions become a barrier to pedestrians, then the tax debate becomes a moral argument: should residents pay for a system that trades walkability for market space? The solution is straightforward in principle: a transparent, enforceable framework for footpath use that prioritizes pedestrians, with a predictable revenue plan that funds proper maintenance rather than quick fixes.

Payroll and accountability add another layer of drama. If GHADC's executives and payroll have faced delays for years, that's not just a salary issue—it's a trust issue. A public body that can't pay its own people cannot credibly promise timely services to residents. The same standard should apply to the TMB: reliability, transparent budgets, and consistent service delivery before any tax is accepted as a given.

Yours etc.,
Vero Amana Sangma,
Tura

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

Anne Frank and the enigma of the chequered diary

Everyone knows her photo. For some it shows the cheeky smile of a young girl, "Miss Quack Quack". For others, the image represents an enigmatic veil of mystery, similar to Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

Millions have read her diary, watched various renditions in theatres and on the screen, or visited exhibitions devoted to her story. Thousands queue in front of the house in Amsterdam, where she spent 760 days in the secret annex, hiding from the Gestapo and their Dutch collaborators.

People quote the most famous sentence from her diary, immortalised in the Hollywood film, saying that "in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart".

The sentence was written in July 1944 by 15-year-old Jewish girl, Anne Frank, three weeks before the capture of her family by the Nazis. It represents the innocence, perhaps naivety of an adolescent, who after the war became one of the most iconic symbols of the Nazi Holocaust.

The quote carries a universal message that good will eventually prevail. This has turned Anne's legacy into an easily adoptable trope, serving activists and political agendas. But who, actually, was Anne Frank? And how did she differ from the "Anne Franks" that have emerged since the end of the war?

Acclaimed author Ruth Franklin explores these probing questions in her newest book. She is to be commended for her sensitive treatment of a difficult subject and an attempt to get as close as possible to Anne's personality and nature.

Franklin follows two paths. First, she reconstructs Anne's life based on the diary and recollections of people who knew her. In the second part, she reveals the afterlife of the diary and "Anne Frank", in different contexts and on different platforms.

She concludes that the "Anne" most people know, or imagine, differs quite significantly from the girl who lived in the secret annex and penned the diary.

THE STORY

Annelies Marie Frank was born in 1929 in Frankfurt am Main to an affluent assimilated German-Jewish family. After the rise of Hitler and the introduction of the first racial laws, her parents Otto and Edith decided to take Anne and her older sister Margot to the Netherlands. They continued to live in Amsterdam despite the growing threat, even after the German

invasion in 1940. Attempts to emigrate to the United States failed.

The mounting persecution kept restricting their lives. In early 1942, the Nazis began to plan deportations of the Jews to the east. In July, when Margot received a call to the transport to occupied Poland, the family decided to go into hiding.

They spent over two years in the secret annex, eventually accepting four more fugitives: the van Pels family, including their teenage son Peter, and dentist Fritz Pfeffer. They were supported by a group of people, including, most famously, Miep and Jan Gies.

The group, experiencing the constant tensions of living in the claustrophobic space, ran out of luck in early August 1944. They were betrayed, and the Nazis sent them to the transit camp of Westerbork, from where they continued on the very last train to Auschwitz. After a month, Margot and Anne were separated from their mother and sent to Bergen-Belsen in central Germany.

Their physical and mental state soon deteriorated. A survivor of Belsen later remembered the "two thin, shaven-headed figures" who "looked like freezing little birds". Shortly before the end of the war, typhus erupted in the overcrowded camp and Anne and Margot became its victims. Otto, liberated from Auschwitz, was the only survivor from the eight who hid in the secret annex.

THE DIARY

Anne got the red-checked diary on her 13th birthday, shortly before moving to the secret annex. She wrote only occasionally, but soon the diary turned into her constant companion. It was a place where she could express her feelings.

Written in the form of letters to an imaginary friend Kitty (identified by Franklin as a character in Cissy van Marxveldt's popular books for children), the diary offers a vivid reconstruction of life in hiding, describing in detail the daily routine. It also allowed Anne to vent frustration from constant conflicts with her mother, Mrs. van Pels and Pfeffer.

Another prominent feature, dominating later representations, was her evolving relationship with Peter, which eventually turned romantic.

In March 1944, Anne heard a radio broadcast by the exiled Dutch education minister Gerrit Bolkestein, who asked listeners to keep documentary evidence

about their life under the Nazis. Anne began to rewrite her diary, now with the intention of making it public. Franklin suggests that this turned the book into a memoir in the form of diary entries.

Anne had not finished when the raid stopped her efforts. Not all parts of the diary survived. At least one of the original volumes, covering over a year, is missing; it does, however, exist in the version Anne wrote after March 1944.

SEVERAL VERSIONS

Otto returned to Amsterdam in June 1945. After they received a confirmation that Anne did not survive, Miep Gies handed over Anne's papers, which she had found in the annex. Otto decided to pub-



lish the diary but, in what Franklin calls "the most confusing and contested" aspect of Anne's story, "betrayed" her legacy.

Otto combined both versions of the diary. He returned to the manuscript sections that Anne removed, including details of her romance with Peter. He softened the criticism of Anne's mother and of Mr. and Mrs. van Pels.

Franklin believes Otto did so out of respect for victims. The last surviving pages from Anne's diary, offering critical comments about her parents' marriage, were made public only after Otto's death decades later.

It took almost 40 years before a critical edition, comparing all the versions of the diary, was published by Dutch researchers. This necessarily raises the question of how far the Anne Frank people know from

Otto's version is different from Anne who lived in hiding and perished in Belsen.

AFTERLIFE AND PROJECTION

Despite initial scepticism, the diary immediately became a hit, especially in the United States. Soon there were efforts to turn it into a theatre play and film. Otto agreed, because he needed money to preserve the house with the annex.

The Broadway play premiered in 1955 and the Hollywood feature film in 1959. In the following decades, Anne's story inspired scores of authors, but also activists who referred to the public icon in support of their agenda.

The immense publicity did not come without controversies. It has led, according to Franklin, to Anne becoming "whoever and whatever we need her to be". Such efforts keep surfacing. Franklin is right to criticise those who deliberately aim to provoke, for example, by using Anne's image in anti-Zionist campaigns.

The original theatre and film representations, according to some, intentionally universalised Anne's story, suppressing her Jewish identity. This, according to Franklin, made the story more palatable to the American audience and reflected the American Jewish ideal at that time of full assimilation into American society.

Yet although Anne's diary can speak to a multitude of audiences, it is a deeply Jewish story. Anne's relation with her Jewish identity and Zionism was ambiguous, though she was aware of her background and wrote that they "will always remain Jews". Margot, her sister, wanted to go to Mandatory Palestine as a maternity nurse; Otto in his later life was supportive of the Zionist project.

Another affair, more recently, focused on the parts of the diary where Anne expressed her desire to touch her female friend's breast and kiss her. She also wrote about her attraction to female nudity in art.

There were accusations that Otto censored these parts of the diary, in an effort to deny the coming out of his daughter. This is unfair criticism. As Franklin shows, Otto included the entries, slightly modified, in the first US edition, even though Anne had removed them from the rewritten version of her diary.

Ironically, conservative circles in the United States have called for a ban of a graphic novel based on the book, calling it "Anne Frank pornography". Franklin

cautions us against such projections and reading too much into these comments. We simply don't know enough about Anne and about how her sexuality would develop. In the diary, she repeatedly expressed attraction to several boys, including Peter van Pels.

THE RAID

These efforts only show how the popularised image of Anne keeps attracting attention. We still want to know more about her and solve all mysteries. In 2022, a Canadian author Rosemary Sullivan, in cooperation with a former FBI special agent, published a book that claimed to solve the mystery of Anne's betrayal.

Until today, the culprit has not been identified. According to Sullivan, the Annex eight were betrayed by a member of the Dutch Jewish Council. This compulsory community body has often been accused of collaboration.

The publication triggered a quick response from Dutch Holocaust historians who, in a long rebuttal, rejected Sullivan's claim, calling it a baseless fabrication. Dutch and German publishers withdrew the book.

WHO WAS THE REAL ANNE FRANK?

The question ultimately remains unresolved.

Is it the girl who penned the first version of her diary to cope with the persecution and isolation in the annex? Is it the young woman, author of the second version, who matured too quickly because of a lack of contact with her peers? Is it the Anne that Otto, grieving after the loss of his whole family, reconstructed from the pages saved by Miep Gies?

Or is she one of the versions of her story produced at Broadway, Hollywood, by countless writers, and now even political activists?

Reading the diary, even though we know the end, we hope she will survive. We don't want to know what happened after their capture. We don't want to see her bald and emaciated in Auschwitz or Belsen.

She can inspire us, we need to learn about her, but we should respect her. We should not project onto her our current agenda, concerns or political views. We should "restore her as a human being", and that's exactly what Franklin does. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 17, 2025

'Birthdate Forecast'

The Moon forms a sextile with Mercury in your solar return chart, paving the way for an exceptional year ahead. You'll find yourself presented with numerous opportunities to progress and excel in life. Your business is likely to flourish, with promising prospects and expansion on the horizon. Job opportunities will keep coming your way, keeping your career trajectory on a steady rise. It's a favorable time to explore partnerships or joint ventures, which can further strengthen your financial foundation. Your communication skills will prove to be one of your strongest assets this year, helping you close important deals, including international orders. Plans to purchase new property or a house may move forward. Many of you will also consider marriage and settling down. Students will dedicate themselves to studies and achieve commendable results. At the workplace, your rapport with bosses and colleagues will be excellent. Your spouse will be a pillar of strength, and you'll diligently look after your family's needs. The year will be dotted with auspicious occasions, adding to the joy.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would be fun loving, energetic and willing to explore new ideas. You may feel frustrated in relationships as there is a lack of communication, and it is hard for you to verbalize your true feelings and express them. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation. Health needs to be replenished with a planned diet and physical fitness schedules.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You might particularly enjoy discussions about your early life, or the past. In fact, it's a great time to open up conversations with loved ones, as you are more rational when it comes to personal matters now. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal past. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and healthy routines.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings harmonious relations with friends, colleagues and loved ones. There would be love, grace, beauty, happiness and pleasure in personal relations success and good fortune at work bring new opportunities for further progress. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. You would be more determined and hard-working at this time.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You would have to restructure and reorganize activities at work and analyze the situations at home. Your daily routines and business dealings need to be restructured for better gains and productivity. You tend to be a perfectionist while completing business projects and campaigns. It is best to accept the challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs taking it all in your stride. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You would be compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives and gain respect from them. You are ambitious and ready to achieve professional goals and targets at any cost. You would maintain balance, strength and completion in personal and business partnership. Restructuring business schedules and dealings would be productive. If health is affected, fevers or minor infections are more likely.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) News and visitors from far-off places are likely to arrive. You are loving and caring in personal relationships. You look at the world in terms of value and worth now, and what you have is foremost on your mind.

Money issues pop up now—the discovery of a way to increase your income, an unexpected gift or reward, or a brief and tiny financial crisis that motivates you to find new ways to make money are possible. You are blessed with good mood and health.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It would be better to make long-term investments and speculations for financial gains. Group activities can be a therapeutic pastime.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding. You would also form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Health needs to be addressed with a diet plan as well as some physical exercise.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender love and care. You feel fresh and re-energized. A blast of personal energy comes your way, and showing your leadership skills works for you now. You are at your most convincing, as others accept you at face value. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to a head. This is also a strong period for finances and close partnerships. A pleasant surprise may be in store.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Efforts at self-promotion might be made now. This is the time when you're notified of 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 are made of. Perhaps this is not a time to make a presentation or to come on too strongly to the world. You are feeling reflective rather than expressive. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You will be creative, adventurous and unconventional at work and this brings appreciation from senior colleagues. Your partnerships are highlighted right now, and it's time to compromise. Insecurities in your partnerships are brought to light now, and the best way to handle this is to understand that you need others instead of competing for the limelight. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. Keep stress at bay.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success at this time. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and long-lasting relationship. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as changes may occur. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. Physical energy and good health enable you to cooperate with busy schedules and work commitments.

Medication can help reduce risk of accidents, suicide in ADHD patients

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects around 7 per cent of children and 2.5 per cent of adults.

ADHD causes difficulties with holding and sustaining attention over periods of time. People with ADHD also experience hyperactivity and high levels of impulsiveness and arousal. This can make it difficult to plan, coordinate and remain engaged in tasks.

ADHD is linked to problems at work, school and home, and to higher rates of mental illnesses such as anxiety. It's also associated with higher rates of long-term harms.

Stimulant medication, such as methylphenidate and dextroamphetamine, is the most common treatment for managing ADHD symptoms. Most people with ADHD will respond to at least one ADHD medication.

But rising rates of prescriptions in recent years have prompted concern for their effectiveness and safety.

New research published today in the journal *BMJ* points to additional longer-term benefits. It found that people with ADHD who took medication were less likely to have suicidal behaviours, transport accidents, issues with substance misuse, or be convicted of a crime.

The study tracked 148,581 people who received a new diagnosis of ADHD between 2007 and 2018.

The authors used population-based data from Swedish national registers, including everyone aged six to 64 who was newly diagnosed with ADHD. The average age was 17.4 years, and 41 per cent were female.

Participants either started or did not start medication within three months of their ADHD diagnosis.

The authors examined the effects of drug treatment for ADHD on five critical outcomes: suicidal behaviours, substance misuse, accidental injuries, transport accidents and committing crimes. They looked at both first-time and recurrent events.

This study used a method that uses data from health records or registries to mimic the design of a randomised controlled trial, in an attempt to reduce bias.

The researchers accounted for age, education, other mental and physical illnesses, prior history and use of other drugs to account for factors that may influence results.

Within three months of receiving an ADHD diagnosis, 84,282 (56.7 per cent) of people had started drug treatment for ADHD. Methylphenidate was the most commonly prescribed drug, accounting for 88.4 per cent of prescriptions.

Drug treatment for ADHD was associated with reduced rates of a first occurrence for four out of the five outcomes: a 17 per cent reduction for suicidal behaviours, 15 per cent for substance misuse, 12 per cent for transport accidents and 13 per cent for committing a crime.

When the researchers looked at people with recurrent events, the rate reductions associated with ADHD

medication were seen for all five outcomes (including accidental injury).

The effect of medication was particularly strong when someone had a history of these events happening frequently. This means those with the most severe symptoms may benefit most.

Stimulant drugs were associated with lower rates of all five outcomes compared with non-stimulant drugs.

It's likely these benefits are associated with improvements in attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. People may be less likely to be distracted while driving, to self-medicate and show impacts from other mental health challenges.

The large sample size, use of national linked registers and sophisticated design give greater confidence that these findings are due to medication use and not due to other factors.

But the study was not able to examine medication dosages or track whether people reliably took their medication as prescribed. It also had no way to track the severity of ADHD symptoms. This means it can't tell us if this helped most people or just some people with severe symptoms.

We know that ADHD medication helps most people, but it is not effective for everyone. So, we still need to understand why some people don't benefit from ADHD medication, and what other treatments might also be helpful.

Finally, even though the study was rigorous in its design and adjusted for many factors, we can't rule out that other unaccounted factors could be associated with these effects.

As prescribing increases, the size of the benefit decreases.

A second study, published in June, used the same Swedish national registers and self-controlled case series design.

This study also concluded that ADHD medication was associated with reduced risks for self-harm, accidental injuries, transport accidents and committing a crime.

However, this study also showed that as prescribing rates increased nearly fivefold between 2006 and 2020, the size of the observed benefits of ADHD medications reduced.

While remaining significant, the size of the associations between ADHD medication use and lower risks of unintentional injury, traffic crashes, and crime weakened over this time.

This could mean people who are less likely to need ADHD medications are now receiving them.

What are the impacts for patients and policymakers? People need to know that if ADHD medications are helpful for them or their children, they might also improve many other areas of life.

Policymakers need to ensure medication does not become the only treatment people have access to. People with suspected ADHD need a high-quality diagnostic assessment to ensure they get the right diagnosis and the treatment most suitable for them.

(*The Conversation*)

"Respect for the truth comes close to being the basis for all morality."

—Frank Herbert

The Shillong Times

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EC's shadow boxing tactics

THE Election Commission is engaged in shadow boxing – without addressing the real issues of electoral malpractices that it allegedly failed to check or handle appropriately. When serious issues have been raised by the opposition, CEC Gyanesh Kumar is seeking to protect himself by raising a red flag, shamelessly seeking cover under "women and mothers." To a call from the opposition to release CCTV footage from polling booths where alleged frauds were committed in the course of the elections, his ploy is, "Should we share video of mothers and sisters voting?" His argument is unwarranted and condemnable. A voter is a voter, be it a woman, mother or father. They have no right to privacy at a polling booth other than the privacy while casting their vote. No CCTV network at a polling booth is allowed to record this. Hence, the issue of privacy does not arise to these footage. What the opposition sought to know by its call for release of the CCTV footage limits itself to ascertaining if acts like impersonation took place – whether the same persons lined up to vote again and again—and matters like that. No privacy is involved. Nothing should prevent EC from releasing the video.

Gyanesh Kumar is barking up the wrong tree when he argues that allegations against the EC were an "insult" to the Constitution. The boot, rather, is on the other foot. The blame is on the EC for having brought disrepute to the Constitution, which gave it an independent status. That freedom is to be protected and preserved only as long as the EC conducts itself in a fair manner. It is Kumar's argument that the EC has fearlessly stood by the voters and would stand by them like a rock. That was so in the past, but the fairness of the EC is hugely suspect now. Kumar's argument is also that there was delay on the part of the opposition to raise issues. Delay is not an issue. A wrong can be questioned at any late hour. There are suspicions that the EC aided and abetted the powers-that-be to subvert people's will in elections. EC cannot afford to lose its credibility.

What the Opposition has raised are not small matters. The dignity of democracy rests in the commitment of a nation and its institutions to hold elections in a fair manner. Gyanesh Kumar's arguments and postures speak ill of the position that he holds. He would seem to hold a brief for the errant. The Opposition has the right to raise issues. The duty of the EC is to investigate and ascertain whether anything went wrong with its systems. When issues are highlighted, the CEC, rather than being on the defensive, chooses instead to be on the offensive. The issues must be thrashed out and resolved. It is incumbent on the Modi government to help uphold the dignity and fairness of the Election Commission. The Opposition should pursue the issues it raised to their logical conclusion.

Ecological Amnesia and Environmental Onslaught in Meghalaya: A Dire Reckoning

By Wangbo Wangsu George

Meghalaya, the very name whispered by Prof. Shiba Prasad Chatterjee in 1936 – 'the abode of clouds' evokes images of ethereal beauty, mist-laden hills, and an untouched natural grandeur. This nomenclature, officially adopted upon statehood on January 21, 1972, perfectly encapsulated the region's mystique. Indeed, British colonialists, struck by its verdant charm and temperate climate, fondly christened Shillong the "Scotland of the East." For Northeastern Indians, Meghalaya stood as a prime destination for education, a sanctuary for respite, and a haven for tourism. Today, that idyllic vision is rapidly receding into the annals of history, becoming a mere narrative in children's textbooks. What confronts us now is the stark, unvarnished reality of an environmental onslaught, where we are paying for decades of negligence, unchecked urbanization, rampant industrialization, and a litany of failed government projects and schemes.

The very fabric of our 'abode of clouds' is fraying, thread by thread, under the relentless pressure of human activities. This ecological degradation is not an abstract concept; it is a tangible force reshaping our landscapes, impacting our health, and threatening the very survival of our unique biodiversity and traditional ways of life. We are witnessing, perhaps, the most profound manifestation of "ecological amnesia," a collective forgetting of our intrinsic connection to nature, a dismissal of ancestral wisdom, and a perilous detachment from the environmental consequences of our actions.

The Erosion of Memory: Ecological Amnesia at Play

Ecological amnesia is a subtle yet insidious phenomenon, often described as the tendency for each generation to redefine environmental degradation based on what they experienced in childhood, effectively lowering the baseline of what is considered "normal" environmental quality (Kahn & Friedman). For those who grew up amidst pristine forests, crystal-clear rivers, and unpolluted skies in Meghalaya, the current state of affairs is a profound shock. But for younger generations, a polluted stream or a denuded hillside might be their perceived norm, thus eroding the urgency for change. Our customary laws and practices, such as the sacred groves (Law Kytang), served as powerful conservation mechanisms. These indigenous systems embodied deep ecological knowledge, passed down through oral traditions and communal practices (Gadgil & Guha). Yet, in our pursuit of modern development, we have largely abandoned these time-tested practices. The erosion of this traditional ecological knowledge, often unwritten and undervalued, is a critical component of our creeping ecological amnesia.

The Unholy Trinity

The pillars of Meghalaya's environmental crisis

stand upon an unholy trinity: unplanned urbanization, unregulated industrialization, and widespread negligence, both governmental and societal. Unplanned urbanization has transformed Shillong from a quaint hill station into a sprawling metropolis, its growth largely haphazard and unsustainable. Unchecked hill cutting for new constructions has led to severe soil erosion and increased landslide vulnerability, a grim reality particularly evident during the monsoon season (MS-DMA's, Annual Landslide Vulnerability Assessment, 2023). The increasing population density has strained existing infrastructure, especially solid waste management systems, leading to overflowing landfills and the indiscriminate dumping of garbage in rivers and valleys (Shillong Waste Management Audit Report, 2022). Water bodies (Umkhrah and Umshyri) once vital arteries of Shillong, are now choked with plastic waste, raw sewage, and industrial effluents, their aquatic life decimated beyond recognition.

The advent of industries, particularly cement plants and the infamous coal mining has left indelible scars on Meghalaya's fragile landscape. While coal mining was a significant economic activity for decades, its environmental repercussions were catastrophic: pervasive acid mine drainage, widespread deforestation, irreversible land degradation, and severe air pollution from burning coal and dust (NGTO, since 2014). Even with the formal ban, reports suggest illegal mining activities continue in isolated pockets.

Similarly, the proliferation of cement factories, especially in areas like Jaintia Hills, has led to extensive limestone quarrying, physically destroying hills, fragmenting critical forest habitats, and generating significant dust pollution that impacts ambient air quality and local agricultural productivity (Industrial Emission and Quarrying Impact Survey, Jaintia Hills, 2020-2023). The cumulative impact of these unbridled industries on fragile ecosystems has been devastating, transforming once lush green hills into barren, scarred landscapes.

The state's environmental crisis is further compounded by a pervasive sense of governmental negligence and the often-ineffective implementation of environmental policies and schemes. While comprehensive policies exist on paper, their enforcement remains woefully inadequate (CAG, Report on Environmental Compliance, 2021). Projects ostensibly aimed at river cleaning, solid waste management, frequently falter due to a critical lack of sustained funding, poor planning, alleged corruption. These failed government projects are not merely administrative lapses; they represent profound lost opportunities for timely intervention and a fundamental betrayal of public trust. The enduring

absence of comprehensive land-use planning, coupled with a reactive approach to escalating environmental challenges, has allowed the crisis to deepen unchecked.

The Environmental Onslaught

Despite being the 'Abode of Clouds' and home to some of the wettest places on Earth (Mawsynram, Cherrapunji), parts of Meghalaya now face acute water scarcity, especially during the dry season (District-wise Water Stress and Scarcity Assessment, 2023). This tragic paradox is a direct result of extensive deforestation, pervasive river pollution, and the unchecked depletion of vital groundwater aquifers. Consequently, water-borne diseases are increasingly prevalent, particularly in urban centers and mining-affected areas, posing a significant public health challenge. (Annual Public Health Surveillance Report, 2022).

Vast tracts of once-dense forests have been cleared, threatening countless endemic species of flora and fauna (State of Forest Report: 2021 Assessment). The irreversible loss of forest cover also exacerbates climate change impacts and disrupts delicate ecological balances. Industrial emissions, burgeoning vehicular exhaust, and dust from unregulated activities have collectively led to a noticeable decline in air quality in urban centers like Shillong and major industrial zones (Air Quality Index Data for Shillong and Jaintia Hills Industrial Belt, 2023). Deforestation, unscientific quarrying, and indiscriminate hill cutting have stripped the land of its protective vegetative cover, leading to an alarming increase in landslides during the monsoon seasons, causing devastating loss of life and property (Monsoon-Related Disaster Incidents Summary, 2018-2023). The degradation of natural resources directly impacts the livelihoods of countless communities traditionally dependent on forests, agriculture, and water bodies, leading to profound cultural erosion and increasing economic hardship. Various local NGOs like 'PMF and HEW' have been barking like a mad dog.

Reclaiming Our Environmental Heritage

Reversing this pervasive environmental onslaught requires a multi-pronged approach, demanding urgent, coordinated action, unwavering genuine political will, and a profound and rapid shift in collective consciousness. The first step is to move decisively beyond mere rhetoric and ensure the rigorous enforcement of existing environmental protection laws. This necessitates a stringent crackdown on illegal mining operations, strict regulation of quarrying activities, the imposition of stringent pollution control norms on all industries, and the immediate implementation of punitive measures for all violators drawing upon specific guidelines from the CPCB and relevant sections

of the EPA, 1986. Urbanization should be meticulously guided by comprehensive, sustainable planning frameworks as per NITI Aayog's recommendations. Genuine public participation in all urban planning decisions is absolutely essential to ensure community ownership. Large-scale, community-led reforestation programmes, meticulously focusing on native tree species, are absolutely vital for rapidly restoring lost forest cover, significantly improving the land's water retention capabilities, and enhancing the state's rich biodiversity as per MFM Regulations, 2019. Concurrently, comprehensive river restoration projects, including critical desilting efforts and aggressive pollution abatement strategies, are also urgently needed to revive our dying waterways.

Meghalaya must strategically attract and vigorously foster industries that are inherently environmentally sustainable and unequivocally in tune with its unique ecological sensitivity. For existing industries, a decisive shift towards cleaner production technologies and strict, transparent adherence to EIA are imperative, with strict penalties for non-compliance under EIA Notification, 2006.

To effectively combat the pervasive ecological amnesia, we must actively integrate comprehensive environmental education into the very core of our schooling system from the earliest age. This education should not only impart scientific knowledge about ecosystems and sustainability but also rekindle a deep-seated respect for nature and an understanding of traditional ecological practices.

Finally, true and effective environmental governance unequivocally requires the active and sustained participation of local communities, dedicated NGOs, and a vigilant civil society. Empowering local bodies to rigorously monitor environmental compliance, promptly report violations, and actively participate in all relevant decision-making processes can significantly enhance governmental accountability and the effectiveness of conservation efforts. The ethereal beauty that earned it its cherished names is now under severe, unprecedented threat. The current environmental onslaught is a profound collective failure, a failure of governance, a failure of industry, and, ultimately, a failure of us, the citizens, who have allowed ecological amnesia to cloud our judgment and diminish our resolve.

The choice before us is stark and clear: continue on this perilous path of environmental degradation, condemning future generations to a land stripped bare of its natural heritage, or collectively rise to the monumental challenge, reclaim our vital ecological memory, and embark on a concerted, unwavering effort to heal our 'abode of clouds'. The time for decisive action is now, before the 'cloud-kissed hills' become a mere dusty memory, irrevocably lost to time and neglect.

Heaven of Freedom?

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

"Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

That was Tagore's prayer. 78 years have passed, and one must wonder, is "my country awake?"

The first sign is the flags. Yesterday, they were crisp, today, they're slumped over, limp and rain-streaked, looking as exhausted as the rest of us. The great national party is over, leaving behind the quiet, awkward morning-after. The great freedom hangover.

Last week, everyone was very excited about being free. To show how free we were, we put little flags on our cars and our bikes and scooters. The main point of the day was to celebrate being free to go anywhere, so we all went to the same place, at the same time. Which meant no one could go anywhere.... We were all stuck.... in a jam. Is that what we mean by a 'freedom jam'? It is the ultimate freedom paradox,

If you think our approach to building the future is bizarre, wait until you hear what we do with nature. Nature, is the green stuff we haven't put a building on yet. We love it so much, we build a big road, so millions of people can come and see it. But sleeping outside in nature is a bit dirty, so we chop down nature and build big concrete boxes called 'hotels.' So people can come and see nature, from inside a box, that is standing where nature used to be. It is all so complicated, it makes my head ache!

I also read about Umiam Lake, it is getting smaller and filling up with plastic. Soon it won't be a lake.... it will be a sort of crunchy, wet landfill, filled with everything we've thrown away since 1973. It is not just polluted, it is evolving. Soon, it might achieve self-awareness and crawl out of its bed, a great, sludgy monster demanding to know who's 'ja' charge.

"This tragic irony, this selective vision, extends from the pavements of the present, to the foundations of our future. We keep talking about our "bright future" and the "children who will build it", but I saw pictures of the schools. Some of them look like they were built before gravity was properly invented. Children are trying to learn about the nation's glorious past while bits of the ceiling is plotting its own diabolical future on their heads."

being collectively free to be individually stuck.

Now the flags on the cars look a bit sad and droopy, like they've just been told some bad news, and I'm left with questions.... what did we actually celebrate again?

I was reading a newspaper someone had used to wrap their momos in, it told a confusing story about the people on our pavements. Where did they go, I wondered... it was like a magic trick, one day they are there, the next day... gone! It makes you wonder somehow, is freedom something you have to qualify for, like a club with a dress code. Do you need a proper shop, or a house with a roof, or at least a car to put a flag on, to be free. The takeaway seems to be that freedom isn't for everyone. It is for the 'haves'; the 'have-nots' on the other hand, it seems, must settle for 'have-not-to-be-seen'.

This tragic irony, this selective vision, extends from the pavements of the present, to the foundations of our future. We keep talking about our "bright future" and the "children who will build it", but I saw pictures of the schools. Some of them look like they were built before gravity was properly invented. Children are trying to learn about the nation's glorious past while bits of the ceiling is plotting its own diabolical future on their heads. We teach them about brave people who fought for a better tomorrow, in a classroom that might not have a tomorrow... how ironic is that!

We won't be celebrating independence then; we will be running from a sentient "Bin-Lake." Will people still come and take selfies with it, putting up captions like: "Standing by this legendary landmark which smells like 50 years of fish and chips. #Trashy-ButClassy" and "I like my lake like I like my tea, dark, dark, and with mysterious lumps. #BrewedByPollution."

This all comes from greed, doesn't it.... and avarice, which is just a fancy word for people who want to be greedy in a more expensive way. We want more, but what is 'more'.... another floor on a building, another car in a jam, another plastic chair by a waterfall?

So what now, the party's over and the last of the patriotic WhatsApp forwards has been sent. We're all free again, free to ignore our poor, free to send our children to wobbly class rooms, and free to turn our beautiful hills into a car park with a view.

Maybe that's the real meaning of Independence, Day. It is not a celebration, it is a distraction.

I think I'll take my little car flag down now; it seems to have served its purpose. We wave it once a year to prove we are free.

Perhaps this is the heaven Tagore prayed for....not a country that has awakened but one that is finally free to remain asleep.....

Letters to the Editor

A Plea that Deserves Immediate Attention

Editor
When many of us read the piece by Marbiang Rymbai entitled "A Plea from Meghalaya's Youth" (The Shillong Times - 15 Aug 2025), we could not help but cry deep inside, with pitiful thoughts about the tormenting journey on their road to uncertainties our educated youth have to undertake. It was not only a simple letter to the editor but it is a letter to the government, the educators, the employers, and the society at large. It was a letter that expresses the unspoken truth and anger, the grim facts and despair, the harsh reality and frustration, not only of the author but of thousands of unemployed youths and their disgruntled parents.

Our youths have spent a quarter of their lives preparing themselves for various

job avenues in the state, only to find that no matter how big their resume is, it is all going to waste once they realise the system's apathy towards their cause (as pointed out in the letter – the criteria, the salary, the guarantee). Students do not know what it takes for one to secure their future in this unjust, cruel environment, while parents keep sending their children with expectations. Sadly, many are beginning to lose faith in the educational system, the government and some in society altogether. Does our conscience permit us to remain silent for long?

From where does such a negative aura originate and who is responsible for creating such a mess in our future generation's lives? The answer already lies in the above letter and the culprit is already accused of not only creating the unemployment fiasco but of many other fronts. Yes, in our very own state, it is the MDA Government that pampers party workers more than they deserve and sacrifices our very own to feed the outsiders of the state.

Getting a permanent government job these days is pure lottery, since for 50 posts/seats minimum of 25,000 applicants are running to try their luck. We are sure, if a WhatsApp group entitled "Jobless Youth of Meghalaya" is formed, it would be ever-growing with lakhs of members. Yet it is surprising to see the government turning a blind eye to this nightmare but can roll every budget into a magic show – then you see the crores, now you don't! Alas, they are truly investing where it matters – employment to benefit their toadies, i.e., the Government-owned Defeated MLAs, Advisers, Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen, Co-Chairmen, etc, who, as proud profligate consumers of public money, have no shame to see our youth begging for jobs but undeservingly squander away lakhs in a month – a sum our struggling youth cannot even make it throughout the year.

Unfortunately, unemployment has already become a neglected affair and a scary topic to bring to the table.

Not to find a job has become a daily struggle, mind you – it has become an acceptable way of life for many. To add salt to an injury, the spendthrift attitude of the MDA confirms that the government does not have the will to overcome this crisis; rather, it pleases to invest in entertaining our youths with unfruitful festivals that benefit the few. It is like they purposely built an airport in a place where there are no passengers – but hey, unemployed youths can always go there to enjoy the AC.

It is high time the Government admits that a rise in unemployment is a tragic reality. In fact, unemployment in Meghalaya in particular and Northeast India in general is higher than the rest of India, but the '10 billion dollar' question is whether it wants to do something about it or keep the circus running as usual? It is time to act before letters from frustrated youths turn into something uglier.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Rusievan Shangpliang,
Via email

Silence the Siren: A Civic Appeal to End the Misuse of VIP Privilege

Editor,
The siren was never meant for announcing a VIP's travel – a sign of pride. It was designed for emergencies to save lives, to rush the sick to hospitals, to reach accident victims in time. Yet, in Shillong, we now hear this urgent sound not for medical and other emergencies, but for a wedding procession. A white Bolero bearing the ML01 registration moves through traffic with police clearing the way. Sirens blare, vehicles halt, buses wait, and ordinary citizens lose precious time. What if an ambulance is stuck behind? A life could be lost not to fate, but to privilege.

Public roads belong to everyone, not just the powerful. Sirens are not for comfort, convenience, or ceremony. They are for emergencies. Not family celebrations.

When police are deployed to clear a path for a private event, it sends a dangerous message: that some people matter more than others. This undermines the very spirit of independence and equality that India stands for. We fought for freedom so all could be treated fairly not so that a few could misuse authority while the rest suffer in silence.

Behind every traffic police officer standing on the roadside is a person who took an oath to serve with fairness and dignity. Yet, day after day, many are forced to clear roads for unofficial VIP convoys not because it is right, but because they fear action from above. They know it is wrong. They feel the guilt when a school bus waits or an ambulance is delayed. But they obey, not out of duty, but out of helplessness. Your uniform deserves respect, not misuse. You are not traffic enforcers for the privileged you are guardians of justice on our streets. We see your silence. We feel your struggle. And we stand with you when you

choose to do what is right not what is ordered.

Using VIP facilities for weddings or personal events is not just unnecessary. It is wrong. It puts lives at risk, disrespects the duty of our emergency services, and erodes public trust. Real dignity does not come from breaking rules or demanding special treatment. It comes from following the law, standing with the people, and leading by example. No one should have to wait in traffic or miss a job, an exam, or medical care just because someone else believes they come first.

To those who misuse this privilege, we urge you to reflect. Was it worth it? Did your moment of convenience come at the cost of someone else's health, dignity, or livelihood? If you hold a position of respect, use it to inspire fairness not fear. Travel like a citizen. Arrive without escorts. Let the siren remain sacred and reserved only for those fighting for their lives.

It is time to stop silently

giving way. Every time we pull over for unofficial VIP convoys, we accept injustice. We allow privilege to override principle. But change begins with us. Stay in your lane. Do not stop for unmarked processions. Report misuse. Raise your voice. The road belongs to all of us and no siren should ever drown out the rights of ordinary citizens.

On this Independence Day, let us reaffirm that true freedom means no one is above the law. Let us commit to justice, humility, and equality not just in words, but in action. Because a nation does not grow strong by how it treats the powerful, but by how it protects the ordinary.

Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh
Via email

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

"Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

— Mark Twain

The Shillong Times

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Rivers in Dire Straits..

MANY who clamour about the heat wave hitting Shillong these days don't actually exercise their minds about why this has happened and how. Senior member of the United Democratic Party (UDP), former minister and now MLA of Amlarem constituency in the War-Jaintia area, Lahkmen Rymbui, has lamented that construction is happening right on the river without any concern about the environmental cost that this violation will extract. Rymbui has given a clarion call to use relevant sections of the law to prevent encroachment along rivers. But this call has come a little too late in the day. A look at the Umkhrah river front is testimony to how the moneyed class have encroached and built structures thereby reducing the width of the river. This is visible along the stretches of all rivers in Meghalaya today. How was this allowed to happen? Is it not because building by-laws are violated with impunity by the very people who are elected to be lawmakers?

Rymbui who was once the Minister in Charge of Environment and Forests, himself hails from a region where limestone quarrying has devastated the environment beyond recognition. It's as if the environment itself is being exported to Bangladesh where hundreds of trucks are lined up at the border to transport coal, limestone, boulders and sand. The District Councils which claim to be the custodians of forests, rivers and minerals don't seem to be bothered that the rivers are drying up and so are the catchment areas where forests have been cut down mercilessly to feed the sawmills that at one time were shut down by the Supreme Court when it banned tree cutting and the timber business unless cleared by a committee of the State Environment and Forest Department that is to prepare the working plans. In the absence of supervision all this has been forgotten and it's back to the go as you please policy.

The UDP is a partner in the MDA government and hence it would have been in order for Rymbui to draw the attention of the Government to this heavy onslaught on rivers. The Meghalaya High Court too has directed the State Government not to allow any construction to come up within 50 metres of the highwater mark of a water body without the express leave of the Court. The problem is that the State Government has been lax in the application of its own laws and therefore asking it to be the policeman is fraught. Rymbui had pointed out to the recent tragedies in Himachal Pradesh where human intervention and ruthless construction has wreaked havoc and caused loss of lives and property on a large scale. With climate change well and truly entrenched in this state as is evident by the rising temperatures, cloudbursts cannot be ruled out and landslides which are a common phenomenon here and have caused human tragedies will cause havoc. Hence conservation of rivers and forests both ought to be a top priority of the Government. What's more important than human lives, is the question here.

The signs of the times – A need for Identity verification

By Toki Blah

For regular subscribers of The Shillong Times, the front page reportage, the editorial column and space allocated for public expression - "Letters to the Editor" of ST Dated August 14, 2025, must have held special attention. The peculiarity was I believe purely coincidental, for all the above three, dealt simultaneously on the same day, with the Bangladeshi intrusion into one of the villages, of South West Khasi Hills District. The report stated that the Chief Minister brushed off the incident as just another cross border attempt at dacoity. He tried to assure everyone that border security had since then been tightened (not clear what that means); that the Union Home minister had been informed. The Meghalaya Home Minister emphasized that instructions had been issued that such incidents "should never happen again" (not clear again whether these instructions applied to troublemakers from Bangladesh or to our own police force. Either way it seems an unrealistic statement to make).

The editorial of that day approached the incident from a different angle. It spoke basically of the ease with which illegal migrants from across a porous International border can procure Indian documents to prove they are Indian citizens and their ability to blend in and merge into the local population of the state, with all the demographic dangers this holds for tribal Meghalaya.

The third observation by Salil Gewali, spoke of the rise of extremist ideology in Bangladesh and of its fall-out in the North East. He cites the arrest of illegal migrants in Assam linked to Bangla terror outfits such as ABT/AGIS as well as the ISIS. All three however are clear that the Bangladesh of today is no longer the friendly Bangladesh of yesterday. Something strange but ominous is taking place of which we must be careful of.

On August 5, 2024 the Awami League Government of Sheikh Hasina was overthrown in a rebellion led by radical Islamic elements. A caretaker Government under the Advisorship of Mohamud Yunus then took over the governance of Bangladesh. Since that day the friendly face of our southern neighbour has turned sour. An anti-India policy was adopted and encouraged; India baiting started becoming the national pastime of Bangladesh. For example the open rapprochement with known Indian enemies like China and Pakistan; the statement of their adviser that we are a landlocked region with Bangladesh our only route to the sea; or his call to China to make war with India and then seize the entire Northeast or

his plea to the entire Northeast to join Bangladesh and Nepal as economic partners (completely bypassing New Delhi. An inexcusable faux pas in diplomatic decorum). As if the NE is a foreign country of its own. A deliberate and calculated call to create rifts between the North East and the Centre or at its worst an opening gambit for the eventual separation of the region from India.

Side by side is the rapid and rising Islamic radicalization of Bangla youth. These people are openly encouraged by the Yunus Government. This group's admiration and fascination for Jihad ideology is an open secret. The ISIS call for a revival of the Caliphate seems to have caught their imagination and they see such a Caliphate stretching from the Philippines to the distant shores of Europe. Now let's join these dots together and what do we find? We find ourselves bang in the middle of a sinister plot to rewrite

of such border villages by Islamists with all the proper documents of Indian citizenship. Marriage with our local women to strengthen Indian identity and permanent Meghalayan resident status is established. Its not impossible. It can be done or is already being done as mentioned in the ST Editorial mentioned above. By then any punitive action to correct matters would be too late. Preventive measures must be taken now to protect ourselves, otherwise it might be too late. So what do we do? Let's try and find out.

The intrusion this time might just be a tentative probe to find out how prepared we are against such eventualities. Read world events and learn what's happening around us. The American deep state is interested in fomenting trouble in India's eastern flank; Pakistan and Wahhabi Islam would like nothing better than Sharia Law taking roots in this remote region; China's policy

BSF presence, is for the villagers to defend themselves until adequate help arrives. Increasing BSF 24 x 7 patrolling all along the porous 443 km border is humanly impossible. We must therefore encourage the formation of Village Defence Parties (VDPs) for each border village. VDPs must be armed and trained in defence tactics. Each VDP should then be digitally linked by mobile to the nearest BSF outpost, to seek quick and more robust protection in case of any misadventure from across the border. Closer VDP interaction with the BSF must be encouraged. For the moment that should suffice. It's better to be safe than sorry and we must be prepared for the worst if it should come.

Last but not least is the question of influx into Meghalaya. That fear of outsider entry from mainland India, entering Meghalaya through designated land routes, to seek employment and exploitation of our resources, has changed. The danger today is official sponsored migration from across a porous and unregulated international border; through hard-to-check unmarked jungle routes; not to simply find employment, but to settle permanently; to merge with the locals; marry our women; to seize our land; convert and radicalize the locals to fundamentalist Islam (I mean no disrespect to secular and liberal Muslims of Meghalaya) and then eventually demand that based on religion, this part of India should merge with Islamic Bangladesh.

I beg the reader not to treat this as fear mongering or inciting Islamophobia. Instead, realize and accept that the narrative over Influx has changed! Influx is no longer confined to alienation of tribal land but to the total and complete obliteration of who we are today. Our identity as a hill tribe is under threat. ILP can no longer serve as the mechanism to check this type of illegal entry: The 19th century Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873 was simply never designed to check the type of 21st century influx we face today. As pointed out above, if the narrative has changed so should our response to the emerging threat. Our survival in the ultimate analysis will lie in biometric smart cards that can stand any test that seeks to contest our Identity as Indians and Meghalayans. This is important to understand. Firmly establishing our identity as Indian tribals will prevent attempts at an eventual takeover by others. From a civilian perspective, I can see no other influx preventive mechanism except through this procedure. We urgently need a participatory pow-wow among all stakeholders to see how we can make it work.

Point is we must be prepared and the only way, keeping in mind the distance of BSF outposts from several border villages and the reluctance of our local patriots to allow increased

"Create terror at Meghalaya's border villages; cause fear and panic; repeat such acts elsewhere and cause mass exodus from India's borders. Typical terror tactics. What happens then? Perhaps a gradual takeover of such border villages by Islamists with all the proper documents of Indian citizenship. Marriage with our local women to strengthen Indian identity and permanent Meghalayan resident status is established."

the political geography of the region, where we, tribal communities of the Northeast, become hapless satellites rotating round a radicalized fundamentalist Bangladesh and Shariat law the controlling factor to our lives.

Now based on the above observations, let's turn back to the South West Khasi Hills incident and the capture of the six Bangladesh infiltrators. From reports we know they were intruders armed with firearms and bombs. From pictures of the captured intruders they do not in the least look like the typical Bangladeshi we usually encounter. All of them come across as well-fed, muscular, athletic individuals; more like international wrestlers than the scrawny Bangladeshi all of us have in mind. So did they cross over on their own to commit dacoity or were they handpicked trained individuals purposely sent to create terror and mayhem at our border villages? My own assessment is the latter. Create terror at Meghalaya's border villages; cause fear and panic; repeat such acts elsewhere and cause mass exodus from India's borders. Typical terror tactics. What happens then? Perhaps a gradual takeover

Yours etc.,
Philip Marwein
Shillong-2

No Compromise on Meghalaya's Security

Editor,
Heartfelt thanks go to Salil Gewali for his bold letter in The Shillong Times captioned "Lessons from the Bangladeshi criminal attacks" (ST Aug 14, 2025). His write-up is a wake-up call for everyone considering the frequent attacks by Bangladeshi nationals in the bordering areas of Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills. This time the attack happened in South West Khasi Hills. The Garo Hills, in particular, are far more sensitive and vulnerable.

The repeated attacks and the gradual influx of Bangladeshis, even via Assam, into our land cannot be taken lightly. From my experience, the Bangladeshis can easily blend in with their communities within, which will eventually pose a major threat to the peace and harmony of our state. It is not an issue of tribal or non-tribal, but of the overall safety and security of Meghalaya. We should not

keep silent now, tomorrow may be too late.

I am in complete agreement with Gewali that we should draw lessons from Assam. We should remember how unchecked infiltration and their internal supporters have changed the demography of Assam, disturbing the indigenous communities.

Thank you, Salil Gewali, for speaking with such honesty and vision. Leaders particularly from the Garo Hills region must not compromise the safety of Meghalaya for mere vote-bank politics. This is my sincere appeal to the respected leaders.

Yours etc.,
Hilarius Umdor,
Shillong-8

True Patriotism Lives Beyond the Flag

Editor,
I read your Independence Day column "Envisioning a New Meghalaya," with great interest and admiration. Your clear and heartfelt words beautifully remind us that patriotism is not just for one day of flag-hoisting, speeches, and celebrations. True love for the country means respecting the

Tricolour every day and showing it through our actions, big or small.

You have rightly drawn attention to important concerns — errors in the voter list, the decline in press freedom, and the need for greater public awareness about democratic rights in Meghalaya. What I feel is that these are not only government matters but also the responsibility of every citizen, for democracy grows stronger when its people are informed and active.

Your points on traffic congestion, growing poverty, and the social problems linked to teenage pregnancies are also very relevant. They remind us that development is a shared duty, where communities and citizens must work hand in hand with the government through long-term, practical efforts.

This article is a timely reminder that Independence Day should be more than a ceremonial holiday — it should be a day for honest self-reflection. On two days in the year — Independence Day and Republic Day — our spirit of nationalism and our desire to contribute to the nation reach their highest peak. But as the evening comes and the flag is lowered, these feelings

Of Dogs and Men – Predicament of Dharma

By Binodan K D Sarma

*"tasman nham jatu
katham canadya: tyaksyamy enam
susukhathri
mahendra: (Therefore, I shall never
under any circumstances abandon
him for my own
happiness. O great Indra)*

These were Yudhishtira's words to Indra, when the latter invoked him to enter heaven, but without a faithful companion who had accompanied the Pandava to the end in their final journey to mount Sumeru, believed to be the route to heaven. This companion, who Yudhishtira refused to leave and enter heaven, was an Indian Indie dog, later reveals himself as Lord Dharma (Yama) and that in his protest for a dog to enter heaven with him, the astute and righteous, Pandava passed the final test of 'dharma' (duty) in flying colours. And so a dog, made it to heaven because a common righteous man refused to abandon him and the right action. This is folklore and mythology. We are in a similar situation once again.

Dogs and Dharma (Duty) (incidentally start with the same letter) are now in moralistic debate of what or who is more important. The recent Supreme Court order to Delhi Government to round up all stray and street dogs from the 'streets' to shelters, to protect mankind from the infection of rabies, is what some have said is the dharma (duty) to a safe living in the city. As per the honourable judiciary, stray dogs are a 'menace' to society. The judge referred to an article of a national daily to refer to this judgement. The article pointed out that an average 20,000 stray dog bite cases are reported in India every year, of which 2000, are in Delhi alone. This led the judiciary to act on their role to be the protector of society and ensure that every citizen has a safe life in the city — this being otherwise that dog bites are not the scariest things to live in a city, but that debate can be set aside for this time.

Dharma or duty is a very grave term. Our mythologies and history books are full of examples of how the conflict of duty is a pertinent question in the mind of mankind since ages. Be it Ram in Ramayana, an Arjun in Mahabharata or Achilles in Iliad, the moral war of the right act has been pervasive in the history of evolution across cultures and religion. Our courts of justice have been erected in faith that they will be protector and arbitrators of the moral conflicts that arise in the best possible way. Dharma is not limited to bringing justice for mankind alone — it is supposed to be extended to every living creature on Earth alike. This is where, the honourable court's decision seemed to be wayward and against the fundamentals of justice to every living being.

Dogs and mankind, have persisted together, as early as 4500 documented years ago, if not earlier if we refer to mythology. Their coexistence is built on a faith that the weaker of the two, will be protected whenever necessary. That the canines have fulfilled their part does not need a citation but whether we as humans have fulfilled the same, calls for introspection. The Indies or the Indian pariah is one of the most neglected breed in India till the last few decades, where animal lovers and communities have actively worked around in rehab programs for them. But that

would have never been enough till as individuals we work towards their safety and right to live with dignity. Our duty towards these idiomatic 'man's best friends' is much more than just feeding a few biscuits, milk, water and left over meals or even proper ones. It calls for an activism to question the respective governments to ensure that the authorities do their duty towards them, for which we as commoners pay taxes (Yes, we do). Every government has a budget (managed through taxes collected from various sources) that needs to be allocated to vet services of the state like sterilization and vaccination programs, building animal shelters and other services, all to ensure that the streets are 'safer' for mankind and stray animals live a life of dignity. We as a citizen of the state and city, rather than just complaining of the growing 'menace' of animals, can question the government on whether these have been implemented or not. This is our duty or dharma. Of course in a world where we forgo asking the government whether our votes are safe or not, asking for such a menial, lower-down-the-order requirement is never even a passing possibility of it being considered as our duty. This is where we fail ourselves and the animals. We have on our own proverbial journeys to heaven (happiness) forgone any action to protect the right of another living being.

The statistics will not lie that the Delhi MCD in its effort of sterilization has failed by 70-80 percent of the necessary coverage. With a staggering 1 Million strays this is an uphill task which requires that a systematic program is put in place and is governed and executed in precision. But like most government programs, this also could be lost in the maze of bureaucracy and red-tapism, unless we as citizens hold them accountable time to time. Stray dogs like any other animal live on a Darwinian instinct — to survive against odds. They will snap, bite and growl at anything that they consider as a threat. Does that mean, we round them up and pack them inhumanely in conditions that holocaustic? No, absolute not. Because we as the evolved species should understand how to manage this crisis without making a mockery of the weaker of the two. Yes, they are the weaker ones. Yes, we are the more evolved ones. So it deems us to act wisely and not arbitrarily, where we read an article, inspect a petition and then ask the government to act on something as Herculean as cleaning the Aegean stables. Let there be a process that upholds the rule of 'dharma' in the right way and most importantly in a humane way; that we have inherited from our cultures.

Yama (The God of Duty and Dharma) in his praise for Yudhishtira in the final journey did after all say what we all should pay heed to — "O Kunteya. You are indeed a great man, a righteous man; your compassion for all living beings is exemplary. A dog has been as dear to you as your own brothers. Your conduct will remain a shining example to all men for all times. Now, you can mount the chariot without any hesitation."

(The author is a dog lover and animal activist who also runs an advertising agency in Delhi. He can be reached at Binodan.sarma@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Wanted a brisk and business-like Assembly session

Editor,
Meghalaya's Assembly Session will begin on September 8, so please allow me to point out some serious concerns related to social, economic, educational, political and other issues. This is an appeal to all our MLAs especially those in the Opposition led by the LoP, that MLAs on both sides of the House should bring up motions, discussion and debates in the House, if time permits, on (a) the critical state of education in Meghalaya, (b) deplorable condition of the state's economy (c) poverty and unemployment (d) increasing chasm between the rich and the poor (e) depressing and despicable healthcare in the state; the multiple impacts of increasing social ills like drugs and drug abuse, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, single and teenage mothers, crimes against women and children, amongst others. These are serious concerns and are killing Meghalaya. Imagine how all these ills

afflict and impact society as a whole! Yet our MLAs do not give much importance and perhaps choose not to give much weightage to these matters although they are matters of life and death.

Personally, I have witnessed many proceedings in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly where several government and private businesses were transacted. Issues like unemployment, price rise, economy, education, healthcare, agriculture, power, water scarcity, environment and other issues were indeed taken up in the House by members but I found the seriousness, quality of debates and discussions on the issues not impressive and I dare to class them as very poor, lacking in depth and bereft of statistics or data. The reasons are many and according to me, no homework and research was done on the subjects at hand. Moreover, it all depends on the quality of the legislators or MLAs that the constituencies send to the House. However, I must admit that there were few members who were excellent and sharp and their qualities and capacities were worthy of their role as legislators but we missed them after they were voted out or died.

There are many opportunities for the members of the House if they want to bring important issues that affect the state, their constituencies and the people in the form of motions, call attention motions, half-hour discussions, discussions on the budget, censure motions, discussions on the Governor's address and even Question Hour can be very beneficial for the state and its people. Members are expected to bring up really searching questions of public importance on any subject or even on policy matters.

Unluckily, the coming session is going to be very short with only three days of Government business and two days of Private Members' Business. Though the time is very limited, let us hope that the business transactions will get extended by a few hours during Private Members' Business if not during Government's business.

I urge upon the Business Advisory Committee of the Assembly, through the Speaker, the leader of the House and the LoP to allot more calendar days for different sessions in future in view of the many important life and death issues confronting the state.

often fade. True patriotism is when the flag in our hearts never comes down.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
Tura

AT Point mayhem

Editor,
If anyone wishes to witness a chaotic orchestra being played daily before school starts and after school ends, do visit this T-point mayhem that unfolds at Upper Lachumiere area near the 2nd gate of Loreto School & JND Store. It's a confluence of sorts, or shall I say, reckoning that starts at Gold Gym roundabout at Lower Lachumiere, Inner roads of Upper Lachumiere from Malki Point and the incoming traffic from Dhankei roundabout towards Gold Gym, Lower Lachumiere, you get the picture? Added to this delight is a cherry on top of helpless tourist vehicles with the size of a tank, squeezing onto tiny Shillong roads.

Every school morning and after, this T point spot transforms into a battlefield. Cars, two-wheelers, and pedestrians all compete like contestants in a reality show, except here the prize is just a few inches

of road space. Horns play a never-ending orchestra, parents shout instructions, and helpless children abandon their vehicles and dodge other vehicles like they're in a video game. Safety? Well, that is the missing guest star. This show aggravates even further if it's raining.

The absence of traffic signals or even single traffic personnel makes the situation worse, though to be fair, if an officer stood there, they might need therapy after a week.

We don't need rocket science to fix this. A few traffic cops at peak hours, proper lanes, or at least a working signal would turn this circus into something resembling order. Until then, parents, cab drivers, and commuters will keep staring at this morning mayhem with their sanity gone unchecked.

I hope the authorities act soon before someone decides to sell tickets to this chaos.

Yours etc,
Shivani Pde,
Via email

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

“Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other.”

— Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Modi's age factor

WITH less than a month left for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attain the age of 75, nothing yet goes to show he would hang up his boots and pave the way for another leader to govern the nation. This is a curious phenomenon. It was with rare vehemence that Modi, in one clean sweep, relegated veterans like Lal Krishna Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and some others to the sidelines, creating a Margdarshak Mandal for the BJP and its government and introducing an age bar for elders in 2014. It was clear to all that Modi as PM did not want them to stand in his way. The veterans cursed their fate and went into oblivion. Normally, the older and more mature, the more assertive the elders have been in seeking positions of power. Modi changed that scenario in the saffron party. It is to everybody's knowledge that those who had been dumped into the Margdarshak Mandal never got a chance to offer any advice to either the party or the government. Rather, Modi and Amit Shah towered above all others and ran the government and the party. Now, however, it's Modi's turn to be at 75. Reports are that Modi would, in mid-September, shift the PMO to the recently built complex near the new Parliament House for a more comfortable existence. The message is loud and clear.

It would also sound curious that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat would be crossing age 75 in the same month of September; a few days before Modi does so. But, the RSS does not have any age bar for its top functionaries. Yet, Bhagwat hinted recently that he too is in favour of an age bar for leadership. Perhaps he had Modi in his mind. Rumours also swirled that the RSS is in a mind to look beyond the Modi era in Indian politics. In all fairness, it must be admitted that the BJP has a wealth of experienced leaders, mostly of the RSS stock, though their levels of governmental performance are debatable.

The present thinking on a change of PM seems to be guided also by the fact that the last parliament polls demonstrated a fall in the trust that the nation had reposed on Modi. He could not muster a majority for the BJP-led NDA in the 2024 parliament. His government survives today on the support the JDU from Bihar and Telugu Desam from Andhra Pradesh extend to it. Those like Naidu have a way of extracting their pound of flesh in such tricky situations. In the present circumstances, a weak Modi can only grin and bear with Naidu and Nitish Kumar, who had been pulling his legs for years. Another factor weighing against Modi is the way Operation Sindoor ended in a whimper. The perceived concern on the part of the RSS vis-à-vis Modi's continuation as PM for his present full term might, thus, be prompted by several factors like these.

Politics of Illegal Immigration and Eviction

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

Because of its size and location, whatever happens in Assam is bound to have serious repercussions on the surrounding states, all of which are predominantly inhabited by indigenous groups—either tribal (such as Kuki-Chin-Mizo) or non-tribal (such as the Meitei)—or once had a large tribal population, as with Tripura, where the indigenous community has become a minority because of migration from former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The eviction happening there has got the state and non-state actors in Meghalaya to become extra wary of non-indigenous individuals entering the state. This is coming when the international border with Bangladesh is also in a volatile state.

Recently, some criminals from Bangladesh had attacked a Garo village in South West Khasi Hills. There have been skirmishes reported from other parts of the state as well. On the 18th of August, the KSU staged a sit-in protest at Khyndai Lad, in front of the old Assembly building to press both the central and state governments to take urgent and decisive action against the unchecked influx of illegal immigrants into the region. This was, as reported by the papers, part of a coordinated demonstration across capitals of the northeastern states, resolved during a recent meeting of the North East Students' Organisation (NESO) held in Guwahati on August 6. Illegal immigration has been a very volatile political subject in the state for a very long time, with things deteriorating in 2019 when protesters were tear-gassed and lathi-charged by the police after they reportedly threw stones at the police near the Raj Bhavan. Realising the situation was out of control, the government introduced a resolution on implementing the ILP in the state, which was passed by consensus. However, it is now more than half a decade and the demand lies with the Union Government, which has shown no inclination to accept the demand. In the meantime, the situation in Assam and internationally is only adding to the fear of the indigenous people in the state. This is although Census data for the last 50 years has shown that the non-indigenous population of the state has been experiencing a steady decline. But the current situation where suspected or confirmed illegal immigrants are getting arrested either coming into the state or looking to use

the state as transit to go into other parts of the country, is only confirming the popular suspicion that indigenous community of the state is under existential threat.

A similar sentiment also exists in Assam, which is being used by the BJP government to evict people from especially forest lands, claiming them to be encroachers. The targets of such encroachments have mostly been Bengali Muslims, targeted for many years as being illegal Bangladeshis. But of course, they are not the only ones. In order to identify illegal immigrants, Assam conducted the NRC (National Register of Citizens), which came up with a figure of 40 lakhs who have doubtful citizenship. What was intriguing about this number is that 30% of these are Bengali Hindus, who under the CAA, in principle, though illegal, will get citizenship. This is not acceptable to the many groups in Assam and the region, who don't want any illegal immigrants to get citizenship. To put things in perspective, the government will probably grant citizenship to more illegal immigrants i.e., Bengali Hindus, than the entire Garo population, and the number almost equals the Khasi population. It's like giving half of Meghalaya to illegal immigrants based on their religious affiliation.

The fear that indigenous people have of being marginalised comes not only from illegal Bangladeshis but from migrants coming from outside the region, and sometimes even from other indigenous groups they perceive are encroaching on their territory. An excellent example of this is the illegal occupation of Kheroni PGR (Professional Grazing Reserve) and VGR (Village Grazing Reserve) lands by migrants from Bihar and UP in Karbi Anglong. In 2024, the Karbi civil society groups staged a protest against the Hindi-speaking population for illegally occupying indigenous lands. During one such protest, a group of Hindi speakers attacked the Karbi volunteers in Kheroni, West Karbi Anglong district. This led to the shutdown of all the major towns in the District with the Karbi groups demanding the immediate eviction of the illegal Hindi-speaking settlers from the lands occupied by them.

Rokibuz Zaman's story, 'Why tribal groups in Assam's Karbi hills are demanding the eviction of Hindi speakers', in Scroll

is a well-researched report on the issue. In it, Jemson Timung, a leader of Karbi Students' Association, stated that "Karbi Anglong is a Sixth Schedule area, and only tribal individuals have the right to acquire land. We will not allow any Bihari illegal settler to acquire land under the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council". Another Karbi leader, Chandra Kanta Terang, who heads the Autonomous State Demand Committee, expressed frustration that "The Karbis were beaten up in their own home, while trying to protect our ancestral land from outsiders". Holiram Terang, veteran Karbi politician and a member of Karbi civil society groups, also alleged that, "After the BJP government came to power in the Centre and state, some of these people have become very aggressive, socially and culturally. I won't be surprised if the RSS is pushing them to demand land rights." Rachnatmak Nonia Sanyukta Sangh (RNSS), an organisation claiming to represent the interests of Hindi-speaking communities, countered these allegations. They met President Droupadi Murmu in Shillong with a memorandum and asked her to intervene for the "protection of land rights of settlers on VGR/PGR land in Karbi Anglong".

Tuliram Ronghang, the Chief Executive Member, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, appeared to agree with the demand of the Karbi group when he stated that "The eviction is not directed against any community. It would be carried out against all communities which are encroaching on these lands as per the SC order." But it was delayed for a month because of the Lok Sabha elections. Once that caveat was in place, it became clear that the eviction would not happen. The Hindi-speaking people living in that area have predominantly voted for the BJP, and it is unthinkable that the party would allow their eviction. And surely enough in January 2025, fresh protests erupted in Karbi Anglong, as the KSA (Karbi Students Association) and its allies demanded the eviction of the illegal Hindi-speaking occupants from the PGR and VGR lands. While the current eviction in Dhubri and other locations is going on, groups in Karbi Anglong, are asking why the same is not happening in Karbi Anglong. Being a Bengali Muslim

does not automatically make someone an illegal Bangladeshi. And Bangladeshis are not the group that pose a threat to the rights of the indigenous people in the Northeast. What is interesting to note is that the June 2025 'Geological Survey of India (GSI) Handbook on Geological Potential of Northeast India: A hidden trove of mineral prospect beneath majestic landscape' had estimated that the Chandardinga area in Dhubri district had an estimated iron ore deposit of 18.29 million tonnes. How much of the eviction that is happening in Dhubri is more about clearing the land for corporate control for resource extraction and less about removing illegal immigrants?

Furthermore, recent shocking news revealed that the Gauhati High Court was shocked that someone gave nearly 3000 bighas (between 400-800 hectares depending on the unit of measurement) of land to a private cement company, Mahabal Cements, for mining in the tribal district of Dima Hasao in Assam, a Sixth Schedule area. The lawyer arguing the case for the company explained that the land is under lease and the area is mostly barren. Justice Medhi sarcastically retorted that everyone knows how much barren land there is in North Cachar Hills. The barren lands are most probably jhum fallows maintained by the indigenous Dimasa farmers.

Even if someone were to agree that the people being evicted in Assam are illegal immigrants, they will also agree that it is being done to shore up support for the BJP for the upcoming Assembly elections. The frustrating part is that the play might actually work and the party will come back to power. But they will not be able to extinguish soon the fire that they have lit where they are trying to pit indigenous peoples against the Bengali Muslims. When the Bodos and the Karbis and other indigenous groups in Assam and the region fought for autonomy, they did not fight to share it with others, whether they were illegal Bangladeshis or migrants from the mainland. The continuing conflict in Manipur is a testament that it can be between two indigenous groups as well, and the outcome can be horrifying. Meghalaya will not be untouched by all this, and this is what should worry us all.

(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

Disrespect to the Constitution...! Ah, how easy it is nowadays to be guilty of "disrespecting the Constitution!" No need to burn it, tear it, or spit on it—just ask a question, raise a doubt, or show a mildly raised eyebrow, and boom—you're branded as a criminal, a rebel, or worse, an anti-national.

Today, it's Rahul Gandhi. Tomorrow, it could be you. The day after, it could be the fellow selling sugarcane juice at the corner, who dares to ask why power bills are higher than his profits. Disrespecting the Constitution, my friends, is now the easiest crime to commit in this country—mainly because the definition changes depending on who is in power and who feels offended.

And who are the judges of such weighty accusations? None other than the very men and women drawing fat salaries from our pockets—our bureaucrats and also our elected representatives. The same leaders who often confuse the Constitution with their party manifesto, and the people with their vote banks. The same worthies who, while swearing by the Constitution, use it as a doormat when it suits them.

I watched, amused and alarmed, as the Election Commission thundered back at Rahul Gandhi's charge of fraud, saying he had shown "disrespect to the Constitution." Disrespect? My dear sirs, what dictionary are you consulting? Because the last time I checked, questioning authority is the very soul of democracy, not its downfall. The Constitution was written precisely to allow such questions—to guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and yes, freedom to call out those in power.

If asking, "Are you doing your job right?" becomes sedition, then the Constitution has already been quietly buried, and we are merely attending its funeral in silence. The tricolour still flutters, the anthem still plays, but the spirit of democracy lies stiff in a coffin, while we stand solemnly around pretending everything is fine.

And this isn't new. We have grown used to phrases like "anti-national" being hurled at students, journalists, and opposition leaders. "Sedition" slapped on those who refuse to clap loudly enough at government functions. Or "disrespect to the army" when the poor jawan is sent to fight a battle he wasn't equipped for, and someone dares to ask why. In fact, the ruling elite has turned these phrases into a toolbox—pull out whichever hammer fits the head that dares to rise.

These phrases are not arguments; they are smokescreens. They are meant to make you forget the question and glare instead at the questioner. Like a magician who waves a glittering cloth in front of your eyes while the real trick is happening elsewhere, our leaders have mastered the art of distraction. Instead of answering the tough question, they accuse you of disloyalty. And sadly, too often, it works.

It works especially on the

unedicated, who are fed slogans instead of facts. It works on the easily misled, who prefer a WhatsApp forward over a newspaper editorial. And it works, tragically, even on the educated, who should know better but would rather enjoy the comfort of a political fairy tale than the discomfort of truth.

If you, dear reader, find yourself fooled by such dramatic declarations, then pause a moment. Hold up a mirror. Ask yourself if you've lost the ability to discern right from wrong. For when we cannot tell the truth from propaganda, we are not merely victims—we are accomplices. By nodding along, by cheering slogans without substance, we hand over our voice, our rights, and eventually, our Constitution.

Rahul might be right or wrong, and so also you or me, but democracy gives me the absolute right to express my thoughts, without being branded with names, or accused by anyone.

Let us be clear that when such accusations are flung at us, this is not just disrespect to the Constitution. This is disrespect to the people of India. To you, to me, to every taxpayer who pays the salaries of these solemn-faced leaders and commissioners. They draw their monthly pay from our sweat and toil, and in return, they fling words at us—their paymasters—like schoolyard bullies. Instead of serving, they sermonize. Instead of answering, they accuse. Instead of governing, they gaslight.

And while they lecture us about the Constitution, let us remind them of a simple fact: the Constitution belongs to us, the people. It was written in our name, with our mandate, and for our protection. It does not belong to a party, a commission, or anyone who boasts of having a 56 inch chest.

It is not a toy to be picked up and dropped depending on convenience. And if it is being disrespected, it is not by those who ask questions, but by those who silence them. It's high time this game stopped. Not with more words, but with action. If an elected representative misuses language to mislead, let us haul him to court. If an institution hides behind grand phrases instead of answers, let us remind them who gave them their chair. And if they still persist, then let the people themselves pass the verdict—not in Parliament, but at the ballot box.

Because democracy, at its heart, is not about power, but accountability. Our leaders are not monarchs; they are employees. And employees who fail, who lie, who insult their employers, should be sacked. Not coddled, not celebrated, not decorated—but dismissed.

Because, dear sirs, it is not us disrespecting the Constitution. It is you. And unless you stop, you may find yourselves impeached—not by lawyers in courts, but by millions of ordinary Indians who have finally opened their eyes.

Now that would be true respect for the Constitution...!

Letters to the Editor

Demand for Meghalaya Territorial Army legitimate

Editor, The news "KSU demands Territorial Army for Meghalaya to stop Influx" (ST August 19, 2025) made interesting reading. The Government of India in the Ministry of Home Affairs has granted support for Mizoram to establish a Mizo Territorial Army (MTA) battalion. The initiative is aimed at combating drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and wildlife smuggling along Mizoram's porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Recognising the strategic importance of Mizoram, Union Home Minister Amit Shah has endorsed Mizoram's proposal to raise the MTA in May 2024 on the proposal of the Chief Minister of Mizoram in February 2024. The Mizoram Chief Minister is a former IPS officer who has been actively pushing for this force to address manpower shortages and enhance border vigilance. The Government of Mizoram in August 2025 has begun recruiting the first batch of 70 male candidates who will undergo nine months of training at the Assam Regiment Centre in Shillong. The trained personnel will be deployed in the 1st quarter of 2026 in the border districts like Champhai and Saiha which are hotspots for narcotics and contraband smuggling.

The strategic role of MTA in Champhai is primary border surveillance with Myanmar where the border is porous and is a high drug trafficking zone. In Saiha in southern sentinel near Bangladesh to check wildlife contraband and arms routes. In Lawngtlai the strategic role in a buffer zone with Chin State, Myanmar where the risk profile is refugee influx and insurgent movement and in Lunglei the strategic role of MTA is internal logistics and training hub. The smuggling corridor in Mizoram is the Zokhawthar-Rih sector where the risk intensity is high as contraband type are heroin and methamphetamine; in Tlabung-Karnaphuli where the risk is medium the contraband type is timber, wildlife parts and in Saiha-Paltewa where the risk is high the contraband type are arms and precursor chemicals. As far as agency coordination is concerned the role in MTA integration is for

intelligence sharing and joint raids with Narcotic Control Bureau, tactical support and border patrol with Assam Rifles, local enforcement and community intelligence with Mizoram Police and monitoring ecological contraband with Forest and Wildlife Department. In the light of the above the Khasi Students' Union have rightly demanded that Meghalaya should have a Territorial Army along the lines of Mizoram. Meghalaya's international boundary with Bangladesh is 443 Km and therefore it is imperative to have an MTA in place given the present political situation in that country. Similarly, the need for the Inner Line Permit system in Meghalaya which is long due cannot be overlooked given the population structure along the border of Assam which is more than 800 KMs which is detrimental to the security and safety of the citizens of Meghalaya given the size of its population. The Central government in the Union Home Ministry may kindly take note of the demand of the Khasi Students' Union while the State government may kindly pursue the matter in right earnest and to its logical conclusion in the interest of the indigenous population of

Meghalaya. Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh, Via email

Strategic Thinking Needed to Curb Illegal Migration

Editor, The present threat of influx both from across the Bangladesh border and those evicted from the neighbouring state of Assam is a hydra-headed demon, with far greater danger to Meghalaya and other NE states. The situation draws attention to my article in The Shillong Times dated August 8, 2012 - "Tackle influx before situation goes beyond redemption" - Fifteen years have gone by bereft of any tangible initiative. The dangers today to the indigenous community, together with other genuine Indian nationals, is far more potent and may assume bigger dimensions, if preventive measures are not taken on a priority basis, since the potential danger is both from across the border and within the country. I had highlighted in the same article, that the biggest scar in the psyche of Pakistan, probably bigger than Kashmir, is the role of India in ensuring independence of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh. This wound is still raw. Bangladesh as a nation today is in turmoil and moving closer to Pakistan. The greater or pan Bangladesh policy of ISI is an open secret with countless evidence of such a strategy being pursued. We as a nation today are stronger than ever to thwart any such nefarious design. However, it is time to seek preventive measures, than to look for solutions after allowing the situation to go beyond redemption. I reiterate my observation, made in the same article, that the apprehension pertaining to the fact that indigenous people would be rendered minority in their own land one day, if the influx is not checked in time, is well-founded. Even as the Indian Constitution allows citizens of India to settle in any part of the country, the same provision of the Constitution needs serious re-thinking in the context of small states like Meghalaya, which is inhabited by different indigenous communities, who are numerically very small and hence provision to safeguard interests of

smaller communities' particularly their demographic status is imperative. It is time for serious thinking backed by incisive planning, before we are faced with a similar situation as in our neighbouring state. Yours etc, Naba Bhattacharjee, Shillong - 4

Heaven of Freedom - A Reality Check

Editor, Ellerie Diengdoh's article "Heaven of Freedom?" (ST Aug 18, 2025) published in your esteemed daily is a timely reminder that freedom is meaningful only when it touches the lives of ordinary citizens. Political independence was a historic milestone, but freedom must also mean release from hunger, poverty, and deprivation. Recent reports highlight how far we are from this ideal. Families in Domtynrong village were denied PDS food entitlements for over a decade due to a data error. The NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index ranks West Khasi Hills as the poorest district in Meghalaya, with more than half the population lacking basic

facilities. Similarly, a climate study found that 25 of the State's 39 development blocks are highly vulnerable because of weak healthcare, low incomes, and inadequate support. These realities show that millions remain bound by invisible chains, even in an independent nation. At the same time, there are hopeful signs. The "She-Rise" project promoting zero-waste menstrual hygiene has empowered women with dignity and livelihood. New healthcare facilities at U Tirot Sing Memorial Hospital also demonstrate that people-centric initiatives can uplift communities. The writer's reflections remind us that true freedom is not a fixed moment in 1947 but a continuing journey. It challenges us to build a society where justice, dignity, and opportunity reach every citizen. Yours etc., Jairaj Chhetry, Tura

Government Must Regulate School Fees in Private Schools Editor, The school fees charged by various private schools in Meghalaya has reached an alarming level with parents bearing the brunt of it. Recently, the Delhi government has brought the regulation of fees charged by private schools in Delhi under its purview. These private schools now must get the Delhi Government's approval to raise school fees. This has provided relief to parents. Similarly, the Meghalaya government can enact laws to regulate the fees charged by private schools in Meghalaya to provide similar relief to parents. Various NGOs here are also quiet on the high fees charged by many schools and are reluctant to protest. Private schools here have become totally commercialized and their sole aim is to earn high profit. In the garb of fees, various additional, unnecessary costs are added thereby inflating the total fees payable. The government here must intervene and protect the interest of students and parents. Yours etc., Donald Swer, Shillong - 1

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"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."

—Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVIII No. 11 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, AUGUST 21, 2025

Sixth Schedule Under Trial

NEWS reports that 3000 bighas of land in the Sixth Schedule area of Dima Hasao adjoining East Jaintia Hills where two reserved forests are located is being given out to a cement company has raised a stink in the Gauhati High Court where a litigant filed a public interest litigation. The judge in that particular case was visibly shocked because that extent of land equals an expansive 990 acres which is an entire village in some cases. The argument put forward by those tasked to conserve forests and to protect the indigenous peoples' lands is that the area is barren—now declared a wasteland from where limestone can be mined to produce cement. How conveniently the entire operation has been executed without any opposition from the District Council members including its Chief Executive Member (CEM) Debolal Gorlosa. The reason is not far to seek. The ruling Executive of the Dima Hasao Council comprises 25 MDCs from the BJP. And the CEM speaks the language of the BJP and Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma. It would appear that Gorlosa has no concern about giving away so much land in a scheduled area where the very purpose of the Sixth Schedule is diluted. The District Council of Dima Hasao has become the second tier of the State Government.

One of the sanest voices from Dima Hasao, Daniel Langthasa a former MDC, who is at the forefront of the Sixth Schedule Protection Committee and his supporters have raised a stink on this parceling off of tribal to corporate bodies but their protests have fallen on deaf ears. Langthasa was also the only one who raised his voice when the mining tragedy happened in January 2025 where several miners were killed inside a rat hole mine. Langthasa has voiced out the danger of handing tribal land over to private parties for coke industries and other purposes without the consent of village authorities which is a violation of the Sixth Schedule and the Council's mandate. Langthasa says that after the coal mine tragedy it was found that there were at least 220 illegal rat hole mines in and around Umrangso. He says that such a huge network of illegal mines could not have existed without the knowledge of the Dima Hasao District Council.

The problem with the Sixth Schedule is that the tribals are themselves ignorant of the powers vested in it. This is also because even those elected to the Councils are unsure of the powers vested in the Council for protecting land, forests and mineral resources and that tribal land cannot be alienated without the consent of the village authorities and clans that own the land. In Meghalaya the Land Transfer Act has to a large extent been able to prevent land alienation except when benami transactions occur and non-tribal businesses operate on tribal land through the benami route. Time is not far when corporates will seek to acquire land in Meghalaya too because of its coal and limestone potentials. There is already large-scale rural landlessness in Meghalaya. Will the Autonomous District Councils of Meghalaya exercise their minds on this critical aspect?

Who Decides What Land is 'Barren' & Why Should We Trust Them with 3,000 Bighas of Tribal Territory?

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

"3,000 bighas! An entire district for one company?" This question is not a mere quip; it resonates like a gavel striking the conscience of a region. When the Gauhati High Court posed this question, it was not engaging in theatrics—it was performing triage. In a Sixth Schedule hill district, where land is more than just a commodity but a tapestry of memories woven into the soil, transferring 3,000 bighas to a private cement company is far from an ordinary administrative act; it is an earthquake. The tremors are felt here in Meghalaya too, where the hill's ancient law—older than any statute—dictates that the land remembers who has tended it and why.

Envision the scenario as it likely transpired in Guwahati: the judicial bench inquiring, the legal counsel affirming, and the courtroom collectively holding its breath. Subsequently, the inquiries emerged, direct and unembellished: Under what policy? By whose authority? Most critically, by what right can a Sixth Schedule district—explicitly established to protect tribal land and life—be treated as an open ledger for aggressive corporate incursion? The court's skepticism was not capricious; it was principled. It resonated with the authority of an elder in a village durbar: resolute, factual, and unflinching.

The proponents of the deal employed a familiar lexicon—"barren land," "investment," "jobs," "development." Yet, anyone who has traversed the slopes of Umrangso understands that the notion of barrenness is an illusion: What appears "unused" to bureaucratic eyes is often a shared commons in reality—grazing grounds, foraging zones, sacred groves, shifting cultivation plots left to rest, and overlapping spaces where wildlife and humans have forged ancient agreements. Even the seemingly "empty" areas resonate with life for those attuned to listen: hot springs, migratory bird stopovers, and water veins nourishing the forest edges. Development that fails to hear this symphony renders itself deaf—and then questions why protests echo like drums.

However, it would be an oversimplification to view this moment merely as a typical conflict between development and conservation. It is more fundamental—a test of whether constitutional commitments hold

any significance when money flows freely and memory becomes inconvenient. The Sixth Schedule is not merely decorative; it represents our hill pact: tribal autonomy, land governed by customary systems, and community consent as a prerequisite, not an afterthought. When large tracts of land are appropriated under the guise of investment policy, the Sixth Schedule risks being reduced to a mere suggestion. Fortunately, the High Court refused to comply with such a notion.

The sheer scale should unsettle any democratic sensibility: 3,000 bighas. One parcel today, a cluster tomorrow, and soon the map transforms from a tapestry of living communities into a spreadsheet of concessions. This is how enclosure arrives in modern guise—through MoUs signed in capital cities, through cabinet notes extolling the "ease of doing business," through narratives of "unlocking potential," until silence descends where a forest once thrived. People still reside there, of course, but they begin to live around a project rather than within a landscape. They start to seek permission to be themselves.

History offers us dusty warnings. From colonial land acquisition to more recent pro-growth regimes, the failure to recognize people as more than mere beneficiaries often results in the same moral geometry: a straight line of displacement slicing through a circle of life. Audits and inquiries over the decades have revealed how rushed allotments outpace rehabilitation, how public purpose is proclaimed at a podium and paid out in promises that vanish in the sunlight. It is an old tractor in a new field. The tires may be shiny, but they leave familiar tracks.

The company claims the land is barren, while the state argues that the investment will spur progress. Perhaps some of it will. Jobs are important. Roads are essential. A cement bag symbolizes construction just as a stone represents resistance. However, the court wisely chose not to question the ambition but to scrutinize the arithmetic. Three thousand bighas is not mere calibration; it is a form of capture. In a Sixth Schedule district, such large-scale capture can lead to dispossession by stealth. Public interest, therefore,

must transcend being a mere slogan on a podium; it must be a method. This method starts with transparent policy: reveal the rule book, the thresholds, the ceilings, the compatibility test with Sixth Schedule protections, the consent minutes, the environmental baselines, and the cumulative impact—not just the fragmented project-by-project narrative, but the entire chorus.

If governance were approached as a craft rather than a performance, clarity would manifest in several ways. First, clearly communicate to the public the criteria used to allocate such a large tract of land in a tribal district, and identify who evaluated these criteria. Second, demonstrate that free, prior, and informed consent was genuinely sought and obtained from communities, not through perfunctory meetings but through thorough deliberative processes, with records as comprehensive as the stakes involved. Third, assess the cumulative impacts across the entire proposed cluster: the effect on water tables, dust on fields, light on birds' nocturnal paths, traffic on village roads, shifting cultivation cycles, and pressure on common lands—because ecology functions as a network, not a single column. Fourth, make rehabilitation a prerequisite—funded, scheduled, and enforceable—ensuring that lives are not left in limbo while capital speeds ahead. Fifth, establish a clear distinction between mineral rights and territorial control: a mining lease does not equate to a land kingdom.

We in Meghalaya, being children of a similar covenant, should read this case like a mirror. The temptations are the same: to declare fallow what is unfamiliar, to summon "industry" as a magic word absolving sins, to deem consent "obtained" through hasty, selective translation. We must do better. The law gives us the scaffolding; the hill gives us the ethic. Between them, we can build a standard that dignifies both livelihood and enterprise. There is a way forward that replaces cynicism with scrutiny. It begins with authorities treating the court's questions as an opportunity to disclose, deliberate, and justify. Communities must exercise both veto and design power—accepting specific acreage rather than 3,000 bighas;

allowing quarrying with distance limits from hot springs; accepting jobs with training, safety guarantees and appropriate worker housing; demanding audited royalty and development funds; and requiring sunset clauses for unused land. If investment is a bargain, let it be hard on all, especially those who profit. A press must not be dazzled by grand numbers like 3,000. Counter with other metrics: households collecting fuel wood; foraging women; migration patterns; water carried; forest regeneration time. These numbers, absent from cabinet notes, are the ledger of the living.

The court's role is to keep the contract honest. When it asked if this was "some kind of a joke," it wasn't mocking industry but mocking scale without sense. This should be felt as instruction, not insult. It tells the government and company to return with homework done, and tells us to keep reading footnotes, where power hides. For those opposing court involvement in "development"; it's not intrusion to ask for keys before driving off. The land is a public trust with a constitutional manual. When ignored, the brakes fail at the worst turn.

We have our own tales of disputed concessions, our own files where "barren" attempts to mask "beloved," and our own tensions between livelihood and ledger. Let this moment refine our tools—policy, consent, assessment, rehabilitation—until they are adept enough to forge a path that neither flattens communities nor stifles opportunities. Development worth pursuing is slow enough to be comprehended and swift enough to be experienced. Anything else is merely a land grab by another name.

The court has demanded transparency: policy, process, proof. This is a reasonable request for a decision of such significance. Should this truth come to light, the project—appropriately sized, wisely limited, and strictly managed—could still achieve legitimacy. If not, then 3,000 bighas will become a cautionary tale in hill folklore, demonstrating how easily we can lose direction when we mistake the map for the terrain, the promise for the plan, and the investment for the future. The hills remain steadfast. The question is whether our institutions will meet the challenge.

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

'Influx Debate Must Not Derail Meghalaya's Growth Vision'

By Homnath Gautam

The headlines "Every entrant to Meghalaya is not an infiltrator; TMC President (The Shillong Times 18th August, 2025) is a bold call to stop labeling all who visit or reside in Meghalaya as infiltrators. The issue must be debated not in the streets but among the intelligentsia and government authorities. The issues needs to be deliberate upon with reason and fairness and not with emotions only.

1. Influx Debate Needs Maturity: The debate on influx and infiltration has been going on for decades in Meghalaya, but it is important that we approach the matter with maturity and foresight. While the fear of illegal immigration is genuine, the problem lies in the way it is often handled on the ground. Too often, innocent non-tribals who are genuine Indian citizens—tourists, businessmen, or labourers—end up being harassed in the name of infiltration. Such

unnecessary restrictions, our economic vision will remain unfulfilled.

5. Assam Evictions and Border Vigilance: The ongoing eviction drives in Assam against illegal settlers are also bound to displace people. While they may try to enter into our state but it will be difficult for them to settle in urban areas without the consent and knowledge of Dorbar Shnongs—they may find refuge in remote areas along the Assam-Meghalaya border. This is where vigilance must be focused not only by the Government but also by people living in border areas.

6. Bangladeshi Criminals – A Grave Security Threat: Even more alarming is the fact that Bangladeshi criminals have recently been caught entering Meghalaya. This is a serious concern for the security of our state and cannot be ignored. The people of Meghalaya must stand united,

"The debate on influx and infiltration has been going on for decades in Meghalaya, but it is important that we approach the matter with maturity and foresight. While the fear of illegal immigration is genuine, the problem lies in the way it is often handled on the ground. Too often, innocent non-tribals who are genuine Indian citizens—tourists, businessmen, or labourers—end up being harassed in the name of infiltration. Such practices create mistrust, discourage investment, and hurt the very economy that our state is trying to build."

practices create mistrust, discourage investment, and hurt the very economy that our state is trying to build.

2. 93,000 Migrant Workers – A Wake-Up Call: According to official figures, over 93,000 migrant workers are registered with the Labour Department under the Meghalaya Identification, Registration (Safety and Security) of Migrant Workers Act 2020. This number itself raises an important question: why does a small state like Meghalaya have to depend so heavily on outside labour? Why are we not taking concrete steps to equip our local youth with the skills needed for infrastructure, construction, and other trades? If government officials can be sent for specialised training in different departments, why can't we create a system to send our local workers for training in bigger companies outside the state, so that they return as skilled labourers?

3. Strengthening ITIs and Skilling Youth: A stronger network of well-equipped ITIs in every district could provide long-term solutions, producing skilled manpower constituency-wise. This would gradually reduce the demand for migrant workers and create better livelihood opportunities for our youth at home. Without such policies, the influx of workers from outside will only continue, and resentment against them will keep growing.

4. 10-Billion Economy Vision at Risk: It is also worth remembering that our Chief Minister has set an ambitious vision of making Meghalaya a 10 billion dollar economy by 2030-32. Such a goal cannot be achieved if every outsider is viewed only with suspicion. Hotels, shops, and small enterprises rely largely on visitors and non-local participation. Tourism alone contributes nearly 8% to 10% of the state's GSDP, providing direct and indirect employment to more than 50,000 people through hotels, home stays, transport services, handicrafts, and small businesses. Over 16 lakh domestic and nearly 40,000 foreign tourists visit Meghalaya annually. If this sector is weakened by mistrust and

raise their voices, and put pressure on the Government of India to complete border fencing without further delay. A properly fenced and secured border is the only long-term solution to stop illegal infiltration and cross-border crime.

7. Reducing Dependency on Migrant Labour: It must also be recognised that our state requires labour, especially in construction, infrastructure, and service sectors. Migrant workers, if verified and genuine, contribute significantly to our development. But at the same time, the government must invest in skilling our own youth, so that dependency on outsiders gradually declines.

8. A Balanced Roadmap for Security and Development: What we need is a balanced and pragmatic approach. Border management should be made stricter, but at the same time, there must be a clear distinction between illegal settlers and genuine Indians who come here for work, tourism, or trade. Alongside, a roadmap for skill development and district-wise training institutions will ensure that our own youth become the backbone of Meghalaya's growth story.

9. Call for a Special Task Force: Finally, the government should consider forming a Special Task Force comprising the Labour Department, Tourism Department, and Border Security agencies. This body could work in coordination to regulate migrant workers, protect genuine visitors, boost skill development for locals, and maintain strict vigilance along sensitive border areas. Only a united and coordinated effort will allow Meghalaya to achieve both security and sustainable economic growth.

10. Conclusion – A Call for Fairness and Vision: Let us protect our borders, but let us also protect the dignity of genuine citizens while empowering our people with skills. Development and security can go hand in hand if our policies are guided by fairness, vision, and foresight.

Letters to the Editor

Rhetorical overreach

Editor,
The article "The signs of the times – a need for identity verification" by Toki Blah (ST Aug 19, 2025) makes some valid points. The incidents that have necessitated his suggested steps are truly disturbing and require public discourse.
Unfortunately, the rhetoric is too strident, almost to the point of jingoism. Such overreach has obscured the importance of the article. But it's not just the tone, some of the suggestions border on discrimination and stereotyping. It makes us guilty of entering a zone of danger, not very different from what the article warns against.
The phrases, "marriage with our local women", and "marry our women" is disrespectful to women. It takes away their agency, it deems their ability to make a choice of husband, and it implies that we know better as to who a woman should marry. It also suggests that their socio-economic condition propels them to marry anyone who can uplift their circumstances. If our women suffer from difficult situations, it is the duty of our society to do more than criticize. Maybe the men of our community are to blame. After all, abandonment of women by husbands and partners in Meghalaya is highest in the country. This is a bigger problem than the threat of 'outsider' men. Anyway, the short answer

is that a woman is entitled to marry whoever she wishes to, and any advice especially by men, is an affront to their personhood.

The term "scrawny Bangladeshi" is a stereotyping that is ethnically and ethically objectionable. It caricatures a race in a way that is reminiscent of colonialism. The author goes on to pointlessly speculate about "Islamic Bangladesh", "a radicalized fundamentalist Bangladesh" and much more. These statements negate his claim of not inciting "fear-mongering" and "Islamophobia." Bangladesh has not abandoned democracy, so these are futile arguments. He brings in "Pakistan and Wahabi Islam," again treading on speculative ground. Looking at politico-religious developments around the world, almost every religion is moving towards dangerous conservatism.

Armed Village Defence Parties (VDPs) is a risky idea that defies the very Constitution of India. Law and order are the duty of the police and protection of borders the work of the army and BSF. This is nothing but a call to vigilantism. Arming ordinary citizens will inevitably result in misuse, and the taking of law and order into their own hands. Some countries have a provision for "citizen's arrest", but not by citizens with guns. Locals can be organized for collecting intelligence and reporting suspicious movements, but that is all.

I fail to see how these at-

titudes and suggestions can solve the problems at hand. It is likely to exacerbate an already tenuous situation.

Yours etc.,
Pyrkhatlang Sohtun,
Via email

When public intellectuals hit below the skirt

Editor,
I used to read Toki Blah's articles with a certain degree of seriousness but his latest one "The signs of the times – a need for identity verification" dated August 19, 2025 appears to have degenerated to the level of the pressure group rhetoric of making suggestions which are at best unimplementable in a nation state sharing a post-colonial boundary with a country that is now struggling to get back on the democratic rails. His final nail to the illegal influx predicament comes as shock to me, a woman, because he blames the local Khasi-Jaintia women as facilitators for illegal migration from Bangladesh by marrying those men. Does Blah have any data from which he can cite as to how many women in the border areas or in the entire state of Meghalaya have married those "scrawny" (perhaps he intended to say half-starved) Bangladeshi migrants? Sitting in Shillong and belting out such impetuous write-ups that are intended to add to the existing fear psychosis is not expected of a person whose columns appear regularly in The Shillong Times

– a newspaper I respect for its independent views. But such write-ups make me wonder at the ST's choice of articles.

I am painfully aware that patriarchy is alive and kicking in Khasi society and that every problem in this society is laid at the doorstep of women but for such mind-numbing statements to come from a public intellectual (Isn't that what writers and thinkers are called?) makes me cringe. Thanks but no thanks Shillong Times for such write-ups!

Yours etc.,
Delilah Langstiech,
Shillong-2

Tripura a poor allegory for Meghalaya

Editor,
In present day Northeast India, the demographic transformation of Tripura is often cited as a cautionary tale of indigenous marginalization due to large-scale migration. The dominant narrative suggests that Tripura's tribal majority was overwhelmed by illegal non-tribal settlers, leading to cultural and political erosion. However, this view overlooks the historical background of partition of India and the internal dynamics of the then princely state of Tripura. A closer examination reveals that the movement of Bengali Hindus into present-day Tripura state was not external or illegal, but a consequence of territorial loss and humanitarian displacement resulting

from hasty and ill-planned partition of our country on religious lines.

Before Partition, the princely state of Tripura comprised two distinct regions: Hill Tippera region (11000 Sq. Km approx.) comprising most parts of present-day Tripura state and Chakla Roshanabad region (1500 Sq. Km approx.) which included parts of present-day Comilla, Brahmanbaria and Noakhali in Bangladesh, the areas ceded to (East) Pakistan. The majority of Bengali Hindus resided in Chakla Roshanabad region and not in Hill Tippera. The tribal communities were concentrated in the Hill Tippera area that was unaffected during partition and remained within India. Thus, displacement of Hindu Bengali from Chakla Roshanabad region cannot be termed as illegal as it was a territorial reallocation within the same princely domain. The displaced Bengali Hindus were not outsiders but subjects of the Tripura monarchy, forced to relocate due to one of the bloodiest geo-political upheavals in world history. The demographic shift in Tripura, therefore, was shaped by humanitarian consequences of partition, displacement and territorial loss, not by unchecked immigration as is being incorrectly projected. So, invoking Tripura as a warning demanding more protection appears unjustified and not based on actual historical facts.

Yours etc.,
N K Kehar,
Shillong-3

Traffic Police Personnel Violating No-Parking Rule at Pine Mount Junction

Editor,
I wish to highlight an incident at Pine Mount School junction where a traffic police personnel, claiming to be from Sadar Police Station's Traffic Branch, parked her car in a No Parking Zone. This caused a massive traffic jam in both directions, creating great inconvenience to Laban residents.

Even after being reminded that it was a No-parking area, she refused to move her vehicle and displayed an arrogant attitude, citing her position in the Traffic Branch. It is shocking that those entrusted with upholding the law should openly flout it.

Are law keepers allowed to break the very rules they enforce? Such behaviour not only inconveniences the public but also erodes faith in the police. I urge the concerned authorities to take immediate and strict action.

Law must be equal for all – citizens and law enforcers alike.

Yours etc.,
Joey Micheal,
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.

Shooting the messenger

JOURNALISM, today has become a happy-go-lucky business. Most of the established media networks have taken a fancy to singing paeans of the powers-that-be, with only occasional, soft-touch criticism. In the process, they miss the wood for the trees, harp on what's inconsequential and turn a Nelson's Eye to serious issues. Under the Modi dispensation, most media establishments that once targeted him have softened their stances and subsequently changed their tune. They either remain silent to the perceived flaws of the political establishment or beat around the bush. Truth, for the most part, is now a casualty. It is against this backdrop that one tends to see the Assam Police's summons issued to two veteran media personalities, Siddharth Varadarajan and Karan Thapar. Stunningly, the police have not gone on record to state as to what wrong the above two senior media persons have committed. Their plea for a copy of the FIR has not been responded to. What's stated vaguely is that the summons related to an article on Operation Sindoor and that the case has been filed under section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

The section pertains to actions that promote enmity between different groups, or publishing false or misleading information jeopardizing the sovereignty, unity, integrity and security of the nation etc. The scribes responded to the summons by stating that the Supreme Court has granted them interim protection from arrest. The Assam Police was unruffled. It went one step ahead and issued another summons to them. As the scribes point out, the failure on the part of the police to attach a copy of the FIR is in itself a serious violation of rules. This means the cops, or the high and mighty engaged in shadow-boxing, have much to hide. A question is, why such a provocation against the two senior scribes who have decades of respectable professional engagement behind them. The Wire with which they are associated with, is among the few journals that showed the courage to criticise the establishment.

The integrity of these professionals is beyond a shadow of doubt. For both Varadarajan and Thapar, issues mattered most. Notably, every media establishment in this country eulogized the way the Indian military acted, overall, in a brave and effective manner during Operation Sindoor. They made the nation proud. However, it is a moot point whether the political leadership deserved such praise. The claim that this Operation "has not stopped" could itself be a ploy on the part of the Government to keep mouths shut — on the premise that internal criticism is not advisable in times of war. Also, the case filed by the Assam Police on a matter of national significance looks odd — in that it did not originate from the national capital. What this entire rigmarole appears to be is that any adverse remarks on Operation Sindoor is construed as seditious. The attempt of the NDA Government is to muzzle the media, covertly at first and now overtly and the Assam Chief Minister is acting as the chief trouble-shooter for the ruling establishment. This is a perilous path that our political masters must eschew.

Sixth Schedule in a Capitalist Economy

By Patricia Mukhim

Like the rest of the country Meghalaya too is trundling along the path of capitalism. What else do you call a governance where concessions are made for certain people in power to build what are called "city centres," which allow buildings to rise up to seven stories and which evidently are upcoming malls in Madanring, Jingkieng Nongthymmai and Nongmynsong. Whether Shillong actually needs these malls is debatable considering that Meghalaya's populace is not getting richer but is slipping down the ladder of poverty. Some may wonder why I am harping on the same theme week after week. Someone has to keep reminding the Government that not all is hunky dory in the state and people in the rural outback and quite a few in urban Shillong are actually battling stark poverty which may not be visible to those sitting in the State Secretariat. The irony about this state is also that those in Government who take important decisions about our future don't know what poverty is. They have never experienced what it is to miss a meal; not to have work; to have too many mouths to feed and not to afford to go to a hospital when they are ill.

There is a small population that lives a life of luxury and whose greed is insatiable. They hold the economic reins through overt means and do business with the Government. Their wealth ranking is equal to some of the rich elite of this country. And this coterie of business sharks have no empathy whatsoever of their own tribe. There is no visible philanthropy from their side. They have never been known to support even a single educational institution by providing funds to improve the infrastructure so that students don't have to wade through water to enter their classrooms. This is a selfish category of people but they are also the most powerful lot that can change even Government decisions on what structures should be built in which place, never mind if that structure ultimately ends up a non-starter.

It is in this capitalist regime that one turns to the District Councils which are a gift of the Constitution makers to ensure that tribal land and resources are not bartered away to what is being

touted as "economic development." There is a limit to 'how much of mining is too much' and whether the environment of this vulnerable hill state can undo the damage of rapid deforestation for mining purposes, "because a few people need to keep mining to fill their coffers," with little revenue accruing to the state and its people. The fact that coal is illegally mined and transported means so much of revenue going underground.

The problem is whether those elected to the District Councils are committed to implementing the Sixth Schedule in letter and spirit or whether they too are in the race to get rich quick like their seniors in the state legislature and the government. If we read the Recommendations of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution dated March 2002, it says inter alia that (a) subjects mentioned in the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution (relating to entrustment of powers, authorities and responsibilities of the panchayats) may be entrusted to the Autonomous District Councils functioning under the Sixth Schedule (b) The implementation of centrally funded projects should be entrusted to the Autonomous District Councils with strict audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) (3) Anti-defection law should be made applicable to all Sixth Schedule areas.

These recommendations are aimed at strengthening the District Councils but 23 years down the line nothing like that has happened and the Councilors too have never demanded that the recommendations of the Commission be implemented in letter and spirit. As of today the District Councils of Meghalaya operate on a shoestring budget since most of the centrally sponsored schemes are implemented by the State Government. However, the Councils too are lacking in accountability. The Garo Hills District Council (GHDC) has not paid salaries to its staff for years together. But the question also arises as to whether the GHDC actually needs 2300 employees most of whom are political appointees.

The Jaintia Hills District Council (JHDC) has 1149 employees and has been facing problems in paying its staff. At last count there was a backlog of salary payment of seven months. It appears that the JHDC requires a substantial sum of Rs 8.45 crore monthly to pay staff salaries and pensions. But the book of accounts of the JHDC have been in a shambles. Only recently has the Comptroller and Auditor General released the audit reports of the JHDC for 2018 and 2019. We are now in 2025 so there are accounts pending for audit totalling 6 years in all. It shows that there are no attempts to hold itself accountable for the use of public funds. In 2005 the CAG report highlighted the unauthorised removal of Rs 5.49 crore from the JHDC's cash book in October 2004. This discrepancy remains unrectified in subsequent cash books. Hence the annual accounts for 2017-18 lack accuracy and the CAG cannot verify that the accounts are in order until the money finds its way back into the cash book. What this means essentially is that the money was taken from the Council's fund and never accounted for. So who has taken this public fund? Why was this not discussed during the election? How can such a huge amount (it may look like peanuts for the high level in government) just disappear? Can such an Institution therefore be entrusted to look after the interest of the tribals?

The CAG report further states that the JHDC constituted 10 Committees of which only 2 held any meetings while the rest never held any meetings or even submitted their reports. Despite this the JHDC spent Rs 8.47 crore towards various incentives for members of the Committees during the period from 2013-14 to 2017-18. What is worse is that the CAG found that the cash book from August-1, 2009 to June 1, 2014 was not furnished to the audit team as it was not available. In June 2014 a cash book of the receipt cell was opened with 'Nil' balance. The CAG found this wrong and misleading since the Council had not reconciled the cash book and had not accounted for the Rs 5.49 crore that was unauthorisedly

removed in October 2004. Hence this amount can be stated to have been stolen from the Council's accounts without anyone being held accountable.

It is in these circumstances that one wonders whether the District Councils can rightly be called the custodians of tribal resources — land, forests, rivers, minerals et al. If the Councils (and this is just one example of a report that is examined by this writer; others too will have to be examined) are so profligate with public money then they may not hesitate to make deals to barter away our most precious resource — land — without any kind of benefit coming to the people of the state, but only a few people in the seat of power benefitting from these land deals. The JHDC has shown scant attention to the state of the rivers within its jurisdiction. The Kupli, Lukha and Lunar remain dead rivers but the JHDC just doesn't care. Not once have we heard the JHDC call upon the central or the state government to help in reclaiming and sealing off the abandoned coal mines so that afforestation projects can take off to restore the environment. If this is the attitude of the District Councils and they are not fulfilling the mandate given to them vide the Sixth Schedule then is their continuation of any use to the citizenry? These issues require a public debate, and should not be treated as 'untouchable.'

The KHADC is not better. It has not shown any responsibility towards environment conservation and has allowed a free-for-all quarrying and mining without any efforts are eco-restoration.

In these troubled times when big corporates are casting their gaze at these hills as has happened in the District Council zones of Assam, one wonders if the Sixth Schedule is really an instrument that can safeguard tribal interests and if the Councils are instead vacillating on the much fought for mandate to conserve what belongs to the tribals, particularly land which is and has always been a much sought after resource. This becomes even more tenuous when the same political party runs the Councils and the State Government.

It's time to hold the Councils accountable. It's now or never!

The Dawn of Bird Shazam How AI is Helping us listen to the wilds

By Punnag Choudhury, Aayush Gupta, Prisha Gupta & Sehajpreet Kaur

In the quiet hills of Nagaland, the forest begins to stir as dawn breaks. The calls of hornbills echo across misty valleys, and the melodic warble of songbirds weaves through the trees like a living symphony. These sounds have always been nature's way of speaking; a language of presence, movement, and survival. And for the first time in history, we may be learning to listen with the help of artificial intelligence.

Just as Shazam helps people identify a song playing in a café, researchers are now building systems that can recognize birds by their calls. The idea of a "Bird Shazam" may sound whimsical, but it has very real implications for how we study and protect biodiversity. In regions like Northeast India, which are rich in birdlife yet difficult to monitor, such technology could transform how conservation is done on the ground.

Traditionally, identifying birds by their songs was the job of experts: ornithologists, birdwatchers, or indigenous communities who spent years learning to distinguish subtle variations in pitch and rhythm. In Nagaland and other parts of the Northeast, villagers have long recognized birds not only by sight but also by voice. This skill has been passed down through generations, woven into folklore, daily routines, and even local farming practices.

However, as climate change accelerates and forests shrink, traditional methods of observation are no longer enough. Bird populations are shifting rapidly, and scientists need scalable ways to track these changes across time and space. That's where AI steps in, not to replace human knowledge, but to enhance it.

At the core of this technology is a deceptively simple element: sound. When a bird sings, its call can be recorded using a phone, a field recorder, or an automated sensor. That audio is then turned into a spectrogram; a visual map of sound that shows how the pitch and frequency of the call change over time. To the human eye, a spectrogram might look like abstract art. But to a trained AI model, it holds clues to the bird's identity.

Two types of machine learning tools are commonly used in bird call recognition. First are convolutional neural networks (CNNs), which are designed to detect patterns in visual data. CNNs analyze the shapes, curves, and textures of the spectrogram, just as they might identify objects in a photograph. Second are transformer models, which were originally developed to understand human language. These help the system interpret how bird calls evolve over time, giving it a sense of rhythm and sequence.

The result is a model that can "listen" to a recording and tell you, with surprising accuracy, which species are present. But this isn't magic. It requires massive amounts of data to work well. Databases like Xeno-Canto and Cornell's Macaulay Library offer millions of recordings from around the world.

These recordings are used to train the models, often with simulated variations; like background noise or altered pitch to help the system learn in real-world conditions. Once trained, these systems are tested on new recordings. Many achieve accuracy rates of 70 to 80 percent, even across hundreds of species. For researchers, this opens up exciting possibilities.

Devices can now be deployed in remote forests, running 24/7, capturing soundscapes with no human presence required. In places like the highlands of Nagaland or the floodplains of Assam, where field surveys are logistically challenging, this is a major breakthrough.

But no technology is perfect. One major issue is the "cocktail party problem"; a term borrowed from audio engineering. In nature, birds rarely call one at a time. Instead, dozens of species may be vocalizing at once, creating a layered, complex soundscape. Untangling these overlapping calls is still a difficult task for AI.

There's also the issue of bias. Most AI models perform better on species that are common or well-documented. Rare, nocturnal, or endangered birds often have too few recordings to train a model effectively. Ironically, the birds we most need to monitor are often the hardest to detect. And then there's noise — wind, rain, insects, and distant traffic can all interfere with a clean recording.

Another challenge is context. A human expert might know that a certain bird is only active at dusk or only found in specific habitats. AI, at least for now, doesn't have this ecological intuition. It might mistakenly identify a species in an area where it's unlikely to be found, simply because the sound is a close match.

That's why many researchers believe the future lies in combining machine intelligence with local wisdom. In Northeast India, communities already have deep ecological knowledge. If villagers could contribute recordings via mobile apps or simple recorders, a locally trained AI system could emerge, one that recognizes regional species with greater precision and respects cultural nuances in naming and recognition.

This collaboration could also build community ownership over conservation data. Instead of relying solely on outside scientists, residents could become active stewards of biodiversity, tracking seasonal changes, migration patterns, and even the impact of development projects. Schools could use bird call recordings as teaching tools. Farmers could track birds linked to crop cycles. And local governments could use the data to make more informed land-use decisions.

Looking ahead, scientists are working on systems that combine sound with other types of information like GPS, weather, time of day, and even video footage. These "multimodal" models may offer a more complete picture of bird behavior. There's also growing interest in self-supervised learning, a technique where AI learns patterns without needing labeled examples. This could help solve the rare species problem by allowing the system to detect new birds after hearing them only a few times. Still, it's important to keep the big picture in mind. The point of this technology isn't just to identify a bird, it's to understand what that bird is telling us. Are its numbers declining? Is its habitat shrinking? Are migratory patterns shifting due to rising temperatures? AI can help answer these questions faster and more accurately, giving conservationists a fighting chance in the race to protect biodiversity.

In a place like Northeast India, where ecological richness meets cultural depth — this work takes on even greater urgency. The region is home to over 800 bird species, many found nowhere else. But it's also under threat from mining, deforestation, and infrastructure development. Tools like Bird Shazam won't solve these problems alone, but they can shine a light on what's being lost — and why it matters. Each morning, as Nagaland's forests fill with birdsong, a quiet revolution is taking place. These melodies are no longer just background noise. They're warnings. They're stories. And with the help of AI, we are finally learning to listen — before it's too late.

(The authors: Punnag Choudhury, Aayush Gupta, Prisha Gupta, and Sehajpreet Kaur are 3rd B.Tech students at Plaksha University, specializing in Data Science, Economics, and Business. United by a shared passion for solving complex real-world problems, they blend analytical depth with creative thinking across technology, strategy, and innovation. Their collaborative spirit and diverse strengths have powered projects that push boundaries and deliver tangible impact. Together, they represent the next generation of change-makers at the intersection of data, business, and design.)

Letters to the Editor

CUET has its advantages

Editor,
I recently came across the letter dated July, 19 2025 criticising CUET and calling it flawed, and as a student who appeared for and cleared the CUET examination successfully, I feel compelled to share another perspective.

It has become a common refrain by many who could not clear CUET to dismiss it as luck-based or rote learning. But as someone who prepared for it diligently, I can say with confidence that CUET is not about luck, it is about preparation. A student with genuine knowledge of their subject can clear it. Mugging up blindly or depending on chance does not fetch good marks in such a highly competitive exam consistent study and conceptual clarity do.

The claim that multiple-choice questions test only memory is inaccurate. In reality, MCQs test not only recall but also presence of mind, speed of application, and accuracy under pressure. Literature, for example, is not only about writing essays but also about knowing movements, authors, contexts, and theories. Without this factual foundation, one can hardly write any meaningful analysis. CUET tests this foundation. Those who call it superficial perhaps lack this base. Also, one cannot fill the answers blindly since it has negative markings. I also disagree with the

argument that undergraduate marks should alone decide postgraduate admission. Our college exam systems are not uniform, marking standards differ greatly among universities. Some institutions are lenient, others very strict. CUET provides a common, equal platform for everyone across India. If someone who did not score a first division earlier clears CUET now, it does not mean the system is faulty, it simply means the person got another chance to prove themselves. That is fairness, not injustice. Also, we need to remember that there are many bright students who have financial issues and have to work right after class and some with health problems and some from rural areas which lack resources. These problems are unavoidable and hence those students face a lot of difficulty in getting first division in their undergraduate exams.

It is always easier to blame the exam as an excuse. But the truth is, thousands of students 'do' clear CUET each year not by rote learning, not by luck, but by preparation, effort, and discipline. We must stop dismissing their hard work by demeaning the exam.

Yes, there is scope for improvement. Maybe subjective questions or interviews can be included at later stages to test analytical skills. But to say CUET itself is meaningless is unfair. For me, CUET represented an opportunity and I took it seriously, worked hard, and

achieved success. If I could do it, others can too.

In Meghalaya we took things for granted and did not work hard enough like students from other parts of the country. Therefore, instead of blaming the system for personal failure, it might be more constructive to accept the challenge, prepare better, and compete fairly. After all, real education is not only about knowledge, but also about resilience and adapting to the system we are in. Always remember "Education is not just within the four walls of a classroom"

Yours etc.,
Name withheld of request
Via email

Time to Act Unitedly Against the Drug Menace in Meghalaya

Editor,
This is with reference to the news article titled "Huge consignment of drugs seized from MTC bus, two arrested" published in The Shillong Times on August 19, 2025.

This shocking incident is a strong reminder that the drug problem in Meghalaya is no longer on the margins — it is spreading fast and destroying lives. Despite frequent seizures and arrests, the drug trade continues to thrive. This is not just a law-and-order issue. It is a deep

social crisis threatening our youth, our families, and our future.

The reasons are clear: massive profits for traffickers, slow justice, and a culture of silence driven by stigma. Most worrying is that our young people — students, workers, even school-children — are the ones paying the highest price.

Let's be honest — policing alone cannot solve this. What we need is a people's movement. There are lessons to learn. In Mizoram, the Young Mizo Association helps keep communities alert and involved. In Punjab, treatment clinics have given addicts a second chance. In Kerala, schools and parents work together to catch the problem early. These efforts prove that change is possible — when society takes ownership.

Our state's true need is a mass public movement against the drug menace, supported by effective programs. Public transport systems — especially buses and parcel counters — should have regular and thorough checks. Village heads, churches, youth clubs, and NGOs could be empowered and trained to spot early warning signs and report suspicious activities, without fear. The government might consider expanding rehabilitation centres and deploying mobile counselling units to reach every corner of the state. Equally important is investing in youth through sports, arts, and skill-building programs

to provide hope and purpose. Careful financial monitoring and action against drug funding could weaken traffickers. Above all, media and faith leaders can help create a supportive atmosphere, replacing shame with hope and silence with open conversation.

This crisis affects all of us. The solution will require all of us. Let us come together — firmly and compassionately — to save our youth and protect the future of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
Tura

Rise in Drug Abuse & Related Crimes

Editor,
I write with deep concern about the escalating problem of drug abuse in Shillong and the Northeast at large — a crisis gnawing at the social and economic fabric of our region. What once may have started in casual corners, as some youthful posturing to feel "cool," has now mutated into a full-blown epidemic. The disturbing reality is that many drug abusers, desperate to maintain their habits, are becoming thieves. This trend is not only eroding family and community trust but is directly contributing to the rising crime rate in our towns and villages. A crucial factor underlying this calamity is the persistent lack of economic opportunity and

aspirations among our youth. With few viable avenues for purposeful employment or creative engagement, many young people are left vulnerable, seeking easy escapes from the drudgery of daily life.

It is instructive to examine history. China, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was systematically weakened by the deliberate flooding of opium — a strategy employed by imperial powers to sap the nation's vitality and will. We must remain vigilant against similar strategies in today's hyper-connected world. From an economic perspective, it is evident that societies with dynamic growth, inclusivity, and widespread happiness have lower rates of substance use disorder. Prosperity breeds purpose; engaged minds and hopeful hearts have little need for such destructive escapes. If we can foster sustainable economic activity, stimulate entrepreneurship, and open avenues for the youth to aspire and achieve, the allure of drugs will crumble in the face of genuine, rewarding alternatives. Coordinated efforts — by government, civil society, families, and communities — are the only way to reverse the present tide.

Yours etc.,
Shekhar Singh,
Shillong

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"Enjoy the satisfaction that comes from doing little things well."

— H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Return of the Rebels

MEGHALAYA'S former Chief Minister, Dr Mukul Sangma who is currently the leader of the opposition in the Meghalaya Assembly has made stark revelations that militancy is likely to have a renaissance in the state. Dr Sangma claims that several qualified youth have already joined rebel groups and completed their training. Naturally the blame for this backslide in peace has been laid at the feet of the MDA Government which Dr Sangma says has been indifferent to the aspirations of the educated unemployed youth of the state. The MDA Government cannot be expected to generate gainful employment for the burgeoning youth population in Meghalaya. Last year, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma while speaking at a public function stated that there are only 6 lakh people out of 35.8 lakh who are above the age of 45 years. This means there are 29 lakh people identified as youth.

Employment can be generated if the private sector is allowed to come into the state to start their businesses but there are hindrances to that on account of the strict Land Transfer Act. Besides, Meghalaya has now become a state where doing business is not viable with so many pressure groups extorting money from big and small businesses. Extortion happens as vehicles carrying goods enter Meghalaya. It continues until the vehicles reach their destination and by that time the trucks have already paid thousands of rupees. Besides extorting money from trucks and tourist taxis, the pressure groups are known to summon business persons to their office and to make them shell out substantial sums of money. This easy way of making money cannot be sustainable. Sooner than later if a no-nonsense government comes to power and decides to get tough with this population of educated unemployed that is thriving on "taxes," it might face a stiff rebellion which is why extortion is allowed to thrive. No government in Meghalaya has dared take on the pressure groups all of whom claim to defend the indigenous people. The state requires job creation in the private sector but unless the climate of extortion is checked no business can thrive here and no one would even want to take financial risks. Law and order has always been the weak link in Meghalaya because the police are not given a free hand to deal with extortion and militancy.

Dr Sangma's concerns arise out of the recent flag raising event of the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) a banned militant outfit that is currently in talks with the Government. The HNLC has remained under the radar for several years now. The former chief minister claims he has inputs of educationally qualified young men with aspirations who are now frustrated when they see no hope of a decent job in the state, opting to join insurgent outfits instead. Mukul Sangma says those in Government are also aware of these developments but have chosen to wait and watch. Militancy has held back the state by several decades. Unless the MDA Government takes the bull by the horns no development in the alternative sector is possible.

The Outpatient department was closing for the day. It was a Saturday, a half working day at the mission hospital in Bangalore. As a first year post graduate student, I longed for the weekend, knowing this would be my chance to catch up on some much-needed sleep and some therapeutic window-shopping. But that afternoon, about 15 years ago, I vividly remember, my afternoon being delayed by a teenage girl, barely 17 years of age. She came out positive on the pregnancy test kit and to make matters worse, the ultrasound showed an ectopic pregnancy. I had the responsibility of counselling her on the diagnosis. An ectopic pregnancy is one that is lodged outside its normally assigned place (the uterus). It could be located in the Fallopian tubes (tubes that connect the uterus to the ovaries), the ovaries or even in the abdominal cavity close to the intestines. An ectopic pregnancy can have catastrophic results. If the pregnancy is not intervened on time, it is bound to grow and rupture leading to massive internal haemorrhage, sometimes resulting in death. As I sat with this young girl, I called her boyfriend as well and explained in detail the need for hospitalization to further monitor and treat her. Alas! This was never in their plans. Being a minor, and an immigrant student there were other challenges. Her parents would have to be informed. Their written consent would be required for any further management. The girl was distraught. Her boyfriend, helpless.

This scenario, as heart wrenching as it is, is not a rare occurrence anymore. Young unmarried women, if not teenagers, find themselves with an "unplanned pregnancy". The immediate reaction is panic, fear and anxiety. As reality seeps in, questions like "What do I do now?" "What do I tell my parents?" "What's going to happen to my education?" "Will my boyfriend disown me?" And the oh very famous and unavoidable question - "What are people going to think of me?" The reflex answer - "Get rid of it!" What one must realize is that this is the exact frame of mind to avoid while making life impacting decisions. Some face it alone, while others call on friends for support. It is not uncommon that few will help themselves to over-the-counter pills. Needless to say, this could turn out to be fatal. The right way would be to consult a health practitioner and make it to a hospital. The MTP Act, 1971, provides for the termination of certain pregnancies by registered medical practitioners and under defined conditions, each according to the duration of pregnancy. But is abortion the answer to every unintended pregnancy?

On a particularly busy

night duty, a 19-year-old girl was wheeled into the labour room. She had been referred to the tertiary hospital I worked in as she had been found to have large growth of vulval warts, making a normal delivery impossible. We rushed her to the OT for an emergency Caesarean section as she was in labour and the baby needed to be out as soon as possible. Once the surgery was done, mother and baby settled, we were informed that the patient was HIV positive. A 19-year-old with HIV infection - this is so not right! Her life seemingly over before it had even begun. The prevalence rate of HIV in Meghalaya is 0.40 per cent, higher than the national average of 0.21 per cent. Meghalaya Aids Control Society (MACS) Thankfully, centers for treatment and monitoring are very accessible to our patients. They can enjoy a relatively good life provided they stick to their regimes.

So why am I talking about these - the unplanned pregnancies complicated with HIV? I speak about these because I see and feel the brokenness in the lives of women I meet within our society. Young women, who are only just beginning their lives. Young, beautiful women with hearts filled with dreams and aspirations but futures snatched from their very hands and ambitions cut short. So, what happened? Where did things go so awry? Quite obvious here is the practice of casual and unsafe sex. Complicated further with multiple sex partners and complete ignorance of its consequences.

Let's look further into the implications of casual sex. To start with - unplanned pregnancies, worse, teenage pregnancies. India's average teenage pregnancy rate was 6.8% (NFH 5, 2019-2020 survey). In comparison, in Meghalaya, 7.2% of all women between the ages of 15-19 years were pregnant during the survey period of 2019-2020, of which, rural Meghalaya had 8.4% and urban areas had 3.2% of teenage pregnancies. According to the state's data, the number reflected 10% of all pregnancies. Teenage pregnancies come under the aegis of the POCSO act. All teenage pregnancies must be reported to the police at the first point of contact. The stress of a teenage pregnancy can leave a young girl with mental health issues and challenges. Certain studies (BMC Psychiatry volume 23, Article number: 786 (2023) have shown PTSD like symptoms in women who have undergone abortions. This has been termed "Post Abortion Syndrome". Illegal abortions can result in septic abortions, leading to hospitalization, ICU admissions and even worse, death.

Having said this, when a girl finds herself with an unintended pregnancy, I encourage her to open up to her parents. It's amazing what parental love and support can do in such a situation. I would encourage parents who are faced with the news of an unintended pregnancy, as heartbreaking and difficult as it is for you, to stand by your daughter and stay positive and supportive as you navigate this journey together. The outcomes are far more positive for both mother and baby.

The heart of the problem is a lack of understanding on the effects of casual sex among the majority of our younger generation. The reasons are many. To begin with, a healthy discussion of sex must begin at home, but does it? The uncensored influence of Hollywood and social media on our children is overwhelming. Postmodern ideas and trends have thrown basic moral standards out the window.

Here's my perspective as a parent and a gynaecologist, I implore upon parents to prioritise spending dedicated, quality time with their children in the first 12 years of their lives, building

Thankfully though, with family support, girls find the means to keep their babies and manage timely treatment. However, pregnancy, labour and delivery in a teenage girl are not without complications. Because, her body isn't fully mature, she is susceptible to complications such as Intra-uterine growth restriction of the baby, Anemia, Preeclampsia (a hypertensive syndrome that can lead to convulsions in the mother and consequent fetal brain asphyxia and fetal death), pre-term labour and delivery. Delivery itself can be difficult through an underdeveloped pelvis, resulting in a higher incidence of instrumental deliveries and Caesarean sections.

Post delivery, the teenage mother is forced to take on the role of mother, that, might I say, she hasn't fully comprehended yet. With a baby at her breast, she is overwhelmed with this premature responsibility; while also realizing, her life has come to a standstill. This can lead to depressive thoughts, low self-esteem and loss of motivation to care for the baby. In extreme cases, we may encounter postpartum depression or even psychosis. The family must be alert for self-harm and tendency to harm the baby as well. This brings to mind a 21-year-old who found herself pregnant in the middle of her undergraduate studies. Though disappointed, she kept the pregnancy, safely delivered her baby and when I met her a year later, she was back to college pursuing her studies.

Limiting screen time and filtering the kind of content kids are exposed to can't be over-emphasized. In no way must social media and movies be allowed to set the moral standard of living for your child. Over the years there has been a distortion of the value of sex. Casual sex has been glorified and normalized and made to look fun and harmless.

The fingerprint which includes STIs, HIV, emotional and mental effects and the trauma of an unintended pregnancy and the pain that follows it are barely mentioned. Clearly, there are zero benefits to casual sex. Keep communication open and clear. Discourage sex before or outside the confines of marriage. Children who grow up with healthy relationships at home, with boundaries well defined, tend to be more secure and happy and make wiser choices as they grow up. Really, the fact doesn't change - It all begins at home.

something similar, they are often called "anti-national" or accused of supporting violence. This double standard harms the idea that everyone is equal before the law. It also makes people lose trust in systems meant to protect both our safety and our basic rights.

In a healthy democracy, like ours, freedom of speech should not be a privilege only for those in power. Yes, national security is important. But it should not be used as a tool to silence voices that do not have political backing. Everyone no matter their position should have the right to speak, question, and hold leaders accountable.

We must balance free speech and security fairly. In a real democracy, everyone, not just the powerful, should have a voice. Let us include all citizens in the conversation, not to fear, but to strengthen democracy.

Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh,
Via email

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The birds and the bees - A Gynaecologist and Parent's experience

By Dr Kerlin Mihsill

a strong bond of love and trust, through time spent in fun and games and meaningful conversations. Begin talking about adolescence and the changes it brings with it as the 12th year approaches, or even earlier in kids showing signs of early onset of puberty. The age of onset of puberty in girls has been pushed to an average of 9 years in recent times. Make efforts to read up and educate yourself on what's happening around them and discuss friends and their conversations together. You will know your child and when best to talk about sex. Because when they hit 13, the teenage years have officially arrived.

The teen years are probably the most confusing years in a person's life. They are suddenly exposed to a behemoth of information. A surge of hormones brings about changes in their bodies, affecting their physical appearance and emotional status. Their expanding minds are rapidly beginning to think for themselves and bear an opinion of their own. With so much happening, the lines between right and wrong become blurred. They groan under peer pressure. Teenagers are known to have risk taking behavior because of a brain that hasn't fully matured. They need a home where they are nurtured and confident that they can discuss and confide in their parents anytime. A discussion should include - what is sex, when is one ready for it and how must one define boundaries in a relationship. One can't expect a child to figure these out on their own. If we neglect these, they will pick up as much information as misinformation from their equally ignorant friends, from the very deceptive internet and God forbid, from child predators themselves. Worse, some will be challenged to experiment on sex, drugs and pornography. Limiting screen time and filtering the kind of content kids are exposed to can't be over-emphasized. In no way must social media and movies be allowed to set the moral standard of living for your child. Over the years there has been a distortion of the value of sex. Casual sex has been glorified and normalized and made to look fun and harmless.

The founder of the Indian Space Programme Dr. Vikram Sarabhai a versatile scientist, educationist, industrialist with many credits to his name had a rooted vision and dreams to propel Indian Space Programme to many heights for nation building and for the welfare of humans. Interestingly his intentions were not isolated. They became a shared vision and dream which was like a nuclear reactor giving out the energy observed till today.

An interesting fact, perhaps a philosophy which he introduced in one of his 1966 speeches titled "Sources of man's knowledge", was 'leapfrogging' which technically translates into an approach of technology development and utilisation by leaping and applying space research to remove socio-economic problems and propel national development, this literally means bypassing intermediate stages of technological development by directly adopting advanced space technologies to uplift India's rural and socio-economically disadvantaged populations by integrating science with nation-building and peaceful progress. Dr Vikram Sarabhai was instrumental in his approach for the peaceful uses of outer space. Back then he served as the Vice-President and Scientific Chairman of UNISPACE-I (1968) (United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space).

From the 1960's onwards till the present day we can see that India's ISRO has collaborated in many space activities with top space agencies of the world such as NASA (US) CNES (France), JAXA (Japan), ESA (European Union), DLR (Germany), ROSCOSMOS (Russia), ISA (Israel). Just as how you'll always find an Indian restaurant around every corner in any part of the world, India has quietly but surely sprinkled its own special spices and touch in the world of space technology, sharing its unique blend of creativity and passion with nations everywhere. The feat accomplished by Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla after 41 years is worth mentioning. He became the 2nd Indian in space and the first in the ISS (International Space Station).

It's indeed another leapfrogging and great learning for ISRO's Gaganayan mission (Human Spaceflight). Furthermore, the most recent collaboration of the Indian Space Programme is with NASA in an Earth Observation mission called NISAR, (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar). Interestingly after a decade the mission was successfully launched on July 30, 2025 from Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC SHAR), Sriharikota by ISRO's GSLV-F16. The dual frequency microwave data from NISAR will definitely be a great boon in a wide range of applications in the field of Ecosystem and Vegetation Monitoring, Cryosphere studies, Land surface topography, Natural Disasters Management, Agriculture & Forestry and Climate Change studies.

Having mentioned all the aspects sprouting from a dream, a vision, leapfrogging and observing those dreams translated into realistic actions, what could be the key takeaways for us? What we could get from Indian Space saga is that our State our people and youth leaderships must have a rooted shared and a collective participatory vision and dream and the vision should sync whether from bottom to top or vice versa. Unless we have a common shared dream we cannot propel or leapfrog stages of development in terms of Education, Health, Environment, Social, Governance (ESG), Economy, Employment, Democracy and many more.

Dear readers, don't we need to introspect on such key parameters? What can be the shared vision and dreams for our State so as to enable us to leapfrog to higher levels of developments and to keep igniting visions just like a nuclear chain reaction. We have a blessed and beautiful State deeply rooted in culture and traditions and filled with immense natural diversity. It's imperative that we realise that Rome wasn't built in a day. In spite of many challenges we need to have a common vision to go the extra mile, break new grounds and move onward and upward. To conclude, let us ponder on what Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said, "One must keep dreaming at various phases of life, and then work hard to realize those dreams. If we do so, then success is imminent. To the many people I meet I always say, 'Dreams are not those that we see in our sleep; they should be the ones that never let us sleep'."

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert and Space Science Enthusiast)

Indian Space Programme

Leapfrogging and Shared Dream

By Maitphang Syiem

"My children, I have a famous scientist with me who wants our church and our church land for the work of space science and research. Science seeks truth that enriches our human life. Spiritual preachers seek the help of the Almighty to bring peace to mankind. In short, what Dr. Sarabhai and I are doing is the same: seeking the Almighty's blessings for human prosperity. Children, can we give them God's abode for a scientific mission?" The church reverberated with a chorus of 'Amen', and subsequently the Church building became the space science cradle field. The prayer room became the first laboratory; Bishop Rev Dr Perter Bernard Pereira's house was designated as the design office where scientists assembled India's first rockets.

The words said by the then Bishop Rev. Dr. Peter Bernard Pereira reminds us of the humble beginning of Indian space science. The consent given by the Bishop and the church members was indeed a sacred contribution to science and nation-building and for that sacrifice eventually later a new church was built in the area around Thumba. Former President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam as a young scientist back then had worked in the church building, he recounted in one of his books "My Journey Transforming Dreams Into Actions". He said "When I think of this event, I can see how enlightened spiritual and scientific leaders work harmoniously for larger goals". The site undeniably will always remain part of history and at present it houses a space museum preserving early rocket models and honoring the spirit of innovation fostered there.

"Big things often have small beginnings" Indeed this is a profound and timeless truth which also reverberates India's space journey from St. Mary Magdalene Church in Thumba, a small fishing village in Kerala. This 23rd of August 2025 commemorated as the 2nd National Space Day should remind us of the incredible journey and how things had small beginnings, from the rockets and parts being carried on bicycles and bullock carts and to spacecraft landing on the south pole of the Moon. Truly it is a transcending journey which not only displayed scientific capabilities, but also true grit and to dream beyond limits. "Look at the sky. We are not alone. The whole universe is friendly to us and conspires only to give the best to those who dream and work", stated by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, resonates with the kind of journey that Indian space odyssey had and dear readers, the dream and the commitment by many Indian scientific minds transformed to what it is now.

The founder of the Indian Space Programme Dr. Vikram Sarabhai a versatile scientist, educationist, industrialist with many credits to his name had a rooted vision and dreams to propel Indian Space Programme to many heights for nation building and for the welfare of humans. Interestingly his intentions were not isolated. They became a shared vision and dream which was like a nuclear reactor giving out the energy observed till today.

An interesting fact, perhaps a philosophy which he introduced in one of his 1966 speeches titled "Sources of man's knowledge", was 'leapfrogging' which technically translates into an approach of technology development and utilisation by leaping and applying space research to remove socio-economic problems and propel national development, this literally means bypassing intermediate stages of technological development by directly adopting advanced space technologies to uplift India's rural and socio-economically disadvantaged populations by integrating science with nation-building and peaceful progress. Dr Vikram Sarabhai was instrumental in his approach for the peaceful uses of outer space. Back then he served as the Vice-President and Scientific Chairman of UNISPACE-I (1968) (United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space).

From the 1960's onwards till the present day we can see that India's ISRO has collaborated in many space activities with top space agencies of the world such as NASA (US) CNES (France), JAXA (Japan), ESA (European Union), DLR (Germany), ROSCOSMOS (Russia), ISA (Israel). Just as how you'll always find an Indian restaurant around every corner in any part of the world, India has quietly but surely sprinkled its own special spices and touch in the world of space technology, sharing its unique blend of creativity and passion with nations everywhere. The feat accomplished by Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla after 41 years is worth mentioning. He became the 2nd Indian in space and the first in the ISS (International Space Station).

It's indeed another leapfrogging and great learning for ISRO's Gaganayan mission (Human Spaceflight). Furthermore, the most recent collaboration of the Indian Space Programme is with NASA in an Earth Observation mission called NISAR, (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar). Interestingly after a decade the mission was successfully launched on July 30, 2025 from Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC SHAR), Sriharikota by ISRO's GSLV-F16. The dual frequency microwave data from NISAR will definitely be a great boon in a wide range of applications in the field of Ecosystem and Vegetation Monitoring, Cryosphere studies, Land surface topography, Natural Disasters Management, Agriculture & Forestry and Climate Change studies.

Having mentioned all the aspects sprouting from a dream, a vision, leapfrogging and observing those dreams translated into realistic actions, what could be the key takeaways for us? What we could get from Indian Space saga is that our State our people and youth leaderships must have a rooted shared and a collective participatory vision and dream and the vision should sync whether from bottom to top or vice versa. Unless we have a common shared dream we cannot propel or leapfrog stages of development in terms of Education, Health, Environment, Social, Governance (ESG), Economy, Employment, Democracy and many more.

Dear readers, don't we need to introspect on such key parameters? What can be the shared vision and dreams for our State so as to enable us to leapfrog to higher levels of developments and to keep igniting visions just like a nuclear chain reaction. We have a blessed and beautiful State deeply rooted in culture and traditions and filled with immense natural diversity. It's imperative that we realise that Rome wasn't built in a day. In spite of many challenges we need to have a common vision to go the extra mile, break new grounds and move onward and upward. To conclude, let us ponder on what Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said, "One must keep dreaming at various phases of life, and then work hard to realize those dreams. If we do so, then success is imminent. To the many people I meet I always say, 'Dreams are not those that we see in our sleep; they should be the ones that never let us sleep'."

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert and Space Science Enthusiast)

Letters to the Editor

Between Survival and Security: Whose Fault Is It?

Editor,
The border between India and Bangladesh, stretching across the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, is not just a line on a map. It is a fragile space where cultures meet, opportunities clash, and human struggles unfold. Each day we are bombarded by news images of locals aiding illegal crossings, of cattle and goods being smuggled under cover of darkness, and of border guards stretched thin. To the outside observer, this looks like betrayal or negligence. But standing closer, it becomes clear this is not just about greed, but about a difficult balance between survival and security.
So the question remains: Whose fault is it?
The Locals: Between Poverty and Complicity
For many villagers along the border, agriculture no longer provides a secure future. Broomstick, betel nut, and other traditional crops fetch unstable prices

in local markets. Worse, younger generations see little reason to invest their labour in farming when the state fails to guarantee fair prices. And what of those who neither possess land nor own property at all?
In this context, smuggling appears as a quick and reliable source of income. Helping Bangladeshis cross the border or transporting cattle across the pillars brings in instant cash in ways cultivation cannot. But while survival explains the choice, complicity cannot be denied. These actions risk not only the security of the border but also the dignity and safety of our own local people.
Government's Policy Failures and Silence
It is easy to blame the border villagers, but where has the government been? Agricultural policies remain weak, with little support for farmers. Storage, pricing, and transport infrastructure are neglected. Young people find no incentive to pursue farming or any related ethical trade.
The Dorbar Shnong, the traditional village council, remains underutilized as a platform for awareness and collective responsibility. If

the government truly wished to stem smuggling, it would engage directly with the Dorbar, strengthen markets, and provide villagers with alternative sources of livelihood. Instead, silence and inaction dominate.
When Tight Measures Bring New Dangers
It cannot be denied that the Border Security Force (BSF) faces the enormous task of guarding vast stretches of the frontier. But it often happens that when security tightens and smuggling comes to a halt, a new, darker pattern emerges - retaliation from across the border.
During heavy rains or under cover of night, groups of Bangladeshis slip into Indian villages, looting cattle, betel nut stocks, motorbikes, mobile phones, and sometimes even basic belongings like T-shirts and footwear. The very Indian border villagers that once acted as "partners" in smuggling now find themselves the victims of raids carried out from across the border.
This vicious cycle shows that security alone cannot resolve the crisis. Without addressing the roots of poverty and demand, enforcement risks triggering new

forms of violence. Land ports alone will not suffice. Where are the inter-border markets that once balanced these pressures?
Society at Large: Silent Witnesses
And what about the wider Khasi-Jaintia society? Too often, the issue is dismissed as "a border problem," distant and irrelevant to those in the towns and cities. This silence is a form of complicity. Government departments, student pressure groups, and church bodies rarely engage with the issue in sustained ways, leaving border communities isolated in their struggles.
The truth is, what happens along the border affects us all - economically, politically, and culturally. Turning a blind eye only allows the problem to grow unchecked.
So, Whose Fault Is It? And where does the blame fall?
The answer is uncomfortable but clear: fault is shared. And the question itself is no longer simply, "Whose fault is it?" but rather, "Who among us will finally act?"
Yours etc.,
Sunrise Pohlam, M.Th,
Via email

Free Speech for Some?

Editor,
The recent statement by Dr. Mukul Sangma, former Chief Minister (reported in The Shillong Times, 22nd August 2025), about educated youth joining rebel groups and getting training has rightly caught public attention. As a top political leader, what he says matters not just for what it reveals, but also for what it means for the state's peace and governance.
Such information is important for people to know, and leaders must be free to speak up. But it also raises a serious question: If an ordinary person - a journalist, activist, or student leader had said the same thing, would they be treated the same? Or would they be questioned by police, arrested, or even charged under strict anti-terrorism or national security laws?
This difference in treatment is worrying. When powerful politicians speak, it is often called "political speech." But when common people or critics say

something similar, they are often called "anti-national" or accused of supporting violence. This double standard harms the idea that everyone is equal before the law. It also makes people lose trust in systems meant to protect both our safety and our basic rights.
In a healthy democracy, like ours, freedom of speech should not be a privilege only for those in power. Yes, national security is important. But it should not be used as a tool to silence voices that do not have political backing. Everyone no matter their position should have the right to speak, question, and hold leaders accountable.
We must balance free speech and security fairly. In a real democracy, everyone, not just the powerful, should have a voice. Let us include all citizens in the conversation, not to fear, but to strengthen democracy.
Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Burnt out, radicalised: How workplace exhaustion breeds extremist thinking

When Luigi Mangione was arrested for the alleged murder of the CEO of United-Healthcare in December 2024, public reaction shocked observers. Far from universal condemnation, many people expressed support. This was especially true among younger people, with polls showing 41 per cent of young adults viewed the murder as acceptable.

So what leads the average person to justify extreme violence? Our recently published research, in the special issue "Understanding violent extremism" of the *APA Journal Psychology of Violence*, locates the answer in one increasingly widespread phenomenon: workplace burnout.

Mangione's manifesto cites "corruption and greed" as a source of frustration, a sentiment that resonates widely amid growing dissatisfaction with modern work environments. Recent research shows that broader patterns of systemic frustration and perceived corruption are associated with burnout.

Our study, which took daily surveys from over 600 employees, suggests burnout may quietly fuel worrying attitudes - specifically, the potential justification of violent extremism - towards the perceived source of their distress.

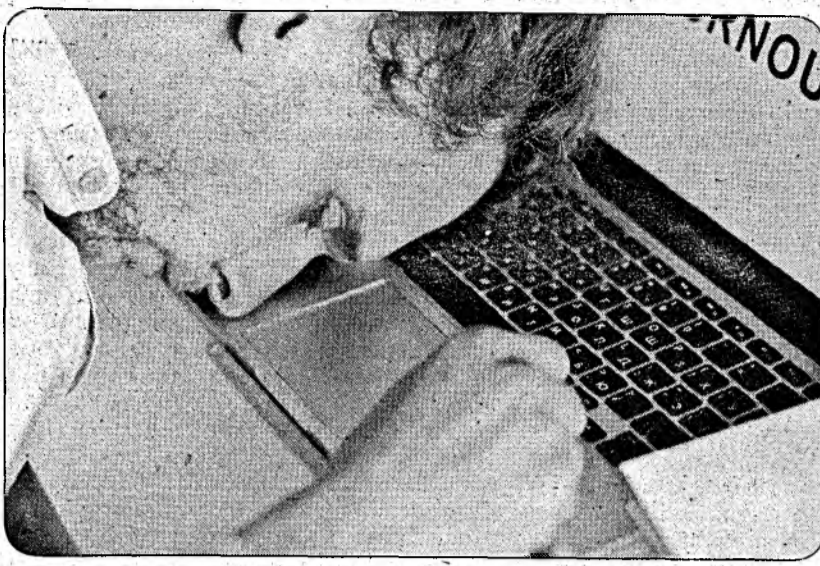
The burnout to extremism pipeline

In our study, employees made daily notes of their burnout symptoms, emotional states, and violent extremist attitudes. On days when employees felt more burnt out, they reported significantly more sympathy toward extremist ideas, such as justifying violence against perceived injustices.

The daily grind of burnout produced negative feelings of fear, sadness, shame, and guilt. To alleviate these negative feelings - and regain a sense of purpose - some individuals appeared to find extremist ideologies more appealing.

This phenomenon can be explained through the combined lens of three established psychological theories. The first is General Strain Theory, which suggests that daily frustrations lead to violent extremism through the experience of negative emotions.

The second is the existential model



of burnout, which links burnout to a failed existential quest when meaningfulness in work disappears. Last is Significance Quest Theory, which argues that when the sense of personal significance is eroded in people's everyday lives, they might look elsewhere, including to radical beliefs, to restore meaning.

In combination, these ideas, particularly the existential and Significance Quest models, suggest that burnout reflects a failed search for meaning - one that may drive individuals toward violent extremism as a means of restoration. General Strain Theory further contributes by emphasising the emotional path involved in this process.

Why burnout matters

Our study does not suggest that individuals experiencing burnout will inevitably engage in extremist violence. Rather, it demonstrates how everyday experiences of burnout can subtly shift individuals toward violent extremist attitudes, thereby normalising the acceptance of violence.

This distinction is critical and is emphasised in the two-pyramids model, which differentiates between radicalisation of opinion and radicalisation of action. While the link between the two may be weak, radicalisation of opinion alone can pose a serious threat to democracies and open

societies by eroding social cohesion and fostering polarisation. For this reason, it warrants focused study in its own right.

Today, workplace burnout is alarmingly common, affecting approximately three in four employees. This means a huge portion of the workforce experiences the emotional strain capable of fuelling extremist ideas.

While the vast majority will never resort to violence, a society that becomes increasingly tolerant of extremist attitudes risks normalising destructive behaviours and undermining both democratic values and workplace cohesion. Moreover, even if only a small minority ultimately engage in violence, the consequences can still be profound.

Organisational support can help

Our findings also reveal an effective form of protection: perceived organisational support. Employees who felt that their organisations genuinely valued their contributions and cared about their wellbeing were less likely to gravitate toward extremist ideologies, even when experiencing burnout symptoms.

However, there's a critical caveat to this: organisational support is most effective at mitigating the harmful effects of burnout before negative emotions take hold. Once employees have crossed that emotional threshold,

additional support alone has limited power to prevent the escalation toward violent extremist attitudes.

Employers therefore hold the key to addressing burnout before it escalates into something more serious. Organisations must proactively invest in burnout prevention, not merely as a health initiative, but as a vital strategy for preserving stability, both in the workplace and in society at large.

This means promoting fairness and transparency in the workplace, ensuring employees feel recognised and valued, training managers to identify early signs of burnout and respond proactively, and establishing open, safe channels for employee feedback.

Concerns about fairness don't stop at the office door. Broader perceptions of injustice in society may also fuel extremist sympathies, especially when individuals are already mentally exhausted.

For instance, efforts to pursue the death penalty against Mangione to serve President Trump's political agenda may deepen perceptions of systemic unfairness, which will only exacerbate radical views.

The broader implications

Burnout is more than just workplace exhaustion or disengagement. It signals a deeper and more dangerous existential vulnerability. A workplace that ignores employee burnout doesn't just risk lower productivity - it creates a breeding ground for ideological radicalisation.

As both workplaces and societies confront a surge in extremist sentiment, including support for violent acts framed as resistance to corporate greed, it is crucial that we learn to recognise the underlying psychological triggers. Burnout is one of them, and employees don't just need support to do their jobs better - they need it to maintain a sense of meaning, stability, and connection in their lives.

A burnt-out mind will seek meaning wherever it can find it. If the workplace fails to offer that, extremist ideologies are often ready to fill the void, with consequences that reach far beyond the office walls. (*The Conversation*)

Work from home or office? What's better for wellbeing

So your boss wants you in the office more? If this makes you anxious, you're not alone.

Return-to-work tensions aren't simply resistance to change. They reflect deeper questions about how different people work best and what modern organisations actually need to succeed.

After COVID, return-to-office rates stabilised by around June 2023, without much movement since.

In Australia, 36 per cent of Australians were working from home regularly in August 2024 and 37 per cent in 2023. This is a dramatic shift from pre-pandemic levels when only 5 per cent of Australians worked from home regularly.

In Europe and North America, around 30 per cent of employees now work hybrid schedules, with 8 per cent fully remote.

Yet tensions persist. Many employers are pushing harder to get workers back in person, while unions are pushing back. The Australian Services Union recently requested presumed work-from-home arrangements and 26 weeks' notice before employees have to return to the office.

Meanwhile, the Victorian government plans to introduce laws giving employees the legal right to work from home two days a week.

Workers prefer hybrid models

Research on remote and hybrid work models reveals both benefits and challenges. Hybrid work can increase productivity, improve work-life balance and reduce attrition rates.

A 2024 randomised controlled trial found hybrid work arrangements led to 33 per cent lower quit rates. There were particular benefits for women, non-managers and employees with long commutes.

Research tracking individual productivity found fully remote work was associated with a 10 per cent drop in productivity. However, hybrid working appeared to "have no impact on productivity".

Employees generally prefer hybrid models, with many willing to accept pay cuts for remote work options.

It's good to spend some time in the office. There are benefits in spending time with our colleagues face-to-face. We learn more naturally in social set-

tings. We gain knowledge informally through observation, spontaneous questions and overheard conversations. The social connections that form more readily in person contribute significantly to employee retention and satisfaction.

Collaboration and innovation often flows better face-to-face too.

Some things are difficult to replicate virtually. The spontaneity of brainstorming, the nuanced communication possible through body language, and the collective energy of problem-solving are hard to achieve online. Being able to work from home improves inclusion.

Parents, carers and people with disabilities benefit significantly from the flexibility to manage responsibilities while maintaining productivity.

Recent research shows flexible working practices are important for neurodivergent employees. This includes those with autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Neurodivergent workers make up a significant percentage of the Australian workforce: 12 per cent in 2024. And in the United States, 20 per cent of adults have a learning or attention issue.

For neurodivergent employees, working at home gives much-needed sensory control and routine flexibility. This includes adjusting lighting to reduce overwhelm, controlling noise levels and taking breaks when needed. It also allows avoiding the social exhaustion that constant office interactions can create.

Loneliness also a workplace issue

Loneliness is a significant concern among both remote and on-site workers.

A survey of 7,500 American workers found over half feel lonely. Some 36 per cent of lonely workers were more likely to seek a job somewhere else, compared with 20 per cent of workers who were not lonely. Additionally, 42 per cent of lonely workers reported being disengaged. This is twice as many as among surveyed workers who were not lonely.

Earlier research from 2024 found one in five workers globally experienced loneliness a lot in the previous day. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 24, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

The Moon's semi-sextile with Mars in your solar return chart sets the stage for a fantastic year ahead. You're poised to climb new heights in your career or business, with your financial situation steadily improving. Thanks to the influence of a powerful individual, you could gain significant professional advantages. This year, your earnings will largely be the result of your own hard work and dedication. However, be cautious about lending money - doing so might drag you into legal complications to recover it. It's also an opportune time to invest in property, such as land, houses, or plots. At work, you might channel funds into new machinery or technology, which will pay off. On the personal front, the bond between husband and wife will grow stronger, singles could find suitable matches, and auspicious family gatherings will add to the cheer. Overall, it promises to be a rewarding year.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would express yourself with charm and grace, whether it's through what you express verbally or write. This is a cycle of completion and transition. It is a time when we need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. The ideas you plant now will benefit you later. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. Still, you are outgoing, and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would stand alone, take action and start fresh.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) There is perfection and beauty in emotional relationships as you come from a deep and spiritual space within to relate in a new way with your loved one. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and brings an opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. Avoid being lazy and laid back as a temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication. You desire to learn and improve your practical and creative skills.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would improve your professional and personal relations, as you express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner. There could be a change in ideas or plans, an increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be led away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Your sense of humor takes you smoothly out of difficult situations.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are likely to get business and work opportunities from overseas and engage in multiple activities. You may be tempted to spend lavishly on things that make your life more comfortable and pleasant. It is a good time to organize your workplace and make it more efficient and equipped with good infrastructure. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and the overlooking of crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you don't have time to implement.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Problems are easier to resolve. Your social life will likely increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful and helpful people. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. You would be able to see the world around you in practical terms. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training and further your education. Remember to be thankful and humble.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a significant time for romantic relationships as you move ahead together. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you come across as especially cooperative in your professional and personal life. You desire

to learn and improve your practical skills. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. You would be able to structure your life and your ambitions. You are now able to discipline yourself. Take this opportunity to structure your life and your goals and work diligently towards them. Walking and communing with nature can be therapeutic pastimes.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Socializing, romance, and stability are enhanced and in focus. Love, friendship, and relationships are emphasized. You are creative and you succeed in areas that allow you to make something beautiful, attractive, or entertaining. Any artistic or musical talent you have is more prominent. This helps you to stay on track and to meet your responsibilities. Your concern for your future is stronger than usual, and you may find that projects you start, or investments you make, will benefit you for years to come. This period brings joy, understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You may be recognized or rewarded in some way for the efforts you put forth. Because you project a more responsible and credible you, people in authority tend to be more inclined to appreciate you and recognize your work. Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. You would achieve success at work and complete projects through interplay of ideas and correlation of subjects since communication is your ability. You could be restless and pay occasional visits to friends and relatives.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would have positive feelings towards religion and religious people during this phase. You have a passionate nature, although you display self-discipline with people around you. Work and relationships go through a transformation. You may be thrown away by certain developments in the family and feel compelled to take a strong stand or things can go out of hand. Complications in financial matters can be expected this week. Avoid confrontations. It's also a good time to break bad habits and start a healthy living routine.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This phase brings confidence, pleasure, involvement, and grace in personal and professional relations. This enhances excellent work opportunities for people in a creative line, marketing, media, show business, consultancy and related fields. Romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities come into focus. Stick to your regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet. Your confidence attracts opportunities and some of you may be promoted, or your career could take a new direction.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-spoken words would benefit and gain favors from people in authority and power. You may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovative ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure at this time. This is an especially spiritual time for you - a time when you renew your energy and consider the things that are important to you.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase highlights friendship, romance and love in personal relations. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasures and worship during this time. Fine arts are inviting and involving as you channel your creative energy into it. A new person or opportunity leads to renewed interest in creative fields. Fresh attitudes and a new perspective are needed. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized and attend to your health and well-being. Children do you proud.

Keep kids safe! Australia will get register to track educators

This year Australia has seen a horrific string of reports and allegations about abuse and neglect in childcare centres. Families are desperate to ensure their kids are safe and political leaders have been rushing to respond.

Last month, federal parliament passed legislation to strip funding from centres not meeting safety and quality standards. Earlier this week, the Victorian government released a damning report, which called for a shakeup of the early childhood sector.

On Friday, Australia's federal and state education ministers agreed on several new safety measures. Federal Early Childhood Education Minister Jess Walsh described them as "the strongest and most significant package of child safety reforms in our nation's history." What was agreed? And how could they be improved? What's been announced?

Education ministers agreed to set up a new "national educator register" to tell regulators who is working in the early childhood sector and where. It will also show the status of people's working with children checks. Federal Education Minister Jason Clare said it would be developed from scratch, need new legislation and roll out from February next year.

Other measures include mandatory child safety training for all early childhood education staff - including the bosses of childcare companies. This will begin in 2026 to help workers "spot a person who might be hiding in plain sight" and who may be grooming a child; a national CCTV trial in up to 300 services, which will begin by the end of 2025; a ban on personal mobile phones in services from September 1 2025; 1,600 extra spot checks to be carried out by Commonwealth officers; more information for parents about the information and record of centres, including the last time a check was made and if any issues have been raised by regulators.

These measures are a positive start but they could also go further.

Is a national educator register a good idea? A register for early childhood education and care workers makes sense. The register will be helpful for tracking where people have worked, so potential employers can look up the backgrounds of those applying for jobs.

For example, it could be a red flag if someone has moved around a lot (noting the sector is highly casualised, staff turnover is high and it is not unusual for people to work in multiple jobs). A national register will also help investigators if someone is suspected of wrongdoing.

Clare says the government will "develop and build" the register over time. But in its current planned form, it falls short of a nationally consistent reportable conduct scheme (which was proposed by the child abuse royal commission in 2017).

This would include any reports of misconduct that cannot be prosecuted criminally and are therefore missed in criminal history screenings (via working with children checks).

Some states are doing this on their own (for example from July 2026, in Queensland, early childhood organisations will be required to report concerning conduct from anyone who works with children). This week, the Victorian government announced it would reform its reportable conduct scheme so information relevant to child-safety "whether substantiated or not" is shared with relevant regulators and agencies.

But such schemes are most effective if they're all connected to each other as it's very easy to cross a border in Australia. We should also be enforcing standards around reference checks - which was recommended by the Victorian review this week.

How would CCTV help?

A 2025 report on the New South Wales sector estimated 30 per cent of childcare services already had CCTV installed.

Obviously, 300 services nationally is not a lot (there are more than 9,000 centre-based services in Australia). Clare said the trial would look at where cameras are placed in centres and how data can be safely stored.

We know CCTV can have a general deterrent effect - and people are less likely to offend if they believe they are being surveilled. And it can also be used in investigations if there is an allegation or complaint. Research (including our own upcoming study) suggests many educators would like CCTV for their own protection if allegations were ever made against them.

But we can't expect CCTV to

prevent everything - you can't have someone sitting at a control panel looking at footage all the time.

The Victorian report recommended a "four eyes" principle in centres, where there need to be two adults, visible to each other, taking care of kids at all times. Clare told reporters on Friday ministers had asked the national childcare authority to report back before the end of the year on this idea and the impact on educator-to-child ratios. This is an important prevention strategy. But it will depend on addressing workforce issues so there are enough staff who are empowered to speak up when they notice something.

More spot checks

Regulatory agencies have been woefully under-resourced - so more funds to do checks is a positive step. But beyond the spot checks, regulators need to actually shut services down if they are unsafe.

They have previously had the power to do this but have rarely done it, given the impact on families. As the Productivity Commission noted in 2024, shutting a service down was "severe" and "should be used as a last resort when less severe measures have not succeeded." Parents should also know they can do a spot check themselves at any time. Just turn up at your centre unannounced (so, not at 8am or 5pm). Is your centre welcoming and happy to see you? Do the children seem calm and cared for? What are we missing?

As the Victorian report observed this week, there is an inherent problem in Australia's early childhood system. It is mainly run by for-profit providers. We know for-profit childcare services are, on average, rated as lower quality than not-for-profit services.

These latest federal government proposals don't address the root causes of problems in the early childhood. Instead they work within the boundaries of what we already have. There is a tendency for policymakers to take the conventional wisdom and package it up and say "we're doing more, we're trying harder".

Arguably we have to do something more radical and restructure the entire sector so profit is not a driver and services are only focused on quality and safety. (*The Conversation*)

"The first step towards knowledge is to know that we are ignorant."

—Richard Cecil

The Shillong Times

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Corruption, Ministers

PRIMA facie, the parliament legislation to automatically remove ministers, including the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers from their posts if they are arrested and incarcerated for up to 30 days, looks well-intentioned. This is claimed to be a part of the government's drive against corruption and, on a wider scale, against the criminalization of the political process. What adds credence to this legislation — introduced on the last day of the now-ended parliament session — is that a similar law exists in respect of government officials. But, a deeper scrutiny of the Modi government's record in various aspects would show that it likely has a 'hidden agenda' behind this move — namely to target opposition leaders occupying such positions. It is also likely that the Leader of the Opposition, who holds a cabinet rank, too would be facing a similar situation in future.

The context of this legislation — which needs to be put to vote in another session — cannot be lost sight of. It was last year that AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal as the then Chief Minister of Delhi was arrested and jailed in connection with the Delhi Liquor Scam case. Kejriwal ran the government from within his jail cell without tendering his resignation, as no law existed to bar him from this. A similar scenario had occurred in Bihar, when Lalu Prasad Yadava as CM was jailed in the Fodder Scam in 1997. He went on to install his wife Rabri Devi in the chair. Kejriwal too eventually installed a woman leader as the chief minister to take the administrative process forward without hindrance. While these women ruled the states, the 'super leaders' did the mentoring/governance from behind bars. In other words, they stretched the limits of political propriety.

It would be an acceptable proposition that laws that are applicable to government officials should also encompass politicians who function as ministers. Once this bill passes into law, it could be applicable to the ministers of the BJP as well. For now, however, it is unlikely that any BJP minister at the Centre or the state could face an arrest for the reason that they are bound to be well-protected at multiple levels by the Modi establishment. No investigation against them could progress in the right direction or end up in an arrest. The central investigating agencies under the NDA dispensation have earned a poor reputation for delaying the investigations, on several fronts and failing to nail the corrupt as long as the accused are pro-Modi. The benefit also applies to some top Congress leaders. While the prime minister is not seen to be corrupt, he lacked the will and the determination to rein-in the deeply corrupt. A survival instinct guides him when it comes to taking critical decisions. Generally, he gave a long rope to the investigating agencies led by his own hand-picked officials. Hardly any corrupt leader or bureaucrat has been taken to task under his governance even as corruption is subverting the system as a whole, thereby turning it into a hydra-headed monster.

Converting tribal autonomy into land franchise: Who profits from the silence?

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

New vocabulary like "barren land" and "unlocking potential" sounds neutral until applied to actual landscapes, where these words segment life and turn commons into inventory. Policy on paper becomes dispossession in practice. Meghalaya has developed consent-washing — where signatures replace sovereignty and public hearings become security operations. In East Jaintia Hills, cement plants grew alongside unscientific coal mining, with communities' concerns met by police. A 2023 public hearing in Thangskai turned violent when residents protested broken promises about jobs and safeguards. The High Court later suggested possible collusion between state actors and a cement unit operating beyond limits. We've lost over 3,000 bighas — land neutralised as "vacant," its living uses invisible in files. This subsoil erasure severs wafer, memory, and livelihood connections; often with state approval. In West Jaintia Hills, a Kong's paddy field failed after underground mining disrupted aquifers beneath her land. The mine didn't take her land directly — it destroyed the land's ability to sustain life.

We pretend rat-hole mining is a historical footnote. It isn't. The National Green Tribunal banned rat-hole mining in April 2014, calling it illegal and unscientific, pointing to a pattern of deaths, environmental degradation, and a mafia economy that benefits the few while the state and public lose out. Yet even after the ban, illegal extraction didn't vanish; it adapted, burrowed deeper, and dispersed responsibility. That's the trouble with what I call perforation governance — when the state condemns with one hand and condones with the other, leaving the landscape riddled with small permissions and large denials. Years later, Meghalaya was still counting tragedies from clandestine pits, and activists who documented violations faced brutal reprisals. The hydrological and ecological damage is well documented: acidification of streams, collapse of aquatic habitats, destabilisation of slopes, destruction of forests and farmlands — effects that flow far beyond a pit-mouth. Those who insist such mining is only a labour issue ignore the truth: it is a land and water crisis first, a jobs crisis second, and a justice crisis throughout.

East Jaintia Hills exemplifies dual extraction — coal below and limestone for cement above. When the High Court questioned a cement company's sanctioned limits

and licensing, it probed core governance: who determines industry boundaries and profits from their ambiguity? A 2025 case mandating strict monitoring of licensed cement operations showed institutional weariness with post-facto justifications, demanding real-time accountability. Delayed oversight merely ratifies damage rather than regulating industry. Under the Sixth Schedule, District Councils (KHADC, JHADC, GHADC) can legislate on land allotment, occupation, and forest management except in reserved forests, to protect inhabitants' interests.

The Khasi Hills Council's 2021 land regulation act aimed to protect community interests in non-reserved lands. However, this protection becomes mere rubber-stamping. Council lands — community forests, commons, grazing areas, jhum fallows — are converted to projects through allotments without assessing ecological impacts, reducing consultation to formality. The crucial question isn't Council authority but its exercise — stewardship versus transfer rights. The definition of "forest" remains critical. While Sixth Schedule recognizes community-managed forests beyond colonial "reserved" categories, state and corporate entities label living, culturally inhabited spaces as "unclassified" or "barren" to enable extraction. This definitional distortion reduces autonomy to administrative procedure.

Let's be candid: there is no tribal identity and no tribal autonomy without land. Without the right to decide how water moves, how soil rests, how trees regenerate, "autonomy" is a visiting card, not a living covenant. We have ceded more than 3,000 bighas already — sometimes to cement, sometimes to corridors, sometimes to the pretence that a lease for minerals is a license for territory. This is the new colonialism of coordinates, where a survey number can silence a clan, and a "public purpose" file can un-people a landscape. The Councils must remember what their mandate forbids: becoming brokers of alienation.

What would honest governance look like? First, start with hydro-truths. Before any allotment, a subsoil impact audit — not just EIA rituals is needed. No rat-hole adjacent landscape should be touched by another deep extraction without a five-year aquifer recovery map. Where illegal mining has altered hydrology, any downstream agricultural

loss must be treated as compensable harm traceable to a chain of negligence. The NGT already placed illegality and unscientific practice on record; now the line must run from that finding to restitution frameworks that farmers can actually access. In the Kong's case from West Jaintia Hills, her field was not "damaged by weather"; it was damaged by an economy that treats the underground as a nobody's land and the overground as a no-man's future. A farmer cannot litigate a tunnel. The state must.

Second, de-concentrate industry. East Jaintia Hills shows cumulative capture — where multiple high-intensity operations in a compact area turn districts into emissions islands, with depressed social and ecological baselines. Industrial siting should follow district-level carrying-capacity caps, not unit-by-unit clearances that ignore previous approvals. When public hearings need armed policing, social license is withdrawn. The Thangskai violence resulted from years of unmet promises and localized burdens.

Third, restore forest definition to reality. Councils must codify Community Living Forests — including sacred groves, jhum fallows, riparian strips, and commons — with protection against alienation and mandatory cultural impact assessments. Paragraph 3 powers enable Councils to protect inhabitants' interests in land and non-reserved forests. For claimed "non-forest" areas, Councils should require ethnographic maps, resource-use calendars, and clan testimonies before issuing NOCs.

Fourth, separate mineral rights from territorial control. Mining leases don't authorize commons fencing, path rerouting, or converting community streams to industrial drains. For limestone mining with cement operations, companies must prove clean title and conduct. The 2025 High Court order demands vigilant oversight, transparent reporting, and zero tolerance for pre-license extraction disguised as "purchases".

Fifth, end consent-washing. The Councils' land and forest mandates carry a fiduciary duty. Any land allotment above a minimal threshold must require two-tier consent: village durbar ratification with recorded dissent notes and an independent Council audit panel that verifies the process and translates the implications plainly in the local language. Public hearings cannot be box-ticking ceremonies guarded by batons;

they must be deliberations with the power to say "no." Where hearings turn violent, the state should treat that as a regulatory failure, not a policing challenge, and pause the project pending social repair.

Lastly, name the losses. The 3,000 bighas already slipped away are not a statistic; they are the difference between autonomy as law and autonomy as memory. The streams acidified by coal, the air thickened by clinker, the paddy fields that cave months after a tunnel — these are not "externalities." They are evictions by other means. The NGT's 2014 condemnation of rat-hole mining was a line in the sand; our institutions blurred it through delay, exception, and the creation of compliance fictions. Activists who documented the illegalities paid in blood; miners kept dying in pits that should not have existed; and the public remained a spectator to a political economy that thrives on plausible deniability.

To JHADC, KHADC, GHADC - The Constitution entrusted a commons, not a notary's desk. Paragraph 3 gives teeth to protect, not a pen to parcel out. Every allotment reducing a village from author to audience erodes the Sixth Schedule's purpose: If Councils cannot define "forest" beyond colonial "reserved," they manage fiction. If they cannot prove consent beyond minutes, they license silence. We can turn. Begin with a moratorium on high-intensity projects in East Jaintia Hills until a district-wide impact ledger is published — showing air, water, health, and livelihoods that communities can contest. Create a Rat-Hole Liability Fund from penalties on illegal operators, prioritizing farmers whose fields failed after subsoil tampering. Mandate public audits of cement units' limestone supply chains with real-time disclosures. Legislate Community Living Forests with a presumption against alienation.

Without land, our autonomy is merely decorative. The page fills with others' plans. We must write back in place's language — naming forests as lived, counting losses as felt, refusing paperwork that reduces hills to plots. The law drew the outline. Councils must color within it for communities, not companies. It recalls streams before pollution, birds' changed paths after kilns, and failed fields from tunnel mining. Memory testifies. Courts can listen. Councils must act. We must see beyond maps to terrain — which slips away as silence spreads like acid drainage.

(The writer is Advocate & Trade Unionist)

Fostering belonging

By Avner Pariat

"The one value which everyone seems to have in common is belonging. Everyone has a powerful need for belonging — a powerful urge for belonging. And one of the reasons why fascism is now so attractive, particularly to young men, is that many young men have lost a sense of belonging. They feel alienated; they feel isolated; they feel that no one cares. They're not part of anything, and fascism comes along and says, 'Hey, you could be just like us. You could wear the same uniform, chant the same slogans, march to the same drums, and beat the same people up.' And they say, 'Whoa, fantastic! I've got a community.'" The only way we're going to draw people away from that form of belonging is to create a much better, inclusive form of belonging.

— George Monbiot, British author

Monbiot's observation about Humanity's deep need for Belonging carries particular urgency for Meghalaya today. When young men feel adrift in a rapidly changing world, when anchors of Tradition weaken while modern alternatives fail to take their place, dangerous voids emerge. Across our state, we see this play out as vested interest groups (senghalang) step in to offer precisely what's missing — a sense of purpose, a ready-made community, however destructive its foundations might be. The challenge before us isn't simply to condemn these forces, but to offer something better: an inclusive vision of Belonging that draws on Meghalaya's deepest strengths while addressing its most pressing issues.

At the heart of any solution must lie a revitalization of community institutions, though not through nostalgic attempts to recreate the past. God knows we have had enough of that! Our traditional systems possess remarkable resilience, but they require careful adaptation to meet contemporary needs. Consider how often relatively minor local disputes (especially along sensitive zones like border areas) escalate unnecessarily because local communities lack confidence in their own problem-solving capacities, thereby creating openings for outside groups (pressure groups/senghalang) to position themselves as indispensable mediators. The answer lies not in dismantling traditional structures but in enhancing them — through regular community forums that encourage open debate, through skill-building initiatives that empower local leaders (especially amongst the youth) through creating spaces where difficult conversations can happen before tensions reach boiling point.

Simultaneously, we must reckon with the quiet crisis of male alienation unfolding across our state. Walk through any of our growing towns in the evening and you'll see them — groups of young men with time on their hands and frustration in their hearts, susceptible to anyone who offers them a semblance of dignity and direction. The solutions here demand both compassion and creativity. Community counselling initiatives could provide crucial emotional support, filling the gap left by eroding traditional mentorship structures. Having been an insider into many senghalang networks I have seen how many confused and battle-ready young men are tutored and coached within them. These organisations have replaced the ailing tradition of the kni (maternal uncle), once perceived as important and respectable by each and every kur (clan), by each and every village/community. Having no equivalent response to fill in this gap on the side of the Liberals, the Conservatives have made merry and have used this crippling aimlessness among our young populace. The results are there for

all to see. The state is paralysed and impoverished by the near endless barrage of impossible-to-achieve protests and odd demands. Most of the participants then end up being used, while the handful in-charge of the trouble-making become MLAs and MDCs. This is the Meghalaya Model, since 1972.

Sports leagues and cultural platforms should be consciously designed as neutral grounds where young men from different backgrounds can discover shared passions and interests that transcend ethnic divisions. For that matter, even our government offices, where subtle divisions often mirror broader societal fractures, could become laboratories for connection through simple, deliberate efforts to foster understanding among staff from different communities. Think a Show-and-Tell programme done once a month between employees, in which they could share and exchange food, stories, histories. That would be a great thing to see!

Economic stagnation fuels much of this discontent, and here too we need fresh thinking. Too many of our youth see only two paths: migration or idleness. The Homestay loan initiative by the Tourism Department demonstrated how intelligent government backing can unlock entrepreneurial energy while celebrating cultural heritage. Similar models could be adapted for agricultural innovation, green energy projects, or tech-enabled artisan cooperatives. When public works projects hire and train local youth, they don't just repair infrastructure — they repair the social contract. The key lies in designing initiatives that speak to young people's aspirations while remaining grounded in local realities, avoiding the trap of either pandering to global fantasies or limiting horizons with excessive parochialism.

Underpinning all these efforts must be a conscious effort to redefine what it means to belong in Meghalaya today. This doesn't mean abandoning cherished identities, but rather recognizing that in an interconnected world, our fates are linked whether we acknowledge it or not. Local media could play a transformative role here, not through didactic messaging but by telling compelling stories of cross-community collaboration that already exist and have existed for hundreds of years. Educational institutions must integrate more shared cultural programming, creating early experiences of unity that can withstand later pressures toward division. Even something as simple as inter-village exchange programs for students could plant seeds for a more cohesive future. Most Khasis have no idea about the Garo Hills and the beautiful people and their culture, the opposite is also true. Time to fix that, everyone!

The task before us is neither simple nor quick, but its urgency grows with each passing season. Every young man drawn into destructive networks represents not just a personal tragedy, but a weakening of our collective future. Yet in their restless energy lies tremendous potential — if only we can offer worthy channels for its expression. What's required now is a coalition of the willing: traditional leaders open to thoughtful innovation, educators willing to bridge divides, entrepreneurs who see opportunity in unity, and ordinary citizens ready to extend the boundaries of "us" just a little further. The present context — a Meghalaya where Belonging comes only through division — is too bleak to contemplate. The time to act is now, before the voids in the lives of the young become filled with something we'll all regret.

Letters to the Editor

Supreme Court Speaks: Meghalaya's Shameful Neglect of Teachers Must End

Editor, The Supreme Court's recent judgment is not merely a legal directive. It is a powerful moral indictment of how India, and particularly states like Meghalaya, treat their teachers. In holding that "when educators are not treated with dignity or offered respectable emoluments, it diminishes the value a country places on knowledge," the apex court has exposed a deep rot within the education system. The bench rightly emphasised that paying Assistant Professors a mere ₹30,000 per month is unacceptable and undermines the very foundation of intellectual development in the nation. This observation is not just relevant to Gujarat, but resonates with alarming clarity in Meghalaya, where the same exploitative practices are rampant and even more deeply rooted.

Across Meghalaya, government-aided colleges have adopted a cynical strategy. They surrender sanctioned regular teaching posts approved by the government only to refill them with contractual teachers at a meagre salary of ₹30,000 per month. This is not an isolated inci-

dent but a systemic pattern designed to bypass fair pay structures and avoid long-term financial responsibility. While these institutions demand full compliance with UGC regulations like NET/SLET and PhD but they brazenly ignore the UGC-mandated pay scales. This hypocrisy is indefensible. How can one invoke the UGC Regulations to filter out candidates, yet discard it when it comes to paying those who are hired? It is a betrayal of trust and a violation of professional equity.

The exploitation runs even deeper when it comes to guest lecturers, who are paid a mere ₹500 per class. These are not casual workers; they are highly qualified professionals, many holding PhDs and years of teaching experience. Yet, they are paid less than the legally mandated minimum wage in Meghalaya, where the revised rates effective from April 1, 2025 stand at ₹541 per day for unskilled workers and ₹665 for highly skilled ones. When you consider the hours spent on lesson planning, evaluation, and mentoring students, this paltry sum amounts to nothing short of academic exploitation. How can a state claim to value education when it pays its teachers less than it does skilled labourers? Treating teachers as disposable labour disrespects their work and shows that, in Meghalaya, teaching is seen not as a real profession, but as a favour given in small, inadequate amounts. This is

not just underpayment, it is the institutional erosion of academic dignity.

The consequences of such policies are devastating. When teachers are underpaid and insecure, motivation plummets. Research, innovation, evaluation and curriculum development suffer. Students, in turn, receive substandard education from overburdened, underappreciated instructors. The Supreme Court rightly observed that teachers are the intellectual backbone of the nation — shaping minds, nurturing values, and building the country's future. Yet, in Meghalaya, this backbone is being systematically weakened. By refusing to grant parity in pay and denying regularisation, the state is creating a two-tier education system: one for the few in permanent posts, and another for the many who are expected to deliver the same quality of work without job security, benefits, or respect.

The Government of Meghalaya and its affiliated colleges must be held accountable. They cannot continue to recite "gurubramha guruvishnu gurudev maheshwarah" during ceremonial functions while subjecting teachers to abject financial conditions. The court's directive to ensure fair remuneration and uphold the principle of equal pay for equal work must be implemented without delay. All contractual Assistant Professors who perform the same duties as their regular counterparts must be paid

at least the minimum scale of the regular pay structure, with arrears calculated at 8% for the preceding three years, as mandated by the Supreme Court.

Moreover, there must be a comprehensive audit of all surrendered posts and the reasons behind their replacement with contractual hires. And where is the voice of the so-called student guardians of the future, the Khasi Student Union, Jaintia Students Union, and Garo Students Union? Silent while their teachers are insulted, their education compromised, and their own futures undermined? When will they wake up and ask why the state is building their classrooms on broken backs and empty promises?

The practice of avoiding permanent appointments to save costs must end. Long-serving contractual faculty, many of whom have taught for over a decade must be considered for regularisation. Guest lecturer pay must be revised to at least ₹2,000 per class to reflect the true value of their work.

Ultimately, Meghalaya stands at a defining moment. It can either continue down the path of neglect where knowledge is ignored, teachers are discarded, and education is reduced to mere transaction or it can choose the path of pride, progress, and principle. A path that honours its teachers not just in speeches, but in salary and status. Honour UGC norms not just when convenient,

but with true commitment, and create a public education system that truly matches the potential of the young minds it serves.

The Supreme Court has spoken. Now, the state must answer not with excuses, but with action. The future of education in Meghalaya depends on it.

Yours etc.,
Tynshain K Lyngdoh,
Via email

Meghalaya's First State University — A Beacon of Hope

Editor, Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to reflect on the historic establishment of Meghalaya's first State University — Captain Williamson Sangma State University (CWSSU), which has just welcomed its inaugural batch of 274 students across Tura and Shillong.

This achievement is indeed a milestone worthy of honour and gratitude. Conceived in 2011 and realized after years of perseverance, the university now stands as a testament to the government's vision and commitment to expanding access to higher education. By choosing to bypass CUET, the State has ensured that no deserving student is left behind, thereby widening the academic horizon for many. The bouquet of postgraduate programmes — from Garo and Khasi

to Environmental Science, Political Science, and Social Work — beautifully blends local identity with global relevance.

The establishment of CWSSU is not merely an infrastructural triumph; it is a cradle of ideas, a lighthouse for knowledge, and a foundation for future leadership. It promises to create new avenues of research, conserve indigenous wisdom, and open pathways of employment for the youth of Meghalaya.

The government deserves to be commended for transforming a long-cherished dream into reality. Yet, the greater responsibility now lies in nurturing this institution with robust infrastructure, competent faculty, transparent governance, and visionary policies. If sustained with dedication, CWSSU can truly become the jewel in Meghalaya's academic crown and a catalyst for socio-economic transformation.

This is not just the birth of a University; it is the dawn of a new chapter in Meghalaya's educational journey, carrying with it the hopes and aspirations of countless young minds.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj Chhetry,
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.

Selling the Environment

SOHRA, the place known as the second rainiest in the world, had its first heavy showers in August this year. Sohra has seen declining rainfall across seven months over 135 years, including during peak monsoon periods. If this climate pattern continues Meghalaya will soon lose the sobriquet — Abode of Clouds. Meghalaya is witnessing an alarming 56% rainfall deficit in the 2025 Southwest Monsoon—the highest in India. With 83% of the population relying on the monsoon to grow rice and other crops this drought has ominous portends. The State is now threatened by water insecurity and biodiversity loss. Less rainfall means lower crop yields, financial losses, and food insecurity. Meghalaya lies in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot and is home to species adapted to heavy rain. Reduced rainfall could disrupt ecosystems and threaten wildlife. Is there even any thinking on these grim signs by policy makers?

From June 1 to July 28, 2025, Meghalaya received only 690.7 mm of rain—far below the usual 1,555.4 mm. States like Jharkhand and Rajasthan recorded 53% excess rainfall, while seven other regions outpaced Meghalaya. This unusual dryness signals a worrying shift for a state known for its heavy monsoons. Research using the Standard Precipitation Index (SPI) reveals a century-long drying trend: In the 1950s, central Meghalaya was the wettest. Over decades, dry zones expanded in western, central, and northern areas. Only southern regions (East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills) remain relatively wet. Southwest Khasi Hills still receives the highest monsoon rainfall, but even here the numbers are falling. As far as seasonal and monthly rainfall changes are concerned December and post-monsoon months (Oct-Feb) are crucial for crop harvesting but in the past few years it has tended to rain during these months and the rice crops that are ready for harvesting are destroyed.

Climate change is a real phenomenon but reasons for climate change are often human-induced. Take the case of reckless deforestation across the state and the relentless coal, limestone and boulder mining that carries on unabated. Nature has got to fight back and it is fighting back with the hope that humans would relent but to no avail. While Meghalaya is not the only state experiencing declining rainfall and states like Nagaland, West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh also report declining monsoon rains which climate experts say the trend aligns with global warming, altering weather patterns and making rainfall unpredictable and uneven. But it is also true that anthropogenic activities have impacted the climate. Forests are not meant to be cleared at the pace they are today. Rivers are not meant to become garbage dumps thereby turning them into sluggish, polluted drains. Sadly, not much awareness is created in the rural areas about the gruesome climate change impacts. The mining mafia does not care about the repercussions of destroying the environment because they can shift to greener pastures. But what about the large majority that must live and die in this state?

Better water management, climate-resilient farming, and policies to combat global warming are essential to mitigate future risks. Meghalaya's rainfall crisis is more than just a dry spell—it's a warning sign of climate change's impact.

Letters to the Editor

Tourist destinations over-exposed

Editor,
After visiting some tourist spots across the country and seeing the chaos there, I wonder if it's really wise for us to invest so heavily in tourism in our state. It's not just about the number of visitors but also about the problems that come with them — noise, a lack of respect for others, reckless driving of self-driven vehicles, loud music, littering, and poor hygiene.
Are we ready to deal with tourists wandering around late at night, dressed for a holiday, and looking for food in the nook and corners of the city? The Government has already started promoting tourism through festivals, ropeways, skywalks and other attractions — but have we thought about what this means for our infrastructure and for people's everyday lives?
Take the ropeway project, for example. Can the roads in Kenches Trace, Lawsohitun, or Lumparing really take on

that kind of traffic and parking pressure? What happens at General's Point if crowds start increasing, not touching the deforestation which will invariably happen? We already know how a small event like a football match, a music show, or a project launch throws the city out of gear. Imagine that on a much bigger and more permanent scale.
Another point is how we, as a community, will respond. So far, people here have been welcoming and open-minded. But how long will that last if the number of visitors doubles and becomes constant? Even now, we hear complaints when tourists from Assam come in over the weekends and crowd the city with commercial vehicles. Some say we should discourage domestic tourists (the monkey-cap clad ones) and target only "high-end" tourists, but realistically, we don't yet have the infrastructure, training, or services for that. Moreover, there are many more destinations with better infrastructure to attract the high-end ones. It will be the general masses who will continue to come, and we will have to live with that.

The caption of this article is extracted from the documentary film entitled, *The Blood and the Border*, directed and produced by Wanphrang K, Lyngdoh, whose previous works on Khasi identity and polity, had won accolades and recognition beyond the borders and abroad. However, this article is not a review of the film, rather a response to that part of the documentary pertaining to the prayers of representatives of various Raijs (cluster of villages), days before the commencement of "Ka Pomblang ceremony" at "Ka ling Sad" (religious and political headquarters of Hima Khyrim) in Smit.

The documentary had captured a significant moment, whereby representatives of various Raijs came forward in the presence of u Syiem, to give away sacrificial goats for the ensuing rituals. During the presentation, Bah Firmly Lyngdoh, the Lyngdoh or representative of Raij Mawlich, offered an honest and profound political prayer to the Shyllong deity thus— "Let him (Shyllong deity) witness that the lands have now been taken away from us by Assam and Bangladesh...that the offering of this white and unblemished goat, should not be taken as a sign of powerlessness nor a mere symbol of festivity, rather this offering signifies the pains and sufferings which "u Khun u Hajar" (citizens) of the Hima have been enduring throughout... Protect the land, the poor and destitute and restore the rights of the people as it was bestowed by our ancestors... Our borders and rights are not written in books, but on land, stones, trees and leaves... However, the power of the book has triumphed leaving the powerless orphaned and stripped of their rights..."

The book has triumphed: The relegation of "Ki Hima Khasi" or Khasi States & its immediate fallout.

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh
The Hynniewtrep people hold a profound belief in the importance of "Ka juban lak" or words or verbal agreements and promises. Khasi ethos regards the spoken word as sacrosanct, desiring of respect, adherence and fulfilment. The Khasis place great importance on their spoken commitments in all aspects of life, be it business, politics, social interactions or economic transactions. Additionally, the concept of marked borders or territories is unfamiliar to the Khasis. Instead, respect for boundaries is based on natural landmarks such as trees, rivers, rivulets and mountains. These natural features serve as unwritten indicators of territorial limits and it is understood that one clan or

group will never encroach upon another's territory. Perhaps, there are two instances that can be interpreted as the book having trampled on the leaves. The relegation of "Ki Hima Khasi" to Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and secondly the delineation of the border in 1876 resulting in the unresolved border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya.

With the adoption of the Constitution of India in November 1949, the Khasi States, which pre-date the Indian Union and Constitution, found themselves to have been relegated to the Sixth Schedule and automatically their rights were subjugated to the Autonomous District Council and the latter through legislations have overriding powers over the Himas, the Syiems or Chiefs and his council. In January 2001, Apphira news service published a special, and significant piece on this issue whereby it is clearly stated, "...these Khasi States and other traditional administrative institutions were bounded by arbitrary and obsolete laws, including the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous (Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen) Act 1959... Even after the creation of Meghalaya in 1972, the Khasi States continue to be in the political and administrative mire. Instead of these States being empowered to be partners in the process of economic progress and development activities, their rights and powers are being eroded from time to time... The laws of the District Council were used for the removal of the heads of these Khasi States and traditional institutions who have been elected through traditional democratic practices, in a most drastic and ridiculous manner..."

In the case of the Hima Khyrim with its religious significance and where the political and religious affairs of the State are intrinsically linked, a question arose and it continues to linger whether it would be prudent for the Autonomous District Council, which derives power from the Bible of India, i.e the Indian Constitution, to legislate on affairs (both political and religious) of the Hima? Or how would the District Council legislate on matters pertaining to administration of the Hima without overstepping into the religious aspects? The Hima Khyrim is founded on the religious belief that the Shyllong deity was the originator of the Hima and to whom "u khun u hajar" or citizens of the Hima pay obeisance to annually through the religious festival of "Ka Pomblang". There

numbers that the state can handle. Going headlong into tourism neglecting the others will only invite heartburn and resentment later on.
Yours etc.,
Emica Nongkynrih,
Via email

Citizens need to wake up & take a call: It's now or never!

Editor,
The article written by Patricia Mukhim — "Sixth Schedule in a Capitalist Economy" (ST August 15, 2025) really touched a nerve. I deeply appreciate this piece because it speaks the truth that many choose to ignore. It is rare to see someone point out how development is being sold to us as malls and tall buildings when in reality, the majority of our people are still struggling to make ends meet. The buildings are rising and the sewage on the roads are overflowing, what a contrast! It's like the view of Dharavi from multi crore high rise posh apartments of Mumbai. It takes, one visit to lewduh

can be no Hima Khyrim without "Ka Pomblang" and no "Pomblang" ceremony will happen sans Hima Khyrim. The continuity or existence of Hima Khyrim now and in the future depends on the ability of the Syiem, the Bakhraw Batri or his Council and its "u khun u hajar," to preserve the core and foundational belief of the Hima, which has been handed down through the ages.
The Border Imbrogio: Both the people of Meghalaya and Assam are reeling under the border conflict which resulted in frequent clashes and loss of innocent lives. The Constitutional Boundary of Meghalaya is defined in section 5 of the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act 1971. It can be read with section 3 of the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act 1969 and para 20 of the Sixth Schedule. It runs to a total length of 885 Kms.

In 1875 the demand to transfer the ten Khasi villages in mouza Nuniah from the Kamrup District to the Khasi Hills was made. The demand gave rise to the appointment of boundary commissioners which comprised the Deputy Commissioners of Kamrup and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills to determine whether villages of Nuniah and other hamlets connected with it lie within the boundary of Kamrup or the Khasi Hills Districts. However, the Chief Commissioner of Assam noted in his reply, "...that the Deputy Commissioners of Kamrup and Khasi Hills are now engaged in defining the boundary, and there are many points for consideration besides that connected with Nuniah. It was desired that the appointment of these officers may be made general to determine the boundary between the two Districts. The decisions of the Boundary Commissioners were published and the boundaries have been defined, vide Home Department Notification No. 1430 Dated September 14, 1876.

However, the Hima Mylliem had strongly objected to the definition and interpretation of its boundaries as prescribed in the 1876 notification. The Syiem and Durbar of Hima Mylliem submitted before the Chandrachud Committee in 1986 thus— "...the boundary of Mylliem State is not affected by the definition of the notification published in 1876 as Mylliem is an Indian State and is not part of Khasi & Jaintia Hills or British India..."

The core problem in this protracted negotiation on borders between Assam and Meghalaya also lies in the interpretation of para 20 (2)

of the Sixth Schedule. The provision says that, "the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District shall comprise of the boundaries which before the commencement of the Constitution were known as the Khasi States and Khasi-Jaintia Hills..."

The Inclusiveness of Hima Khyrim and threat of fundamentalism: Another interesting moment captured in the documentary, was the Christian prayers rendered by the Lyngdoh of Raij Mawshai in which he quoted Bible verses while offering the sacrificial goat before the Syiem and his Council, "... That thou shall worship the Lord your God... Just as God commanded Moses to use the lamb's blood for the salvation of his chosen people, the Israelites..."

The inclusive character of Hima Khyrim is well recorded in Christian journals, like Ka Nongialam Khristan (1914-15), in which it described the cordial relationships between the Syiem and his Christians subjects, especially during the chieftainship of Syiem Dakhor Singh. The Syiem fervently attended and participated in the annual gatherings of "Ka Jingiaseng bah ki Khristan Khyrim" or Christian Assembly of Hima Khyrim. He even patronised the works of Methodist Christian mission and contributed to the Khyrim Christian Fund for the upliftment of the Hima.

The rise of religious fundamentalism and majoritarian politics rooted in hate, bigotry, and intolerance in India is a matter of serious concern. Religious, ethnic, and linguistic minority groups are increasingly being targeted and are under significant stress. Unfortunately, there are instances where individuals are compelled to bear the burden of proving their citizenship simply because they speak a different language or belong to a religion other than Hinduism. This troubling trend impacts the entire nation and Khasi and Jaintia Hills is no exception. There is a growing fear that a dominant religious majority, such as Hindus, might someday trample upon this land, altering its socio-religious landscape.

Meghalaya is also courted with religious fanaticism. This will create a great discord amongst the various socio-religious groups and rip the Hynniewtrep community apart. Therefore, the people must come together to protect and defend the secular and inclusive values.

Finally, for me "Ka Pomblang Nongkrem" is a mystery so let it remain a mystery. Wishing comrade Wanphrang the intellectual film maker all the best in the future. Khuble!

on the same page, on rampant drug use in Meghalaya, is eye opening. Who will clean the roots first before we grow the branches? I also appreciate that the writer did not shy away from naming the greed and the selfishness of a few who live in luxury while many cannot even afford healthcare. The article reminded us that the rivers are dying, the land is being mined, and no one is thinking about the future, especially for the children whose parents are not economically stable enough to send them out of the state for a better future.

This article is a wakeup call, to be taken with a balanced approach and not to be triggered by it. It is a reminder that we cannot keep quiet anymore. I thank you for writing with courage and clarity. Voices like this matter because they bring light to dark corners and remind us — "it is now or never."

Yours etc.,
Shivani Pde
Via email

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

Shillong City: Partially Smart, Never Really Smart

By Rudi Warjri

Lately, there have been several write ups, news items and commentaries about the governance as well as the potentials of Shillong as a city. Invariably, the Government-led, Shillong Smart City Ltd (SSCL) has been under attack in the media. Letters with captions like "Pipe dream", "Buffering...", "Smart City in ICU, a political party called it a "Bluff" Call for Community involvement, standards as per SDGs, no improvement in junctions, ailments of urban Shillong, City drainage system found wanting etc. Also, Shillong is among the 10 worst performing Smart Cities as per the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MOHUA), Government of India. In a recent national study, Meghalaya has been ranked as the third lowest performing state in urban governance, following Nagaland and Manipur. The study, conducted by the Praja Foundation and the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), assessed urban governance across 43 cities in 28 states and three union territories.

I came in as a member of the Board of the SSCP after the Covid pandemic period when the projects were already ongoing and a few of them were on the verge of completion. I therefore had no say with regards to the decision on the projects including the choice of contractors, etc. My participation has been largely restricted to monitoring the progress of the projects.

Certain factual clarifications for the information of the public as necessary. According to MOHUA, "The Smart Cities Mission was launched on 25 June 2015 by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. It aims to enhance the quality of life in 100 selected cities by providing efficient services, robust infrastructure, and a sustainable environment. Through smart solutions, the mission seeks to promote economic growth, inclusivity and sustainability by focusing on the social, economic, physical, and institutional pillars of urban development. By addressing residents' diverse needs—from housing and transport to education, healthcare, and recreation—the mission aspires to create dynamic urban spaces that evolve to meet the aspirations of their citizens, serving as replicable models for other cities." I suppose there should be no dispute on the comprehensive concept and essence of the Smart Cities Mission of the Government of India.

For several reasons, Shillong was the last 100th city to be selected in June, 2018. The projects are largely Government of India funded for a specified amount allocation and for a specified time period. The idea was the projects would demonstrate as symbols or templates in a city. It was for the State Governments and the communities to come out with more such projects. The public should have no illusion that such projects would carry on infinitely at the behest of the Government of India. States concerned could however continue with such projects from their own resources. I affirm that the projects launched so far in Shillong city would barely touch 10% of what Shillong city would need for a truly Smart City transformation.

Some of the visible or not so visible projects in Shillong both completed and yet to be completed are: Polo Commercial Complex, Redevelopment of Laitumkrah Market, Rain Water Harvesting, Waste Water Treatment, Business cum Tourism and Cultural Centre, Open Air Gyms, Retrofitting and Up gradation of 3 Multi-level Car Park, Integrated Command and Control Centre, Office cum automated Multi-Level Car Park at Mawkhair, Roof Top Solar System, Improvement of Walkways, Drainage System, Mechanised Multi-Level Car Park at Motphran, Solid Waste Management, Integrated Control and Command Centre - <http://sscl.meghalaya.gov.in/>

One project that monumentally stands abandoned after several crore rupees have been spent is the Lachumiere smart road project behind All Saints Church. Feasibility is cited as the reason. Nobody knows why and how the project was

decided in the first place. The Deputy Chief Minister in charge, Urban Affairs has also issued a statement on the matter, without elaborating on the feasibility question and the wastage of public funds.

What would take Shillong or the New Shillong to be a Really Smart City?

1) Address the systemic problems. Take Traffic - why can fly-overs not be built? It's largely due to issues or non-availability of land. So ministers, bureaucrats planners etc., in the Government should take the hard lessons learned from the Old Shillong. Unbelievably, a simple thing like space for cycling (Photo Ops with Milind Soman is fine) and walking for pedestrians has not been thought of for the New Shillong Township. This is because the mindset has largely catered to the false sense of those who are social status conscious - which is to own as many cars.

2) Position of the KHADC and Dorbar Shnongs with regard to civic governance: Irrespective of the imperfections, there is some clearer system for areas under the Municipality. If one has a garbage collection problem one can call the Municipality. In case of non-Municipal areas like where I live (next to National Law University), garbage that is freely thrown from vehicles has been lying around for months and as residents we don't know who to turn to. Not to talk of larger issues like pathetic conditions of rivers, drains, the environment, etc.

3) Integrated Command and Control Centre at Umsawli: New Shillong is equipped with State of the Art technology to monitor real time activities and movements around Shillong City. Its effectiveness however depends on the administrative efficiency and real time data supplied by the concerned departments in the Governments and other agencies. Law and order, crime prevention and detection and traffic management by the Police department. Waste, garbage, litter management by the Urban Affairs Department. Municipality and the Dorbar Shnongs in non Municipal areas; Condition of highways by the National Highway Authority; Conditions of roads (with potholes everywhere that also are a safety hazards) by the PWD; Electricity supply (interrupted off and on) by the Power Department and MeECL; Water supply by the PHE; Health data by the Health department and so on and so forth.

4) About two years ago I had written an article - Making Shillong City More Livable: The need for an empowered Shillong Governing Authority. My suggestion was a result of the symposia held at IIM Shillong on Improving Mobility in Shillong City with the subject of Traffic jam as the main issue. I had also mentioned that MoHUA launched the Citizen Perception Survey (CPS) 2022. CPS is a part of the Ease of Living Index 2022 that aims to capture the opinion of citizens about the quality of life in their city; economic ability and sustainability. <https://eol2022.org/citizenfeedback>. I wonder how many citizens responded to that survey. A Shillong Governing Authority which can act coherently on all the issues of civic governance including poverty which leads to uncontrolled hawking, vending, drug trafficking etc; the urban migration and migration from other states that lead to overcrowding. The Shillong Governing Authority can be the "institutional pillar" as eloquently stated in the Smart Cities Mission of MOHUA.

5) One must acknowledge the exemplary role played by groups and individuals like Jiva Cares (Jivat Vaswani); Operation Clean Up; Green-tech Foundation; Jefferson Kyning, Nicky J and others with regards to Khyndail beautification, checking environmental degradation, cleaning rivers; creating awareness on littering and garbage throwing, potholes repairing, etc.
An integrated system where all stakeholders can pool their resources and a consultative system where communities can meet and submit their grievances to the Urban Affairs Department is the need of the hour.

Start of US cuts

INDIAN exports to the United States are set to bear the brunt of a sharp, unprecedented 50 per cent hike in tariffs imposed on them by the Trump Administration from Wednesday, in what it terms as a punitive step against India's fuel imports from Russia despite Western sanctions. This sharp hike in tariffs is bound to hugely and adversely impact India's exports in particular and the national economy in a wider sense. Notably, the EU and the United States are India's largest export destinations, while China and EU are from where India's imports mainly come from. The two-way trade between the US and India is of the order of nearly \$200 billion. Export sources say the tariff hike could hit more than 50 per cent of India's merchandise exports to the US, worth nearly \$90 billion. They fear that exports to the US from here could come down by up to 30 per cent from September, as "US customers have already stopped new orders" in view of the impending tariff hike.

Donald Trump's recklessness is condemnable also as he has singled out India for the sharpest cut while he softened his cuts vis-à-vis imports to the US from other countries that are buying oil from Russia. Even China has been given certain concessions. Contrary to claims here, Trump has never been a friend of India, or of any other country. The man is guided by his instincts as a businessman even while in the presidential chair. The US is bound to benefit hugely from the tariff hikes he has imposed — and the rest of the world can simply grin and bear with it. The central government hopes to partly offset this fall in exports by attempting to boost the nation's exports to 50 other countries. This might help only to an extent. Nothing goes to show India can wish away the US tariff hike.

Clearly, the gains India made by circumventing the sanctions on Russia and buying fuel from it at cheaper rates was substantial. With trade in the rupee, it was advantageous for India since the start of the sanctions consequent on the Russia-Ukraine war from February, 2022. The Joe Biden administration remained somewhat mute to this fuel deal between Russia and India — which according to one source rose from 1 per cent of India's total fuel imports to as high as 42 per cent.

Donald Trump who succeeded Biden, is now in a mood to act — and act harshly against India and others in the line. Curiously, India's heightened oil deal with Russia by quietly sidestepping the sanctions had won fulsome praise for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Today, Trump wants India to rue its "smartness." In the process, India's carefully cultivated diplomatic relations for the last over 30 years since the time of Manmohan Singh have been seriously ruptured. India's trade talks through repeated rounds in recent weeks remain inconclusive. At this point, the odds however seem to be weighed against India. A consequent rise in fuel prices is likely.

Territorial Army in Meghalaya: Safeguard or Liability

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

In the last few weeks, there has been a demand put forward by different groups for the need for a Territorial Army for Meghalaya, considering the highly sensitive border that it shares with Bangladesh. The need for it was reiterated by Cabinet Minister and MDA spokesperson Paul Lyngdoh, who claimed that, apart from the Border Security Force (BSF), the state government needs the support of local villagers to deal with the challenges of influx and illegal migration. The KSU General Secretary, Donald V Thabab, recalled that the idea of a local paramilitary unit or "People's Army" was raised during the Pyrdiwah incident when Bangladeshi paramilitary soldiers attacked and captured Pyrdiwah village, leading to the death of 21 people.

However, there is a lack of clarity about what exactly is meant by the 'People's Army' and how it is similar to the 'Territorial Army'. The Territorial Army has a very robustly designed recruitment process where only those who have a job or are gainfully employed (declaration in an affidavit and submission of their PAN card) can serve in it. So, it might very well be that many people who are staying in the border regions may not be able to join the Territorial Army. The service usually lasts only a couple of months each year, and when not on duty, the volunteers return to their regular jobs. So, it will not be like a permanent force stationed with weapons, ready for action all the time. What appears to be the confusion is between the concept of a Territorial Army, which is a branch of the Indian Army, and something like the Salwa Judum, which was a militia mobilised and deployed as part of counter-insurgency operations in Chhattisgarh. It appears the groups making the demand means something like the latter and not the former. If so, then it is a demand fraught with great danger, the most obvious being the militarisation of society.

While illegal influx from across the border is being argued as a justification for the need for an armed militia, clashes along the India-Bangladesh border have not always involved the action of illegal Bangladeshis from across the border. After the Union Government passed the CAA, Ichamati in Shella,

a border village, saw clashes between the indigenous Khasis and the non-indigenous population. It's entirely possible that in such a situation, members of the armed militia may get involved in supporting one side over the other. Think about Manipur and how the proliferation of weapons led to acts of ethnic cleansing being committed by both sides.

We also have a sensitive border with Assam, which has seen multiple clashes. The clashes in Langpih and Mukroh are the most prominent examples. Because of the recent eviction drive in Assam, which targets Bengali Muslims accused of being illegal Bangladeshis, the government might very well permit armed militia units in villages along the Meghalaya-Assam border. Is it possible that the members of these units might also take part in retaliation when violence erupts?

Imagine there is an armed militia unit based in a border village with Assam that is now trained and armed. One day, Assam officials come, try to erect an illegal structure, the local people come out to protest, violence ensues, and the Assam police fire, killing people. Some members of the unit lose their friends and family members. Does the unit retaliate, or do they wait for officials from both sides to talk among themselves, put up an inquiry whose report never comes out? Even if the report comes out, there is no action taken against those who opened fire and killed the people. What has happened to the Langpih report? Did anyone take action against the officer who ordered the firing? What will members of the armed militia do, who lost friends and family, when they see justice failing them?

Recently, the Opposition Leader and former Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma, has warned that militancy is resurfacing in Meghalaya. According to him, "Already many youth have gone and joined armed groups and completed their training as well," and inputs "indicate that many qualified youth with professional degrees, out of frustration and anger, have resorted to rebellion." This has been confirmed by the DGP Idashisha Nongrang as well.

Starting from 2009 till 2018, Garo Hills was rocked by violence carried out by the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), with the group involved in killing, abduction, extortion, bomb blasts, and attacks on both security forces and civilians. In the late 1990s, the Hyniewtep National Liberation Council (HNLC) was also very active and involved in similar activities. While it is no longer the force it once was, the 2021 bomb blast in Laitumkhrah and the raising of HNLC flag during this year's Independence Day is a reminder that the threat is not completely gone. Support for HNLC still exists among certain sections, and it is going to only spread if there is a feeling that the Khasis are under threat from external forces (illegal immigration, attack on their rights) with the government being in cahoots or unable to stop them. Combined with growing frustration, this is a very potent mix.

Groups like GNLA and HNLC will be very thrilled with the idea of an armed militia. They are going to have a ready-made armed group trained and ready to take up the fight against the state if they feel it has failed them. One can have thorough background checks and security protocols to ensure that the members of the armed militia do not overstep their bounds. But it must not be forgotten that these members are also part of the same society where 'Jaidbyriew politics' continues to be the main driving force during elections, when political leaders constantly drum into the population the existential threat from the "outsiders." This gets amplified and confirmed when indigenous people, their faith, and practices are attacked (attacks on Christians around the country and the issue of the beef ban), or there is intrusion into their territory with the state failing to protect them, e.g., Assam-Meghalaya border. To this already volatile mix, if the lack of development and disenchantment with governance is added, it creates a very dangerous mix which can explode anytime.

Manipur is a very good example of how militarisation can destroy a society. I remember back in university, my friends and I would often poke fun at the states we

came from. To the Meiteis, we would tease them by saying, "In Manipur, you either die at the hands of security forces, or the militants, or due to drug overdose." My Meitei friends would themselves tell me stories of how violence had become normalised in their society: They would be outside playing chess when security forces would prod them from behind with the barrel of a gun. There was a senior police officer who had a habit of firing indiscriminately into the locality whenever the mood struck him. Then I went to Kangpokpi in Manipur's Senapati district, which is the town that forms the buffer between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo. I was told by my Kuki friend not to roam outside the village on my own because of the presence of security forces and militants. This was more than 10 years ago, a long time before the present Manipur conflict.

Will Meghalaya become another Manipur? And what role will ordinary citizens play in that? Maybe I am just trying to overstate the dangers, and the scenarios I have painted will never come to pass. I hope so, and I will be very happy to be proven wrong. But if there's a small chance that it might happen, the example of Salwa Judum will be very pertinent. It was successful in countering the Naxal threat to some extent, but in 2011, Chief Minister Raman Singh described the movement as "over" because it was counter-productive and "innocent people were being killed." In the end, it was indigenous people killing their fellow indigenous people. The solution to securing the border and protecting the indigenous communities of Meghalaya is not an armed militia but a regular force, e.g., a special battalion made up of retired soldiers or serving officers from the police, stationed at vulnerable locations at all times. If need be, there should be a recruitment drive, and the people who get selected should have the same pay and benefits as any regular armed service. This will not only create good local jobs but also ensure that society is not militarised. In the end, the solution should not become worse than the problem it set out to eradicate.

(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.)

A Great Nation Belittled by Language

By Iasaid Khongjee

Our nation has revolved 79 times round the Sun and is gaining momentum in strength and might; for us its citizens, there's reason to be proud of. As a nation, we have everything it takes that demands of a nation in the 21st century. Besides our image to the external world, we are a subcontinent by cultural diversity, languages, geography, ethnicity, beliefs, religions, and more than these, we are an emerging leader of the world afflicted by conflicts, and wars. But in the midst of this glory, there is a thorn that keeps pricking. It divides us and inflicts a thousand cuts on us. It comes in the form of a vain arrogance that threatens to divide us: It's the language. It's ironic that our national leaders don't realize that the hegemony of Hindi is an act of belittling the very values that make our country unique, great.

Sovereignty: A sovereign democratic nation like ours derives its strength from the sovereignty of each of its

of my little world. It's a piece of cloth for pants. The shop owner was a middle-aged gentleman. He insulted me being an Indian for not being able to speak in Hindi. I told him how I missed learning Hindi, but to no avail. When all attempts I failed, just to break the deadlock, I finally asked him if he ever quarrelled with his wife; to which he readily said "yes." So I concluded, saying — "if both of you who speak the same language also quarrel, does it not mean that you don't understand your own language? He mopped the forehead. As I left, I turned back just to have a last look at him; and he smiled, so did I to the one I considered my elder.

A Delhi experience in 2019: In early 2019, two friends and I went to Delhi to present our papers in Daulat Ram college, Delhi university. The next day along with friends living in Delhi, we were on our way to have a look at the famous Taj Mahal. The driver was a gentle-

"The car went at a breakneck speed, at more than 140 kmph. Friends asked him to stop after some distance where the driver and I were the only ones in the front seat; all those who spoke good Hindi, were seated at the back."

citizens. Without this foundation, it is a dictatorship. We ought to be proud of our mother tongue.

What's language (mother tongue) for anyway? India is a country that seeks for realization of the self, of the Brahman from within. Through what language does a Hindu communicate with the immanent being, say, for a communication to be meaningful and effective? Is it not through the mother tongue? What if I pray in English which is not a mother tongue, which is not in the blood? Surely, there's no internal vibration, and that is proof enough that it's a waste of time and energy. This is the power of the language one is born with. What about inter-human communication? Unless and until we reduce ourselves to robotics, any foreign language will do. But what about spending meaningful time with a fellow human? I for one, believe that the person I'm talking with, is special, whether I talk in any language, which means that they hear my second voice only; the first one is the love and respect for the other human being. In a talk-away time, any language will do as long as it serves the needs of others.

With my pathetic vocabulary of Hindi; I told tourists the directions to some tourist spots in Cherrapunjee. Not only telling them where, they even had healthy laughter since my Hindi is mixed with Nepali, Bangladeshi. With the non-English speakers, I talk in broken English and they all understand. So, where's the reason for being uptight with the language? Let's explore more into the world of communication, while at the same time keeping in mind the joy of coming from diverse backgrounds, and that we are brothers and sisters breathing the same air, living under the same Sun.

What about Sanskrit: Why not laugh at our own inability to learn a foreign language? I love language learning; tried to learn Hindi, Bodo, Nepali, Spanish etc, but could not learn beyond five vocabularies. There are many of my kind. If one can speak multiple languages, that's their luck. Following are the stories of an Indian in me who met with the challenges of learning Hindi, a language which is not my mother tongue. After realizing my congenial weakness, I decided to speak whatever comes from the mind just to get things done, just to serve some needs. In 1994, I stopped in Mumbai before going to Goa to see the relics of Saint Francis of Assisi to buy a keep-sake from a far-off part of my first time out

man from Uttar Pradesh. The car went at a breakneck speed, at more than 140 kmph. Friends asked him to stop after some distance where the driver and I were the only ones in the front seat; all those who spoke good Hindi, were seated at the back. On went the journey which was not less than three hours. The driver told his story, I, understand only the word "parathe" (paratha) which I never eat. To all his talks I said "huh, huh" though I didn't understand a word. And when I spoke in my Hindi, the friends in the backseat laughed heartily. At times it made me feel bad, as if I was the butt of nasty jokes; but now I'm used to being laughed at my Hindi: The only thing that none understood is my soul; I liked the other human in the driver, who never stopped talking to me — his employer at the moment. Why not laugh at our own limitations while at the same time enjoy the fun of laughing at our own shortcomings? Why be uptight when there is much more to life than language. Break it!

In the State Bank of India, Cherrapunjee branch the guard, Mr Thapa who I consider a friend, inasmuch as he too considers me a friend I would speak to him in Hindi whenever I visited the bank. His Hindi was fluent but I couldn't understand a single word. So I said to Kong Ioanna Majaw, the cashier, saying "u ong aiu phi Nahnah une" (aunt what is he saying?). "Maphi kei phi kren hindi, phing gwengthuh seh aiu u ong" (You are speaking in Hindi, so how come you don't you understand what he says?). My reply was — "ym dei banang gwengthuh, hynrei dei tang ba ka Hindi u Thapa kam dei ka Hindi paka" meaning "it's not that I don't understand Hindi, it's only because his Hindi is not a pure Hindi." The answer made all in the bank laugh heartily.

There are people who are like me. So I urge each and every Indian not to be uptight just because of the fanatical love for one's language. Life is short. We can't afford to make it shorter by burdening ourselves with a thing we can manage without. A major problem here: if you speak my language, I start thinking that my language is the only trade mark. This is how we get carried away. This is how we become traders of languages instead of using it as a means to connect with fellow countrymen, and women. Speak someone else's language; even a few words can break the barrier. We are humans first, language next. Let's make India a better place!

Letters to the Editor

Govt to pay ADC staff salaries

Editor,
The news headlines, "Govt to pay salaries of all District Council staff from Nov 1st" is a most welcome news and will bring much relief to the distraught and anxious employees of these councils. The Government needs to be congratulated for such a bold step though it will definitely add an extra burden to an already overstretched state budget.

It is no fault of the appointed employees that they have not been paid, some over 43 months! Its criminal and against human rights. As per news reports there are over 2,500 employees in GHADC and over 1500 in JHADC. All irregular appointments! The question now is who made these irregular appointments? Perhaps over a period of time but that does not dilute the seriousness of the question nor of the huge financial leakage it has caused the Government. With what intention were they made? To improve work or to promote political benefit of someone? In reality it smacks of gigantic misuse of public finances by political functionaries! A clear case of financial misconduct and money laundering for political gain by someone in these ADCs.

India has laws and agencies to investigate such crimes. We have the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Lokayukta. These agencies have been used in the past for far lesser cases than the one being unearthed in the JHADC and GHADC.

If the MDA has taken the courageous step of paying the pending salaries of the suffering ADC should it also not have the guts to order an ED enquiry into how and why these irregular appointments took place in the first place? It will not harm the employees but will bring to book those who think that their elections gave them the right to loot the public exchequer.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Nothing ever changes in Meghalaya

Editor,
As young students (millennials), we grew up attending several awareness programs (mostly conducted by the State Council of Science, Technology & Environment (SCSTE) in various venues) which had harped on the same strings as yesterday's editorial ("Selling the Environment" — ST 06.08.2025). Mama Nicky's 'Hei ka Pla' would resonate loudly in our radio as we waited patiently for the request line from 91.5 FM. Then, we finally met him in one of our school events. At one point of time, he enthusiastically demonstrated how to eat KWAI — to remove the excess lime with the tip of the betel leaf. Years have passed, Mama Nick is still standing strong in his passion towards the environment and so does the artistic average-Khasi-height-lime-smears in the luxurious textured walls of Poinisuk Hotel in Laitumkhrah.

The issue of waste management is a decade old issue that is sidelined consecutively by concerned authorities

from one administration to the other (Pardon my memory! The stretch — Oh! The foul odour... coming from that area fogs my thinking ability). The whole of Shillong and its outskirts is helping Mawlai people, Guardians of the Khasis, by stacking piles of waste to form a ladder, in the hope that someday we'll be able to climb up to heaven to reclaim our Shining Sword from the Lord Thunder. Our Science Centre is not SCI-ENCING anymore! (Gen-Alpha Term). As old and new problems take away our mental peace, I humbly invite all — Let's close our nose and our ears and our eyes! Let's dream about high-rise buildings and instruct Chat-GPT to redesign certain areas in Shillong to suit our dream of a future environmentally friendly city. As to the concluding open-ended question by Madam Editor yesterday — "But what about the large majority that must live and die in this state?" — Well, A wise Indian man once said "Life ek safar hai!" — Chalo! Let's undertake this SUFFER together!

Yours etc.,
Kyntiewborlang Kharakar
Shillong - 17

Fix the Border, Not the Fear

Editor
The article titled "The Signs of the Times — A Need for Identity Verification" by Toki Blah (ST August 19, 2025), talks about serious concerns in Meghalaya especially around border security, illegal entry of people from Bangladesh, and the fear of losing tribal identity. The article refers to the arrest of six people in South West Khasi Hills who were

identified as illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh and sees this as a warning sign that the state is becoming more vulnerable. Blah criticizes the state government for not taking the issue seriously. In particular, he objects to the Chief Minister calling the incident just a robbery, saying this shows the government does not understand the bigger threat.

Blah argues that the situation is part of a larger regional crisis. He claims that on August 5, 2024, the Government of Bangladesh was overthrown by radical Islamic groups, and a new caretaker government led by Muhammad Yunus took over which is openly anti-India. However, this claim is not true. As of 2024, Sheikh Hasina is still the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and no such coup has happened. Muhammad Yunus does not hold any official leadership role. This major mistake weakens the entire argument of the article, making it sound more like fear-based speculation than a reliable analysis.

The article goes on to say that this so-called new Bangladesh is now supporting Islamic radicalism, working with China and Pakistan, and trying to separate Northeast India economically from the rest of the country. These claims are not backed by solid evidence and seem more like conspiracy theories.

Blah describes the arrested individuals not as poor migrants looking for a better life, but as strong, armed men who look like trained agents. He suggests they were sent to spread fear and disrupt local communities. From this, he imagines a long-term plan: sneak people in, create fear, force locals to leave,

settle permanently, marry into local families, get Indian documents; and eventually take over politically turning the region into a Muslim-majority area under radical influence.

While illegal migration and fake documents are real problems in border areas like Meghalaya, the article wrongly links all such migration to terrorism and religious takeover. This kind of thinking can unfairly target innocent people and spread fear against entire communities. Even though the author says he respects peaceful Muslims, his words often blur the line between real threats and innocent citizens.

To deal with the issue, Blah suggests two solutions: form local Village Defence Parties (VDPs), give them weapons, and connect them digitally to Border Security Force (BSF) outposts. Introduce biometric smart ID cards to verify who is a tribal person or a genuine Indian citizen.

After all, the old Inner Line Permit system may not be enough for today's challenges. But the way these ideas are presented is worrying. Giving guns to civilians without proper training or control could lead to violence and abuse. Biometric IDs might help stop fraud, but they also raise concerns about privacy — mistakes that could exclude real citizens, and misuse of personal data. The article does not talk about these risks, making the solutions seem perfect when they are not.

Public reaction to the article has been mixed. Some see it as just fear-mongering. Critics say it uses exaggerated language and unproven claims to stir up fear, playing

on people's worries about culture and security to push a narrow, exclusionary agenda. Because the article lacks reliable sources especially on the false claim about Bangladesh's government many question its real purpose. It feels less like a serious policy piece and more like propaganda that could harm peace in a diverse state like Meghalaya.

Still, the article does point to real issues that need attention. The border between India and Bangladesh is not fully secure, and illegal migration whether for jobs, safety, or other reasons is a complex problem. Tribal communities in Meghalaya have long worried about losing their land, culture, and political voice. The current permit system may need updating to meet modern needs.

The right way forward is through open and inclusive talks — between tribal leaders, civil society, security forces, and government officials. The goal should be fair, legal, and smart ways to manage borders and verify identity without blaming whole religions or countries.

In short, while Toki Blah's article is flawed in facts and tone, it highlights a deeper truth: in times of change, questions about identity, security, and belonging are deeply sensitive. They need calm, honest, and fact-based leadership not fear and exaggeration.

Yours etc.,
Marbiang Lyngdoh Rymbai
Via email

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"Tears come from the heart and not
from the brain."

— Leonardo da Vinci

The Shillong Times

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Sixth Schedule Revisited

THE Sixth Schedule is in the news yet again because the Autonomous District Councils have defaulted on payment of salaries to their staff and the State Government wants to pitch in by taking on the salary component of the 3 Councils. When the need for the Sixth Schedule was heatedly debated in the Constituent Assembly, a member from Assam, B Das lamented that a great liberator like Dr Ambedkar should introduce the Sixth Schedule, which 'disenfranchises the civil liberties of non-tribals already living within Shillong Municipality. His contention was that by granting the Sixth Schedule the educated class would have to be governed by 'primitive people.' But Das was not the only one antagonistic to the Sixth Schedule. It is evident therefore that the tribes were held in low esteem and are not credited with having enough intelligence to govern themselves, leave alone govern the 'educated' plainmen living in Shillong city — a Municipal area to date.

To be governed by a so-called enlightened class that holds the views of B Das and his ilk and who consider the tribals as primitive and incapable of any good, tells us that the tribal leaders were right in demanding a separate state. But coming to the present debate on the Autonomous District Councils which are now so low on funds that the salaries of the Councillors and other employees are to be paid by the State Government, the question raised by some is what happens to the 'autonomy' of the Councils then? The fact of the matter is that while the Sixth Schedule is a virtuous act arising out of concerns raised by those who realised that tribals being a minority needed special protection or else are likely to face the fate of indigenous peoples in the present USA and elsewhere, there was no revenue model clearly worked out for its implementation. Question such as what would their resource base be if they are not to be funded by the state and central government, remain unanswered.

As always, these questions were never tackled head-on. True that the Councils are mandated to generate their own revenue. The major sources of own revenue of the Councils are Professional tax, Forests, Trading licences issued to non-tribals and Market cess. Share of royalty from the State Government accruing from major and minor minerals extracted also forms part of the revenue resource. Earlier coal alone yielded revenue to the tune of Rs 600 crore annually to the state exchequer. But when coal mining was banned in 2014, the royalty declined sharply. Often the State Government too delayed the release of funds and the central funds were scheme-centric, so there was no working capital for recurring expenses. Besides, the Councils lacked professional book-keeping thereby compounding the problem of financial management. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) detected several defects such as non-maintenance of cash books etc. In such a situation the Councils need to be pulled up and tasked to function with accountability. Else they are just a superfluous institution considering that Meghalaya is today a full-fledged state ruled by tribals themselves.

Is Sohra a Forgotten Chronicle of History & Heritage?

By Alan West Kharkongor

Sohra, popularly known as Cherrapunjee, is renowned for its natural beauty, waterfalls, caves, and living root bridges. Globally recognized for its extreme rainfall, it holds two Guinness World Records.

Beyond its climate, Sohra is geologically and culturally significant. The recently defined Meghalayan Age, marking the last 4,200 years, was identified through a stalagmite found in a Sohra cave, cementing the town's global scientific importance.

For the Khasi people, Sohra is the heart of their culture and history. Its colonial past, still visible in its architecture and trade routes, is fading from the memory of the younger generation.

Having grown up in Sohra in the 1980s, I developed a fascination for its forgotten stories and colonial connections. This article delves into untold events and the complex relationship between the British and these hills—marked by admiration and exploitation.

During our childhood in Sohra, we played with our favourite toy car, which we called "Kali Klip." Unknown to us, this simple plaything was actually a relic of colonial infrastructure—a metal grip from the historic Cherra-Chhatak Ropeway, built in 1929 to connect Sohra to Chhatta via Shella. Abandoned after Partition, its remnants became our childhood playthings and a memory for every boy who grew up in Sohra in the '70s and '80s.

On October 10, 1929, the Syiem of Sohra, (L) Jai Manik Syiem, his agent Rai Sahib Hormurai Diengdoh, and British officer Mr. Patrick Copeland signed an agreement to build the ropeway. It transported goods and essential supplies between the hills and the plains.

While some argue that colonialism brought development, infrastructure, was largely built to benefit British interests—resource extraction, troop movement, and administration.

Even before the ropeway, the British sought strategic trade routes. The David Scott Mule Trail, developed in the early 1800s, connected Assam with present-day Bangladesh. It was crucial for military and trade movement. But more efficient systems were always being explored.

One such initiative involved Sir Henry Yule, a Scottish geographer and Orientalist. Yule is best known for his translation of the works of Marco Polo and Friar Jordanus, as well as for co-authoring Hobson-Jobson, a dictionary of Anglo-Indian terms, with

Arthur Coke Burnell.

In 1841, Yule arrived in Sohra to explore coal transport possibilities. Though the plan failed, he documented Sohra's beauty and the Khasi people. Yule wrote the first-known account of the Living Root Bridge between Ryngud and Laitiam and sketched it in his book, later published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Sadly, the bridge was replaced by a metal one under a recent government scheme.

Yule also wrote about the River Lingtia (Wahrew), describing: "Sometimes, however, you find a broad reach of deep, still water, swarming with the black backs of large fish." Today, such scenes are only memories.

Few know Sohra had a railway 139 years ago. Visiting Sohbar in 2004, I saw homes built with iron beams, which locals claimed were salvaged from a railway. An elder, Bah Opren, confirmed the British railway reached Mawsmai. Stone pillars near Thangkharang Park still mark the forgotten track.

In 1884, British engineer Henry Kench arrived in Sohra to design a rail link from Shillong to Calcutta. The Cherra Company State Railway (CCSR), a 2 ft 6 in narrow-gauge tramway, opened in 1886, connecting Mawsmai-Tharia to Companyganj (now in Bangladesh), spanning 12.1 km.

Primarily used for limestone and coal transport, the railway featured rope-hauling mechanisms on steep gradients near Sohbar and Thangkharang till Mawsmai. It was severely damaged in the 1897 Assam earthquake and closed soon after. Currently, only a few of those houses with CCSR railway tracks can still be seen at Sohbar Village. Some locals also believe that limestone from Sohra was used in constructing the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata—an intriguing idea for future researchers.

Khasi Oranges & The Inglis Legacy

Khasi oranges were once so prized they were shipped from Sylhet to Europe, known there as Sylhet Oranges. During this trade boom, English merchant Harry Inglis secured orange grove leases from a local Syiem of Sohra. After his death, his wife placed his body in a glass coffin, warning locals he'd return if betrayed—an eerie, psychological tactic. Under Harry's agreements with the Khasis, his leases on the orange groves were good for his lifetime, which

in Khasi translated as 'for as long as he remained above the ground' (Katba dang don ha sla pyrthie).

Thomas Jones, the missionary who developed the Khasi alphabet, clashed with Inglis over his exploitation of farmers. Forced to flee Sohra, Jones's story highlights the darkest side of colonial enterprise. Inglis was buried at a location which is now inside the current NIT Sohra campus, once a British residential area. The site, rich in colonial history, was sacrificed for development, a recurring pattern in Sohra.

Erasure of Heritage
Today, many aspects of Sohra's heritage are fading. Living root bridges are replaced with steel. Traditional Khasi homes have given way to concrete. Oral histories and records of Sohra are vanishing.

The old European cemetery lies neglected, its gravestones fading as nearby settlements encroach. Other historic sites face a similar fate: Ki Jaka Thang Syiem Sohra is losing its grandeur, Rangjyrtie's ancient iron smelting site is overlooked, and Gothic churches are being replaced by concrete structures. Only the Old Presbyterian Church at Nongsawlia remains preserved, still admired for its heritage and architecture.

Even the names of places are being changed without historical understanding. In my locality, a block (kyntoi Shnong) known as Salibandar was renamed Lumpynkhiah which some say is the original name. Many thought that Salibandar was derogatory, perhaps linked to monkeys. However, research shows it derived from "sales" and "vendors," referencing an old market established at the location during the Ropeway trade. It is worth noting that the name 'Marten' for Shillong's waste yard may have originated from 'Number 10'; however, this theory requires further verification.

In 2019, a group of passionate youths from Sohra, who had formed a society, proposed to the state government the establishment of a museum in a heritage house that survived the 1897 quake. The museum aimed to showcase Sohra's trade legacy, colonial architecture, and oral traditions. The house itself serves as an intriguing structure for a historical display.

The proposal impressed Arts & Culture Commissioner Mr. F.R. Kharkongor, who visited the site and endorsed

it. Sadly, the project has not materialized for unknown reasons. Recently, the group reached out to Minister, Bah Paul Lyngdoh, who has roots in Sohra: His support, combined with the keen interest of Bah F.R. Kharkongor, could help revive this important initiative.

A Heritage Tourism Model
Sohra has immense potential for heritage tourism, akin to Nairobi, Shimla, or Kolkata. It could offer visitors a deeper experience, not just waterfalls and rain, but a nuanced look at British-Khasi interactions, resilience, and forgotten legacies. Every trail here has a story; every waterfall, a legend. Kohima's War Cemetery is a model of memory and tourism. Why not Sohra?

As mass tourism grows, integrating heritage tourism could promote sustainable development, aligned with Meghalaya's current tourism policy.

Preserving Identity and Oral History

Heritage preservation in Sohra isn't just about saving buildings; it's about preserving identity, oral history, and the region's soul. Beyond colonial tales, we must celebrate and conserve the rich history of Ka Hima Sohra and its neighboring Elakas, Christianity's arrival, folklore, literature, and all pre-colonial defining events. Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma recently urged mapping Sohra's heritage. Preserving, documenting, and restoring sites can reveal their value, with guided tours by trained local youths boosting Cultural and Heritage tourism.

Envisioning Heritage Tourism Projects

Imagine a scenic ropeway or cable car ride tracing the historic Cherra-Chhatak Ropeway route to Wahrew at Tharia. Rolling hills, drifting clouds, and majestic waterfalls, combined with historical narration, could make it one of the country's most compelling tourist experiences and a major heritage restoration project. A toy train near Thangkharang Park, following the path of the Cherra Company State Railway, could offer joyrides using the original iron tracks of the CCSR still preserved in Sohbar Village. These projects could boost tourism while conserving heritage.

Let Sohra be remembered not just as the wettest place on earth, but as a living Museum, a land of untold stories, enduring strength, and a heritage worth preserving. It is time we honor its layered legacy and ensure that future generations can experience the richness of its past.

When Cameras Started to Compute: The Quiet Rise of Computational Photography

By Pranav Bhaven Savla

In 2014, Google quietly released a new camera app. Hidden behind its simple shutter button was something unusual: every time you took a photo, the app didn't just capture one frame. It took several, analyzed them, and blended them into a single image. To most users this was invisible. But for computer scientists, it marked a shift. Cameras were no longer just glass and sensors they were beginning to compute.

That shift now has a name, that is computational photography.

Computational photography is the use of software and algorithms to improve, reconstruct, or even reimagine images at the moment of capture. Instead of depending solely on the physics of lenses and sensors, it uses mathematics and processing power to push beyond the limits of hardware.

It's easy to confuse this with editing, but there's a crucial difference. Editing happens after the image exists; you, the user, decide to adjust brightness or remove red eye. Computational photography happens during capture. It decides how to merge exposures, correct shadows, or blur a background before you ever see the image.

It's also important to understand that computational photography is not limitless. A smartphone cannot transform a blurry mess into a detailed masterpiece: there must be usable data in the first place. Computational photography stretches hardware, but it doesn't defy physics.

It is fair to ask, then, why we need it in the first place.

The rise of the smartphone created a problem. By the early 2010s, cameras had become central to phones, but the devices themselves were razor thin. Unlike DSLRs, a phone couldn't hold a large sensor or a complex lens system. Physics doesn't shrink easily; a wide aperture lens won't flatten into a 7 mm phone body.

Researchers asked a different question: if the hardware can't improve, can software compensate? The answer turned out to be yes.

One of the pioneers here was Marc Levoy at Stanford, later at Google, who developed algorithms that let small sensors capture surprisingly rich images. His work directly influenced Google's Pixel line, which, starting in 2016, could rival multi-lens iPhones with a single modest camera. Portrait mode on the Pixel didn't depend on hardware depth sensors it was software recognizing edges and simulating blur.

In short, computational photography wasn't a gimmick. It was a survival strategy for cameras trapped inside shrinking devices.

What are some of the tricks it plays, then?

Many of the tricks that now feel ordinary in smartphone photography actually rely on clever computation. Take HDR, for example. Instead of capturing just one image, the phone takes several shots at different exposures, some brighter and some darker, and then aligns them to create a final picture that preserves both the bright skies and the shaded details on faces. Similarly, low-light photography has been transformed by techniques like Google's Night Sight, which can merge as many as fifteen frames, each exposed for up to a second. The software carefully rejects blurred pixels, corrects for hand shake, and averages out noise, leaving behind a photo that appears bright and sharp even when the scene looks dim to the human eye.

Other advances are equally impressive. Portrait mode, once dependent on bulky camera lenses, now uses machine learning models trained on millions of images to detect the fine boundaries between subjects such as where hair ends and the background begins, and then applies a natural-looking blur to mimic depth of field. Super resolution takes advantage of tiny, almost imperceptible hand movements between shots, using them to reconstruct an image with more detail than the sensor would normally allow. Together, these techniques show how computation has redefined what is possible in photography, making professional-quality effects accessible from the palm of your hand.

Beyond consumer cameras, the same principles scale up. The Event Horizon Telescope image of a black hole in 2019

was not a single snapshot, but a computational reconstruction from petabytes of data gathered by radio telescopes across the globe. No human eye or single lens ever saw that image directly.

All this raises a question: what is a photograph today? For most of history, a photograph was thought of as a slice of reality a faithful projection of light onto film. With computation in the loop, a photograph becomes partly an interpretation.

Consider astrophotography. A long exposure photo of the Milky Way shows far more stars than our eyes ever can. We accept it as "real," even though it extends beyond human perception. Computational photography democratizes that kind of extension. A night shot on a budget smartphone now reveals more detail than a naked eye view.

But this power comes with tension. When Google's "magic eraser" deletes passersby from your travel picture, does the photo still document the moment? When wedding photographers use computational tools to swap eyes from one frame into another, is that a record of the day or a construction?

The truth is somewhere in between. These images are no longer neutral witnesses, but curated versions of reality. They show not only what was there, but also what the algorithms and we wanted to see.

The impact of computational photography reaches beyond vacation albums. In science, computational imaging allows biologists to see inside living tissues, astronomers to map faint galaxies, and archaeologists to reconstruct faded manuscripts.

For ordinary people, the technology has lowered the barrier to creative storytelling. A student with a budget phone can now document their environment at a quality that, twenty years ago, would have required expensive equipment. That democratization has fueled everything from citizen science projects documenting bird populations or tracking climate change to social movements powered by visual evidence.

It has also improved accessibility. Apps that read text from images or describe surroundings to blind and low vision users depend on clean, high quality captures. The better the computational photography, the better these assistive systems perform.

Moving ahead, the trajectory is clear: cameras are becoming interpretation machines. We are moving from stills to motion, from 2D to 3D reconstructions, from pixels to volumetric models. Apple's "Spatial Video" and Google's cinematic photos hint at a future where a "photo" is something you can move through, not just look at.

At the same time, generative AI pushes the boundaries further: synthetic photography, where images are created from prompts rather than photons. That raises profound ethical questions. If photos are used as evidence, how do we distinguish between capture and creation? Trust in the medium is not guaranteed.

For over a century, cameras were defined by optics: lenses, shutters, sensors. Today, they are also defined by algorithms. Computational photography does not replace traditional imaging, it extends it, compensating for physical limits and opening new possibilities.

Whether it's a phone brightening a street scene, a telescope assembling a black hole, or a scientist peering into a living cell, the principle is the same: computation and light working together.

We may still call the result a photograph, but it is something subtly new: not just a record of what the lens saw, but also of what the computer understood.

(Pranav Bhaven Savla is a fresher at Plaksha University pursuing a B.Tech with a focus on Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence, particularly its intersection with the humanities. He researches at uDot Braille Tech, developing inclusive and universally accessible technologies. Beyond academia, he advocates for accessibility through his YouTube channel, BlindiePhoenix, where he shares life from the perspective of someone who just happens to be blind.)

Letters to the Editor

Breath of Fresh Air for Police Bazaar: A Note of Gratitude

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for the visible transformation that has taken place at Police Bazaar. Today, as one takes a stroll through this heart of our city, one breathes a sense of fresh air and order, both literally and figuratively as the hawkers have moved to their newly designated vending zones. What was once a congested and chaotic thoroughfare has become a pleasant, walkable space, giving our beloved commercial heart a vibrant and orderly new look.

I recall having written in these very pages an article titled "Civic Rights vs. Privileges and Personal Rights" on November 25, 2024. It is truly gratifying to witness those words translated into reality.

This positive change did not happen by accident. It is the result of visionary leadership, meticulous planning, and immense cooperation. Therefore, it is only fitting to extend a heartfelt 'thank you' to all those who made this a reality.

A word of thanks is due to the Government for its decisive action, and in particular to the Hon'ble Tourism Minister, Minister for Urban Affairs and others

whose vision and leadership have made this possible. The Shillong Municipal Board, with all its officers, deserves deep appreciation for implementing this initiative with diligence. Equal gratitude must also go to the Hawkers' Associations and their leaders who understood the spirit of the move, and to the hawkers themselves for their cooperation and adaptability.

We must not forget the many silent contributors who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make this a success, nor the ordinary citizens who co-operated patiently through the transition. This collective effort is a shining example of what can be achieved when responsibility, dialogue, and goodwill come together for the common good. May this spirit continue to guide us in shaping Shillong into a city that is orderly, vibrant, and livable for all.

May I suggest that the government put up a transparent polycarbonate roof and renovate the floor with decorative tiles and prunable or ornamental trees along the side and also shop owners to beautify their shops so that the place will be a hotspot destination.

Yours etc.,
Gervasius Nongkseh
Shillong-1

Implementing Humane Stray Dog Management

Editor,
This is with reference to

the recent judgment delivered by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India regarding the management of stray dogs in the Delhi NCR region. The Court has rightly emphasised that the issue of growing stray dog populations must be addressed not through cruelty or ad-hoc measures, but by adhering to a structured process grounded in compassion, legality, and public responsibility.

The directives reinforce the provisions under the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, 2023 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, which mandate sterilisation, vaccination, creation of shelters, and humane care as legitimate long-term strategies for population control. This stance is of immediate relevance to us in Shillong, where the stray dog population has become a challenge affecting sanitation, public safety, and animal welfare alike.

As responsible citizens of Shillong, we must therefore:

1. Support institutional sterilisation and vaccination drives in collaboration with municipal authorities, veterinary professionals, and NGOs.
2. Establish and maintain shelter homes for abandoned, sick, and injured animals, ensuring proper upkeep and veterinary support.
3. Promote local adoption practices by shifting focus towards Indian breeds ("indies") and female dogs, encouraging society to value companionship over commercial pedigree.
4. Strengthen public

awareness through education campaigns on responsible pet ownership, adoption, and the legal obligations towards street animals.

While the judiciary has provided clear guidance, its effectiveness depends on ground-level implementation. It is imperative for Shillong's municipal bodies, civil society groups, and citizens to cooperate in instituting humane and sustainable solutions. We must recognise that animal welfare and public health are interconnected concerns, and ignoring one will inevitably affect the other. Through proactive measures and a collective commitment, Shillong can set an example in the North-East for responsible and lawful stray dog management.

Yours etc.,
Viveca Blah
Shillong

Dangerous Rise of the "Haha" Reaction

Editor,
What looks like harmless fun on Facebook, the "Haha" reaction, is quickly turning into a dangerous habit. Once a symbol of joy, it is now too often used as a weapon of mockery, especially against serious matters.

Religious sermons, moral teachings, or posts exposing moral degradations are often met with waves of "Haha" reactions. Instead of healthy debates, people choose ridicule. The laugh becomes a shield to avoid uncomfortable truths. An atheist (a non-god believer)

will put a "Haha" whenever a pastor, a priest, a mullah, or a pandit speaks of God, Shiva, Allah, or the mystery of life itself as coming from the Supreme Divine Power. For them, the laugh is not amusement but rejection, a way to dismiss belief without thoughtful engagement.

Moreover, those who love to give this "Haha" reaction are also the first to throw rubbish phrases and slogans like "India is not for beginners" or some other common local comment-slogans, without any further thought. These remarks may sound clever in the moment, but they only reduce serious conversations into shallow chatter.

In politics too, a person with a totally different viewpoint will "Haha" the posts of the other party, not to discuss or debate, but simply to belittle. This mocking culture encourages division, where people stop listening to one another and only laugh at what they oppose.

As we can see, this trend is not innocent anymore. It erodes respect, deepens divides, and breeds a culture where seriousness is scorned and mocked. If society laughs at every warning, who will listen when real dangers come?

The "Haha" emoji may look small, but its misuse signals something bigger of a generation hiding behind laughter, afraid of honest reflection. Unless we recognise this, we risk becoming a people who laugh at everything and learn from nothing.

Yours etc.,
Sunrise Pohtam, M.Th
Via email

Urgent Need to Regulate Makeshift Shops Opposite Ward's Lake

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I wish to highlight the unchecked growth of makeshift shops opposite the entry to Ward's Lake. These temporary wooden structures and vehicles converted into stalls not only mar the beauty of the area but also risk turning it into another unregulated hawkker zone.

Ward's Lake is one of Shillong's most visited attractions; and its surroundings should reflect the city's charm. I therefore urge the concerned authorities to intervene at the earliest. A practical solution would be to develop permanent, aesthetically designed shops that complement the surroundings, while allowing vendors to operate on a regulated rental basis. This would both preserve the appeal of the area and ensure economic benefit to the government.

Timely action will help maintain the dignity of this landmark and enhance the experience of visitors.

Yours etc.,
Aiban Narry
Via email

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

Diplomacy, choppy waters

DUE to a curious turn of events, Indian diplomacy has waded into choppy waters. After a phase of strengthening of bilateral ties with the United States and the present eruption of issues, India is seeking to get closer to old-time ally Russia and undependable neighbour China.

Be that as it may, it would sound a little odd that India now attempts to cozy up to China. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, external affairs minister Subramaniam Jaishankar and national security adviser Ajit Doval have reached up to their Chinese counterparts in attempts at mending fences.

As for Russia, most of the Putin era since the late 1990s had been a period when Moscow cold-shouldered India, despite the strong fraternal ties New Delhi maintained with it ever since Independence.

Letters to the Editor

Why hyperventilate on Territorial Army?

Editor, Bhogtoram Mawroh's article titled "Territorial Army in Meghalaya: Safeguard or Liability," published in The Shillong Times (ST August 27, 2025), is baseless and misleading to the general public.

Instead, as a responsible son of the soil, he should give his support for this cause. If the government can genuinely fulfill this demand, it will be a significant benefit for our state.

In his article, Bhogtoram Mawroh mentioned various dangers if there were a Territorial Army in our state, but I don't see that he is concerned

about the issue of influx or the illegal entry of outsiders into our state. I have read some of his articles, but I have never seen him express concern or write about his own indigenous community and the dangers if we fail to protect against the infiltration of outsiders.

If the government agrees to establish a Territorial Army in our state, as done in the state of Mizoram, the youth who are recruited will have to undergo training and have to abide by the law. It's not that the government will simply provide them with arms and give them licence to do whatever they want.

Therefore, I urge Bhogtoram to publish such writings that could mislead the public and discourage the youth of our jaitbynriew

Shillong has almost everything, just like the other small cities of the country, but it lacks the basic elements: responsibility, accountability, and civic sense. When we look at the city, we see the same old roads, the tiniest and narrowest ones, and pavements that were once meant for pedestrians have vanished into thin air.

The narrow roads and the rampant dumping of waste everywhere. What has led to such a sinister downfall in Shillong? The constant effort of a social activist through "My Meghalaya, My Pride" to diminish the irresponsible behaviour of citizens, the frequent noble cause of certain groups in Shillong to clean rivers and streams, and the immeasurable contribution of many youth employed by the Shillong Municipal Board to physically clean the streets of Shillong round the clock have been in vain.

Shillong is still cleaner compared to the rest of the country, but as inhabitants of the city, we know this is not what we know of a "clean

city." Similarly, its pollution is not as much as that of different cities and towns, but we need to nip things in the bud before it gets amplified.

"Walk to Work Wednesday," a campaign initiated by Swapnil Tembe, IAS, is a very good campaign. Walking is one of the best exercises, helps in digestion and one's heart, and is the most preferred option for someone who has not subscribed to a gymnasium.

Time and again, people have blamed certain communities for the dirtiness of a city. Civic sense is not found only in certain communities but in all. Why should we blame a particular community when all are to be blamed? Our grandparents have narrated stories of them fishing and washing clothes by the Wah Umkhrah and now, we can't even envisage setting foot on it.

Those who journey all the way to Wah Umkhrah and dispose of their refuse are not blamed, as they are rarely caught red-handed.

By Emidao Shylla

The editor of The Shillong Times has frequently posted on her Facebook page whenever her team goes to clean rivers and streams.

The remarkable involvement of the editor, the volunteers, and others who are very keen to conserve the natural beauty of the water is nothing but a waste of time if people continue to discard their leftovers in the river.

It may not be wrong to believe that Indians do this; because we know someone out there is tasked to clean up the mess we made. Why do we indulge in such bad behaviour just because someone is employed to clean up our mess? People should also not blame the authorities for someone throwing their waste on the road because they don't find a dustbin.

If this city or state truly belongs to us, then we must take responsibility for its cleanliness and its governance. The Government has taken many active steps to

beautify the capital through different initiatives such as painting murals on the walls and buildings. The walls of Sein Jaintia, which were shamelessly rubbed with lime, and were once cleaned by RJ Nicky, are now again defaced by the "white and red painters of town."

A visit to Iewduh is a visit to a living ecosystem, vibrant, noisy, and teeming with life. However, once the market closes, one is no longer met with the same energy. Instead, one is met with filth, where one has to tiptoe to not trample on the rotten mess.

The Government aspires to make the state the cleanest in the country, but even if Rs 10 billion were to be spent on such projects, it would amount to nothing without public cooperation. It is very encouraging that the Government is taking visible and meaningful steps to restore the beauty of Shillong through cleanliness and beautification.

Godot never appeared before Vladimir and Estragon in "Waiting for Godot," but Scotland will. I pray that I don't have to wait for long until 'Scot' returns to the 'land of the east,' making 'Shillong, the Scotland of the east' once again.

The Sixth Schedule: Land to Industry and Multiculturalism

By Dr Samir Talati

The Assam Government's decision to allot 3,000 bighas of land to a corporate house for a cement factory in Dima Hasao District has ignited a debate on the robustness of the Sixth Schedule provisions as a guarantor of scheduled tribes' socio-cultural, economic, and political safeguards.

Overall, the state's policies and practices towards ethnic communities have significant implications for their sense of belonging, cultural preservation, social integration, lifestyle, and socioeconomic advancement.

The immense ethnic diversity has given India a unique multicultural character and made it an outstanding case for multiculturalism. The Indian State has fairly successfully accommodated the aspirations of its diverse populations for development and ethnic identity in its federal structure by adopting the welfare trajectory regarding its vulnerable 'minority' populations through constitutional measures and state policies, making the Indian Constitution, what

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, seen as an example of multiculturalism in action, recognizes and respects the diversity of the tribal populations and offers them a degree of autonomy or self-determination. It provides a policy framework that not only facilitates socio-economic development of the tribes in the Northeast but also offers safeguards to their ethnic identity and avenues of expression.

Under the Sixth Schedule, District and Regional Councils are empowered with exclusive legislative power over land tenure, management of community resources, and customary law. As per Paragraphs 3 and 19 of the Sixth Schedule, any transfer of tribal or community land to outsiders requires the explicit sanction of the autonomous council and, in certain cases, the Governor's approval.

This action has sidelined the collective decision-making that underpins tribal self-rule. It has also undermined generations of customary land rights, by treating community-held land as state-controlled surplus. This poses a threat of severing the link between the tribal people and their ancestors.

Finality, there is the issue of imbalanced power dynamics. Granting large tracts of land to an external corporation reinforces a hierarchy where corporate and state interests trump the rights of a historically marginalized tribal community.

Sixth Schedule provisions strictly prohibit the transfer, lease, mortgage, or sale of tribal land to non-tribals, without the explicit approval of the autonomous district council concerned. By usurping the District Council's law-making and land-management prerogatives, the state government has eroded the political autonomy designed to protect indigenous decision-making on land use.

Multiculturalism in India rests on recognizing and protecting the distinct identities, customs, and governance systems of its diverse communities. It ensures that tribal, linguistic, religious, and regional groups can preserve their heritage while participating equally in the country's political and economic life.

Multiculturalism in Northeast India can be protected by reinforcing constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule, especially by ensuring that the district councils follow procedures, giving primacy to tribal land rights, and rejecting any allotment that overrides communal ownership.

(The writer is with North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati. Email: stalatin@rediffmail.com)

ing alone." "What was she wearing?" "Why was she out so late?" Instead of holding perpetrators accountable, the narrative shifts to the victim, forcing women to live in a perpetual state of caution.

Women Living Amongst Undercover Predators

Being a woman in this so-called modern and progressive society, it is enraging that a woman cannot walk alone without fear. The simple act of existing in public, something so-called "men" take for granted, becomes a calculated risk for women.

This is not paranoia. This is reality. Women's bodies are policed, their actions scrutinized, and yet when harm befalls them, society finds a way to blame them with statements like, "She shouldn't have been walk-

The rage women feel is justified. The exhaustion is justified. How many more must suffer before society acknowledges that the streets do not belong to men alone? Women should not have to walk in fear, to carry weapons in their purses, or to share their locations with friends just to ensure they make it home untouched and alive.

Yours etc.,
Mebaphylla Rymshon,
Via email

Reality Facing Meghalaya's Youth

I write this not just for myself, but for every student in Meghalaya who no longer feels safe even in their own homeland. We grew up believing our State is 'Ka Ri Tip Brieu, Tip Blei'—a land that knows man and knows God.

How did we reach this point? Drugs have taken over our society. They are easy to access, spreading in every corner, trapping our friends, our family, even our neighbors. Because of drugs, crimes have multiplied. Students are attacked in broad

daylight, passengers are harassed, and families live in constant worry. We ask ourselves: if we see it, why don't we feel unsafe, why don't our leaders act? The truth is painful—the NPP-led MDA government has failed to protect us.

We, the youth, are the future of Meghalaya. But if this continues, what future will we have? A generation destroyed by addiction? A society where violence is normal? A society where we do not feel safe even to come out of our own homes?

We make this appeal to the government; to the police; to the dorbar shmong; to the churches, and to every responsible citizen—please act before it is too late. Strengthen the laws, crack down on peddlers, secure our borders, create real rehabilitation for addicts, and most importantly, listen to the voices of the youth.

Yours etc.,
Iwannaki L. Khongji
Shillong

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"Making mistakes is a lot better than not doing anything."

— Billie Joe Armstrong

The Shillong Times

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Never-Ending Drugs Haul

NOT a single day passes without drugs being confiscated either from the East Jaintia Hills route or the Guwahati-Shillong route. And each time a drug haul happens the cost attributed to them amounts to crores of rupees. The question is why are the carriers so bold as to risk everything including their lives to carry those drugs knowing fully well that they are not risk proof and could be arrested any time since the intelligence gathering as far as drugs are concerned is much more sophisticated due to technology. The fact is that some manage to get away and earn their way through life. Perhaps the drugs are also destined to be taken further onwards to other states. There is no state or country today that is immune to drug-use. India is facing a huge challenge in countering drug addiction largely among the youth. There is no single method for drug de-addiction that has worked. Every person responds differently but some aspects are common.

In Meghalaya there is still a lot of taboo in how drug-users are viewed. There is need for greater empathy in understanding their situation and what has pushed them to drugs. At last count it is estimated that about 3 lakh youth are drug users. Obviously one government department cannot do much. There's also need for a concerted effort and the attempt should be to reduce harm among drug users. That involves creating harm reduction centres that include needle exchanges (dumping used needles and being supplied with fresh ones) as has happened in Manipur at least two decades ago, meetings with social workers, psychiatrists and medical doctors. Meghalaya needs more addiction treatment facilities. Society itself must come forward and offer its services instead of judging and condemning drug users. Building a network of social workers to support drug users to reform and come out of their addiction, which is a slow process, is another imperative. While the root causes and consequences of addiction are universally damaging, the approaches to treatment and recovery differ significantly around the world. These differences are shaped by cultural values, social norms, and healthcare systems. What are the tribal cultural values that can wear our youth from their addictive status? Has society-tried to explore that?

On the contrary India has adopted the western model where addiction is treated as a medical condition that includes medical detoxification, residential rehabilitation, outpatient counselling, and medication-assisted treatment. But there are alternative methods that are more indigenous such as building social harmony and group cohesion. Treatment often involves family and community support, and there is a strong focus on reintegration into society. Group therapy and community-based programs are imperative with lesser reliance on medication. Meghalaya might like to explore these alternative routes to help recovering addicts. While the cost to the state in providing such resources would be quite high considering that Meghalaya's internal resource generation is low but adequate attention needs to be paid to this societal scourge before we lose the best brains to drugs.

Letters to the Editor

Why indulge in disinformation?

Editor,
Carmel Fedrick Malngiang's response to my article 'Territorial Army in Meghalaya: Safeguard or Liability' is intriguing because he created a straw man and then proceeded to attack it—resorting to name-calling in the process. He accused me of being against the idea of a Territorial Army in the state and, therefore, labelled me a 'traitor' to the community. But I am not against the idea of a Territorial Army. What I am against is the idea of arming common people and turning them into militias to protect our borders. In my opinion, there is some confusion between what a Territorial Army actually is and what the groups demanding it are actually asking for.

The Territorial Army is a volunteer force under the Indian Army, consisting of part-time soldiers who serve for a couple of months and return to their regular jobs for the rest of the year. However, what these groups appear to be demanding is a permanent force made up of volunteers armed with weapons and ready for action at all times. After all, influx and drug trafficking are year-round phenomena; they do not follow a timetable. So, I'm not convinced that the Territorial Army is exactly what these groups are asking for. Here are a couple of extracts from my article to support this:

"However, there is a lack of clarity about what exactly is meant by the 'People's

Army' and how it is similar to the 'Territorial Army'."

"What appears to be the confusion is between the concept of a Territorial Army, which is a branch of the Indian Army, and something like the Salwa Judum, which was a militia mobilised and deployed as part of counter-insurgency operations in Chhattisgarh. It appears the groups making the demand mean something like the latter and not the former. If so, then it is a demand fraught with great danger, the most obvious being the militarisation of society."

Even the Director General of Police (DGP), Idashisha Nongrang, has stated that there is confusion regarding the reported approval of a Territorial Army for Mizoram. She said, "We are examining what exactly is approved for Mizoram. As per reports, the approval for Mizoram has come from the Union Home Minister, but the Territorial Army functions under the Indian Territorial Army Act, which is with the Ministry of Defence." But it would seem that Carmel has a much clearer idea than the DGP herself—and that's why he started hyperventilating, calling me a 'traitor'. By that logic, I wonder if he also believes DGP Idashisha Nongrang is a traitor. Perhaps he can respond to this letter and offer more clarity.

I am all for protecting our borders. But I do not support doing so through an armed militia (which is not the Territorial Army) because it carries many risks, which I've discussed at length in my article. What Carmel could have done—instead of

Elections are meant to be a clash of ideas, an opportunity for citizens to choose leaders who will shape a better future. But in many parts of the country, they've become the reverse—a race to offer the best freebies. From free electricity and farm loan waivers to gas cylinders, gold for weddings, washing machines, and even livestock like pigs and goats, elections have turned into a Bazaar of handouts. This is not about generosity; it is about making a mockery of the idea of democracy itself. I call this the 'Great Indian Vote Bizarre'.

A 2023 report from the Centre for Policy Research found that nearly 70% of election promises over the past decade included cash or goods to sway voters. In poorer states, where people are desperate for any relief, these short-term gifts often matter more than long-term plans for better schools, roads, or hospitals. The deeper problem isn't just the freebies—it's the way they turn democracy into a transaction, where votes are bought rather than earned. Political parties, struggling to stand out with clear ideas or trustworthy leaders, are leaning more on these freebies to win votes.

Machinery Behind the Handouts

Delivering freebies isn't a simple task. It takes a massive system of government officials to figure out who gets what and make sure it's handed out on time. But this system is often tangled up with politics. In states like Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, ruling parties paint public housing (constructed with the taxpayers' money) in their party colours to remind people who is behind the gift. In Madhya Pradesh, ration cards with leaders' faces started appearing just before elections. These tactics blur the line between public service and campaign advertising, making it hard to tell where welfare ends and politics begins.

This cocktail of aid and patronage creates "vote banks"—groups of people who feel loyal to a party not because of its vision, but because of what it hands out.

The voter, meant to be the backbone of democracy, is now a customer in the election bazaar.

Heavy Cost of Freebies

These giveaways come with a hefty price tag. States like Punjab are spending nearly half their budgets on subsidies and paying off old debts, leaving little for essential services such as schools, hospitals, or new roads. Tamil Nadu keeps exceeding its budget limits, but that doesn't stop leaders from announcing new schemes before every election. Politicians understand the economic consequences—empty state coffers or rising debt—won't hit them until after the votes are counted, so they continue promising more. This creates a dangerous cycle. States are scared to raise taxes, because it might upset voters. A 2022 Reserve Bank of India report showed that states are collecting less internal revenue than they used to, relying instead on central government funds or borrowing. It's populism over progress, short-term gifts over long-term growth.

Cash for Votes: An Open Secret

Today vote-buying is blatant. Despite being against the law, handing out cash, liquor, drugs, or even gold is common during elections, especially at the local and state levels. In 2021, during Tamil Nadu's elections, the Election Commission seized over Rs 1,000 crore worth of bribes. Political workers distribute cash to voters just before polling day. Most people don't report it—it is, after all, their share of a broken system. Many voters know the money comes from shady sources—often public funds meant for other things—but they take it anyway. For people struggling to make ends meet, a few hundred rupees can feel like a lifeline. This cycle of economic insecurity and distrust in politicians keeps the cash-for-vote system alive.

The government hoped technology would clean up this mess. Programmes like Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), which use bank ac-

counts, Aadhaar, and mobile phones, were supposed to make welfare fairer by cutting out corrupt middlemen. But politics still finds a way in. Before the 2023 Karnataka elections, the ruling party rolled out new cash schemes for women and youth, timed perfectly to influence votes. It showed how even modern tools can be twisted to serve old-fashioned vote-buying. Technology hasn't broken the vote-buying economy—it's just made it digital.

Why Voters Expect Handouts

Why do so many voters go along with this? Education plays a significant role. Studies show that better-educated people are less likely to be swayed by handouts and more likely to vote based on policies and performance. A 2021 study from Ashoka University's Trivedi Centre found that states with higher literacy rates, like Kerala, have voters who care more about how well leaders govern. Kerala, with its 94% literacy rate, sees voters regularly switch parties, holding leaders accountable. But it's not fair to call voters corrupt or greedy. In a country where many people struggle to access basic services like healthcare or clean water, handouts can feel like the only time the government pays attention. The problem is not that people want help—it's that this help is dangled as a reward for votes instead of being a right.

The Dependency Trap

The most considerable harm of this system is how it changes what democracy means. A 2022 survey by Lokniti-CSDS found that over half of voters in five central states expected something—a cash payment, a freebie, or a favour—in return for their vote. Elections have become like auctions, with parties bidding higher and higher to win. Opposition parties, unable to match the ruling party's cash, often make even bigger promises they can't keep, hoping to outdo their rivals. This isn't just about money—it's about the soul of democracy. When politics is reduced to a

game of giveaways, it's hard to have real conversations about fixing big problems like poverty, unemployment, or crumbling infrastructure. Voters are treated like customers to be wooed with gifts, not citizens with a voice in shaping their country's future. Policy becomes a series of flashy announcements, not a roadmap for real change.

How Other Countries Do It Differently

Not every democracy operates this way. In Scandinavian countries like Sweden or Denmark, welfare is extensive—covering free healthcare, education, and more—but it's administered through stable, transparent systems that are independent of election cycles. In the U.S. and U.K., campaign promises often centre on jobs, taxes, or economic growth, though populism is beginning to influence these areas too. India's approach stands out because it uses poverty as a weapon. India's "first-past-the-post" election system is part of the problem. In this setup, a candidate only needs more votes than their rivals to win, even if it's just a slight edge. This pushes parties to focus on quick, targeted handouts to sway a few key voters in close races. India's system rewards short-term tricks. With so many parties and voters split by caste, religion, and region, a small gift can swing just enough votes to win.

And, how do we reverse it?

India's democracy shouldn't feel like a cash machine spitting out favours. The current system rewards short-term bribes over authentic leadership and turns voters into deal-seekers instead of active citizens with a stake in their country's future. To fix this, India needs more than budget reforms or stricter election rules—it needs a new way of thinking about what voting means. Changing the election system to reward broader, long-term plans might push parties to focus on progress over populism. Until that happens, the Great Indian Vote Bazaar will thrive. Parties will continue to win elections with votes that have lost all meaning.

The Great Indian Vote Bizarre

By K.N.Kumar

Tourism Without Limits Community Custodianship is Meghalaya's Best Safeguard

By Nicholas Jason Ingrai

A week ago, I came across an Instagram reel shared by the proprietor of a local tour company. He wrote: "We do not usually disclose the location of any place that is new or not known to many people. There are several places we explore ourselves, but we often choose not to post pictures, make reels, or create content simply to gain followers or likes. This is because, even if you do not reveal the exact location, once a reel of a place goes up on the internet, within a few weeks or months you will see so-called influencers, waterfall chasers, and travellers rushing to these spots."

It was refreshing to read this because it provoked a thought I've carried with me for a long time. Too often, a hidden spot remains pristine until it blows up on Instagram. Then, almost overnight, footfalls multiply and what was once a serene corner becomes crowded, polluted, and in danger of losing the very essence that made it special.

Tourism undeniably brings jobs and income. As a labour-intensive service industry, it has opened opportunities for guides, home-stay owners, and local food and beverage operators, among countless others who rely on visitors for their livelihoods. Especially in our state, where the sector has a significant impact on the economy, tourist arrivals have steadily increased over time, but as with any fast-growing sector, the question we must ask is: at what cost?

The Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023 itself recognises this fragility. Its very first core guiding principle is Sustainable and Responsible Tourism, which explicitly acknowledges that Meghalaya lies in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot and therefore requires thoughtful care. Under this, the Policy speaks of respecting the carrying capacity of destinations. The UN World Tourism Organization defines this as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, and socio-cultural environment, and without an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction."

Yet despite this principle being laid down, what we see on the ground is often the opposite: places are being pushed beyond their natural limits. In many cases, it has been the Dorbar Shnong and community members who have had to step in by regulating entry, setting fees, or even temporarily closing areas to protect them.

A striking example is the canyon-like rock formations at Mawrah village in Khat-ar Shnong Laitkroh block. The spot exploded last year in popularity after Instagram reels showcased its dramatic landscape. Within weeks, the village decided to temporarily restrict entry simply to give the land a chance to breathe and to deliberate on safeguards for the future. It was a firm reminder that while social media may create instant fame, it rarely accounts for long-term sustainability.

This concern was also raised by Emica Nongkynrih in a letter to the editor (The Shillong Times, August 26, 2025). She questioned whether the government, while promoting tourism through festivals, ropeways, skywalks and other attractions, has considered the strain this puts on our infrastructure and people's daily lives. Roads in areas like Kenches Trace, Lawsohoun, or Lumparing are already congested. How will they bear the added traffic and parking pressure from projects like the ropeway? As she noted, even a single football match or music

show can throw Shillong off balance. Now imagine that on a much larger and permanent scale. The bigger question she posed was whether our infrastructure and planning are moving in tandem with our ambitions, or whether we are rushing ahead blindly.

The issue is not merely ecological. It is also cultural and social. Villages that possess these natural assets are rarely involved in planning how tourism should unfold in their backyards. More often than not, they are left to clean up the mess, both literal and figurative, while outsiders benefit from content creation or short-term business. Many travel agencies, based in the city or even outside the state, operate independently without involving villagers. This sidelines communities from decision-making, leaving them as passive recipients instead of active stakeholders. In reality, villagers should be at the very forefront of tourism, not treated as mere beneficiaries.

Khonoma Village in Nagaland provides the most compelling example. Once known for hunting, it transformed into India's first "Green Village" through community-driven conservation. This model demonstrates exactly what we need here: community custodianship and ownership. All conservation and tourism activities are carried out by the local community and village institutions formed under the guidance of the Village Council. Bodies such as the Khonoma Youth Organisation and Eco-Tourism Management Committees are actively involved in decision-making, with the authority to even grant certain permissions or impose fines. This shows how a village, by placing itself at the centre of planning, can balance livelihoods with preservation.

This is why the conversation must shift from "eco-tourism" as a fashionable label to actual mechanisms of controlled and restricted tourism. Eco-tourism, when left unchecked, too often becomes a convenient tagline to justify business as usual.

Villagers know their land best—they understand how much it can take, when it needs rest, and what rules are necessary to protect it.

Community custodianship, then, is not just about conservation but also about empowerment, ensuring that those who live closest to the land are also its strongest defenders, economically and socially. Meghalaya does not need to look far for proof: Mawlynnong village has successfully managed tourism growth while maintaining its environmental standards, with systematic measures like visitor counters at entrances, rules explained to tourists, and robust waste management.

The state already has the policy framework, successful regional examples, and strong community structures to build on. The path forward lies in trusting communities, so that tourism benefits both the land and local livelihoods, rather than being driven by external promotion at the expense of people and the environment.

Initiatives like the Tourist Buddy Scheme, launched by the Tourism Department in 2024, are encouraging in this regard, especially as they engage local youth. Yet their impact will depend on how far communities are truly given the authority to guide tourism, rather than merely participate. The scheme is currently rolling out at select prime locations, but Meghalaya has numerous tourist spots, many of them in remote areas. Scaling it will be challenging, which is why Meghalaya's future in tourism depends on a community-led approach above all else.

going off the rails over a non-issue—is to explain what a Territorial Army actually is, how it works, and why it could be the best solution for the problems of influx and other illegal cross-border activities. Instead, he resorted to immature name-calling.

My proposed solution is not an armed militia (which is not the Territorial Army), but "a regular force, e.g., a special battalion made up of retired soldiers or serving officers from the police, stationed at vulnerable locations at all times. If need be, there should be a recruitment drive, and the people selected should have the same pay and benefits as any regular armed service. This will not only create good local jobs but also ensure that society is not militarized" (extracts from my article).

Hence I request Carmel to please read my article again, and then show readers where exactly I've said I'm against the idea of a Territorial Army. Maybe I've written something I'm unaware of. If not, will he apologize for calling me a 'traitor' just because he misread/misinterpreted what I wrote?

Yours etc.,
Bhogtaram Mawroh,
Via email

Urgent Flyover needed to end flooding

Editor
Though your esteemed daily I would like to draw the attention of both the Governments of Assam and Meghalaya to the perennial

problems of flooding faced by commuters from Jorabat to Khanapara and beyond on both sides of the road. This portion of the highway is inundated after heavy rains and the rises up to about 5ft in height and can submerge small vehicles, not to speak of the hazards caused to pedestrians. As a result of such flooding vehicles are stuck in a jam sometimes for 4-5 hours. The flyover constructed on one side caters to the commuters and transporters moving towards upper Assam. But the roads that are submerged are a regular nightmare for the people of Meghalaya as well as those of lower Assam, Mizoram, Tripura etc.

Why can the Government of Assam and Meghalaya urgently take up the issue with NHAI to build a flyover on the flood prone areas which are frequent in nature. The issue should be taken up on a war footing to eradicate this problem that is punishing the tax payers, once and for all.

Yours etc.,
S.L. Singhania,
Shillong-1

On brink of garbage burst

Editor,
I chuckled while reading the letter to the editor "Nothing Ever Changes in Meghalaya" by Kynitewborlang Kharakar (ST August 27, 2025) but I also understood the underlying white elephant in the room, or should I say the giant Marten landfill on our doorstep.

Humour has a funny way of softening hard truths, and that earlier letter did just that. Behind the satire and playful tone was a reality we can't perfume away. Shillong's garbage crisis is not new, not hidden, and certainly not going anywhere if we continue to treat it as tomorrow's problem. The stench doesn't just fog our thinking ability, as the writer quipped, it also fogs governance because administrations keep looking the other way—Out of Sight, Out of Mind! I appreciate the wit with which the issue was raised in the letter. It takes a rare kind of optimism and courage to laugh while writing about waste piling into ladders to heaven; and if citizens can turn frustration into creativity, surely our leaders can turn plans into action.

One day while passing by the entrance of MUDA parking, I buckled up my nose to fight the battle with the stench that lay opposite the gate. But lo and behold, the area had been revamped with paint and flowers. As a politician from North India once said, "denting painting." I was shocked and honestly super appreciative, until I realised the garbage mountain wasn't gone at all. It had simply been shifted from right to left. That's not waste management, that's waste choreography. Talk about sweeping it under the rug, we Indians have this problem, sweep our house sparkly clean and throw it into the neighbour's lawn. Who cares, right?

Now, as Shillong and Meghalaya rise in popularity, let us be more sustainable, more mature than the states that couldn't balance growth, which is future focussed.

Not everything has to "Live for the Moment" kind of attitude. Goa and Shimla have had their share of tourist influx; locals did earn from it, but poor management eventually turned into their downfall. I speak only as a mango citizen of this city that I love. I cannot speak for the tourists, but I do request the locals, please don't litter like "Khlem akor" at tourist spots. Carry back your broken beer bottles and trash to dispose them properly at home. Far too often, when I visit these places, there's always a hill of garbage piling up, a beautiful waterfall, and then? An empty Frooti bottle bobbing up and down. We owe it to ourselves to do better. If we take lessons from Goa and Shimla, we can steer tourism here along a sustainable S-curve instead of letting it collapse into a haphazard bell curve.

As for the wise Indian man's words, "Life ek safar hai," let's not make it a SUFFER for Shillong. Let's act like responsible citizens; maybe start by not hurling empty beer bottles from shiny black SUVs and we urge the authorities to clean from the roots up and not just sweep it under the rug, so growth doesn't just look green but stays sustainable and is future focussed.

Your's etc.,
Shivani Pde
Via email

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Land of no tomorrow: The 'sinking' island nations



Small island nations such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Maldives and Marshall Islands are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Rising seas, stronger storms, freshwater shortages and damaged infrastructure all threaten their ability to support life.

Some islands even face the grim possibility of being abandoned or sinking beneath the ocean. This raises an unprecedented legal question: Can these small island nations still be considered states if their land disappears?

The future status of these nations as "states" matters immensely. Should the worst happen, their populations will lose their homes and sources of income. They will also lose their way of life, identity, culture, heritage and communities.

At the same time, the loss of statehood could strip these nations of control over valuable natural resources and even cost them their place in international

organisations such as the UN. Understandably, they are working hard to make sure this outcome is avoided.

Tuvalu, for example, has signed a treaty with Australia to ensure it will be recognised as a state, regardless of the impact climate change has on the islands.

Beyond affirming that "the statehood and sovereignty of Tuvalu will continue ... notwithstanding the impact of climate change-related sea-level rise", Australia has committed to accepting Tuvaluan citizens who seek to emigrate and start their lives afresh on safer ground.

Facing the threat of physical disappearance, Tuvalu has also begun digitising itself. This has involved moving its government services online, as well as recreating its land and archiving its culture virtually.

The aim is for Tuvalu to continue existing as a state even when climate change has forced its population into exile and ris-

ing seas have done away with its land. It says it will be the world's first digital nation.

Elsewhere, in the Maldives, engineering solutions are being tested. These include raising island heights artificially to withstand the disappearance of territory. Other initiatives, such as the Rising Nations Initiative, are seeking to safeguard the sovereignty of Pacific island nations in the face of climate threats.

But how will the future statehood of small island nations be determined legally?

International law's position
Traditionally, international law requires four elements for a state to exist. These are the existence of population, territory, an effective and independent government and the capacity to engage in international relations.

With climate change threatening to render the land of small island nations unliveable or ris-

ing seas covering them entirely, both population and territory will be lost. Effective and independent government will also become inoperative. On the face of it, all the elements required for statehood would cease to exist.

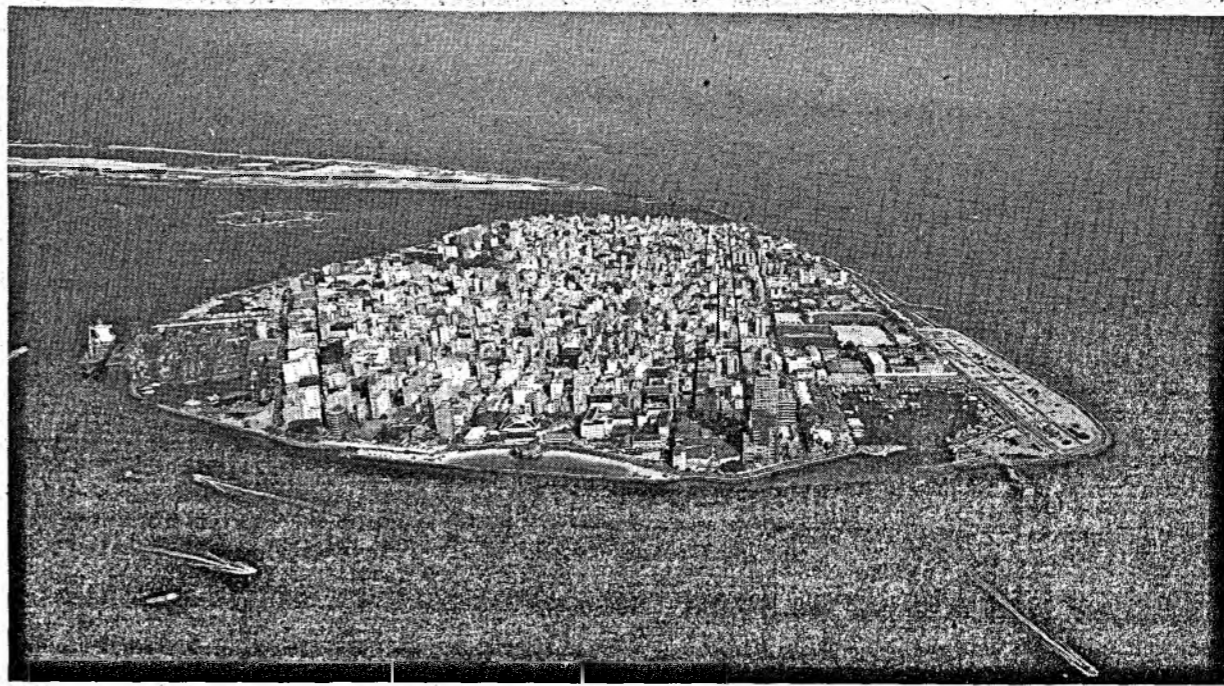
But international law does recognise that once a state is established it continues to exist even if some of the elements of statehood are compromised. For instance, so-called failed states

of climate change. The ICJ addressed a wide range of issues concerning the legal obligations of states in the context of climate change. This included the future statehood of small island nations.

In this regard, the ICJ acknowledged that climate change could threaten the existence of small islands and low-lying coastal states. But it concluded its discussion with a single, rather cryptic sentence: "once

situation of sinking island nations. In other words, a state could retain its legal existence even if it disappears beneath rising seas.

At the same time, a closer reading of the decision suggests that the court stopped short of explicitly confirming that the flexibility of the term "statehood" could be stretched so far as to mean a state could exist even if completely submerged under the seas.



such as Somalia or Yemen are still regarded as states despite lacking an effective government — one of the core elements required under international law.

However, the threats posed to the statehood of small island nations by climate change are unprecedented and severe. They are also very likely to be permanent. This makes it unclear whether international law can extend this flexibility to sinking island nations.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) recently issued its advisory opinion on the obligations of states in respect

a state is established, the disappearance of one of its constituent elements would not necessarily entail the loss of its statehood."

What exactly did the court mean by this remark? Unfortunately, the answer is not entirely clear. On the one hand, the decision seems to confirm the traditional flexible approach of international law to statehood.

In their separate opinions, some of the court's judges interpreted this sentence as extending the flexibility previously applied in other contexts — such as failed states — also to the

The court noted only that the disappearance of "one element ... would not necessarily" result in the loss of statehood. But in the case of sinking island nations it is likely that all key elements — population, territory, government and ability to enter into international relations — would disappear.

For now, the ICJ has left the matter open. The decision points to flexibility, but it avoids the definitive statement that many vulnerable nations had hoped for. The legal future of sinking islands remains uncertain. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 31, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

A square between the Moon and Sun in your solar return chart indicates a year where consistent effort will be key. You'll need to work harder than usual to see your plans come to fruition, with results taking time to materialize. Challenges will appear at every step, demanding patience and resilience. If considering a job switch, make decisions carefully. In business, your dedication and hard work will be essential to achieve your goals. Financially, income will remain moderate, so avoid hasty investment choices. Your boss and seniors will appreciate your dedication, potentially entrusting you with important responsibilities. New romantic relationships could blossom into marriage but weigh decisions wisely and seek family counsel. Your spouse or partner will be a strong motivator, and support from friends and family will be unwavering. Many auspicious events will brighten your year.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings good results for you. Increased involvement with siblings, students, classmates, or neighbors may also be figured out at this time. This could also be a time of mental restlessness. The pace of your life may be a bit hectic now, and if you're not used to it, it could make you a bit nervous. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people around you. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is highlighted. Your attention to the logical world of reason has also been a focus.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. Your home life is especially busy and sometimes hectic. Arguments with, or on behalf of, family members cannot be avoided but conflict resolution is bound to be quick and relatively easy. Excess energy is best channeled into constructive home improvement projects. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual during this period. There may be the need to revisit old, nagging issues regarding personal finances.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Communication, creativity and authority are highlighted. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical. This is a phase of completion and transition. Social interaction is also emphasized. 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 errands, paperwork and phone calls. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your need for a little attention and career matters come to a head. You're called to perform, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regard to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Your mind is especially inquisitive and learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections appeal strongly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are especially fond of the life of the home and family, as their entertainment and pleasure are on your main agenda. There is ample support and unconditional love from your partner. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money. Instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend your cash during this period. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. In fact, some money-making ideas or ventures may be put on hold due to circumstances beyond your control.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You may be involved in lectures, debates and discussions. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or new subjects. You are quite preoccupied with feelings of security and your inner experiences. This is a time when you find your roots and seek a feeling of belonging. Besides

spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and nourishing your inner foundations that support you and your growth. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's an excellent time for entertainment, and fun.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This period brings good-luck for love and romance. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also be figured now. Your power of attraction skyrockets during this phase. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, fun, and a fair share of emotions.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) People 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 symbolic of status. You're called to take on an assignment, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to home or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This week brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to the fore. It's an excellent time to further your hobbies and interests.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The stars promote your luck in service and work-related areas. Your mind is especially sharp, and you are quick on the uptake as additional work comes your way. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Expressing yourself using your writing skills, through the medium of arts or talking to a confidante are ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. You are most likely to express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through an intellectual appreciation of art, cultural pursuits, and literature.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) In addition to your efforts and hard work pay close attention to performance metrics. Your efforts will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You have an increased interest in your own possessions. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, and luxury. Romantic matters are usually from within the local environment close to home, although many romantic short trips may be undertaken for pleasure. You prefer an intellectual and communicative partner.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase brings in happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, increasing travel opportunities, and connections to people of a different cultural background than yours is indicated. You desire to learn and improve your practical skills. You are especially drawn to family life where your affections find expression. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level and tend to be sentimental or nostalgic now. You may now particularly value the aesthetics in and around your home. If things are out of sync on the home front, you will do whatever you can to re-create a peaceful and stable atmosphere.

The 'secondhand only' shopping revolution

As a fashion sustainability researcher, finding the ReTuna shopping mall in Eskilstuna was a delightful surprise. Stepping into this Swedish shopping centre felt refreshingly different — it is the first in the world to sell only secondhand and repurposed items.

During numerous visits to the shopping mall over the last 18 months, I have spoken to customers, managers and employees — all of whom seemed excited by ReTuna's innovative business model.

The mall instantly feels very different to the cluttered charity shops or vintage boutiques most of us associate with pre-owned retail. There is a wide range of products on sale — fashion, sports equipment, household items, children's toys, antiques — and even an Ikea secondhand store selling previously used and repaired furniture.

This is not just a retail space. It is a municipality-led experiment in circular consumption, where everything sold has been donated by the public.

ReTuna was established in 2015 as part of Eskilstuna's climate and waste reduction strategy. Built alongside the city's recycling centre, it includes a dedicated drop-off point called The Return, where residents donate unwanted items. These are sorted and redistributed to the retailers in the mall, creating a low-cost, low-waste circular system.

The model is only possible because of public funding and local government support — a reminder that circular innovation often requires structural investment, not just consumer goodwill.

However, what makes ReTuna so distinctive is not just its inventory but its atmosphere. Consumers describe it as "accessible", "curated" and "convenient". The mall's layout and product displays mirror conventional retail spaces, making secondhand shopping feel stylish and enjoyable.

One shop manager told me customers often mistake the secondhand items for new, a testament to how fashionability and design are used to make reuse attractive without increasing cost. At ReTuna, the clean, calm environment helps make ethical consumption feel desirable and emotionally rewarding. As one shopper put it: "It's not just ethical, it's beautiful."

Retailers use low-cost stock and infrastructure to create visually appealing stores. The result is a

pleasurable shopping experience that challenges the stigma of secondhand. While affordability and environmental values remain central, ReTuna also reimagines what sustainable retail can look and feel like.

DEMAND FOR PRE-LOVED

Consumer interest in "pre-loved" fashion is accelerating, with the secondhand market growing 2.7 times faster than the broader apparel market; according to one recent industry report. Globally, it is projected to reach US\$367 billion



(£272 billion) by 2029.

And it is not only pre-owned fashion that is growing. Another market research report forecasts the wider secondhand products market will reach US\$1.04 trillion by 2035, growing at a compound annual rate of 17.2%.

In a YouGov survey spanning 17 markets, 43% of secondhand buyers favoured in-store purchases, compared with 39% who preferred online (19% were undecided). ReTuna is part of this shift — not as an outlier, but a glimpse of what mainstream retail could become.

This pioneering Swedish mall turned ten this year. It has grown from a local government initiative to an internationally recognised model of circular retail. The mall's success shows that secondhand shopping does not have to feel like a compromise — it can be stylish, convenient and socially meaningful.

Circular retail is not just about what we buy, but how and where we buy it.

ReTuna demonstrates that with the right infrastructure, design and public support, sustainable consumption can be embedded into everyday life — not as a chore but a rewarding experience. (*The Conversation*)