"Never floss with a stranger."

— Joan Rivers

The Shillong Times

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Freedom, Social Media

CURIOUSLY, but certainly, the reach of social media has expanded beyond expectations. The spread of mobile phones with internet links in recent years created a wired community, which has both information and entertainment on their fingertips without resorting to any additional communication equipment. With the Internet having become cheap, unlike in the initial years when the charges were high, an information revolution of a high order has been unleashed. Its reach has covered all segments of the population – the rich and the poor, women and men, youths and the middle-aged and even the elderly, educated population and even the illiterate. Alongside, entertainment videos are also available by their millions – and in one's own language.

Social media's reach has affected not only the impact of the print media but also the visual media and more importantly the news channels; and worse, their advertisement flows too. Some Youtubers on social media have a reach of millions, mint money by the hour, be they social and political commentators, artists, cooking experts or subject-specific specialists. Anyone with a gift of the gab can be influencers on social media. Having taken societies by storm, administrators are becoming increasingly exposed vis-à-vis their irresponsible actions from the village to national levels. What the established media – with abundant restrictions put on them – fail to say, social media is here to highlight. Understandably, however, there cannot be a circus without a ring. Rules governing the social media sector have been sketchy or limited so far. Many 'influencers' get away with their act. Feelings strengthened that "we are a free society," sans governmental controls on governmental criticism. However there are quite a few 'influencers' who stretch their limits. It is in this context that the central government now seeks to "expand compliance obligations of intermediaries with government issued directions and widen the scope of regulatory oversight over online content, including news and current affairs by non-publisher users." The ministry of electronics and IT has invited feedback from stakeholders on proposed amendments – which however are stated in riddles and without sufficient clarity. In sum, the government plans to bring "user-generated dissemination of news content within the regulatory framework governing digital media ethics." The amendment's draft provisions, it said, would apply to news and current affairs content hosted, uploaded, modified, published, transmitted, stored, updated or shared on computer resources of intermediaries by users who are not publishers."

The Ministry clarifies that the government "remains committed to ensuring an open, safe, trusted and accountable internet for all users of Internet-enabled services." The intentions may be good, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. A temptation on the part of the government would be to insulate itself from criticism, which it has effectively managed with the established media by way of muscle-flexing from the highest levels. Social media must be able retain its freedom but at the same time, it is imperative that this medium too is governed by a set of basic rules of public conduct. For instance, no entity should get away with acts like spreading incorrect information, or motivated defamation of those in public life.

On Khasi Identity: State and Social Customs are Emergent and Malleable

By Kitdor H. Blah

According to the social evolution theory of state, people have existed prior to the State, and the State arises out of the need for a neutral arbitrator of justice. Consistent with this school of thought, history tells us that the Khasi people would choose a Chief/Syiem from outside the clans that made up that Hima/State in order to have a neutral arbitrator of disputes. For example, tradition says that the people of Hima Mawsynram took a Chief/Syiem from the Malngiang clan from another Hima, Madur Maskut. The divine origin story of the Syiem clan of Hima Shyllong may also be an allegory to the reality that the Syiem clan was brought from outside the Khasi clans. The Ri Raid was the foundational village state and the Hima emerged later. The Ri Raid was made up of the clans whose economy was situated in clan land holdings. Moreover, the Hima was not permanently fixed, but malleable. It could be reorganized territorially. Hima Shyllong was reorganized as Hima Mylliem and Hima Khyrim. Hima Sutnga was expanded or assimilated with the Jaintiapur Kingdom, which was ruled at one time by Brahmin kings, until the British annexed the Kingdom in 1835 and the King retired to his home in Sylhet. Meanwhile, the Doloi of Sutnga was used by the British to impose house tax and income tax on the people which triggered the rebellion led by Kiang Nangbah. Today we exist in a very different political State, defined as a Constitutional Republic and a union of states, with tribal autonomy. Further, the Khasis in Bangladesh today have a different political history from the Khasis in India. Thus, the Hima or State is not the base identity of the Khasis, but is an emergent and malleable entity.

The culture, which includes social customs, is just as emergent and malleable as the Hima, hence they can vary from one Raid to another, and from one Hima to another. For example, the matrilineal system is not absolute or sacrosanct. If it was either of these, then there would not have existed among the Khasis living in Ri Bhoi, the custom known as Shaw Bhoi, where the Khasi men take wives from among the non Khasis, and have their children take the fathers' surnames. Culture is therefore dynamic, and customs arise out of the changing social dynamics of the people. In this case, the Shaw Bhoi custom emerged out of a need to preserve the clan's lineage, when there was a lack of female members to continue the clan's lineage, to ensure the continuation of the Clan economy.

Moreover, the Khasi ideas of matrilineality and its kur based consanguinity known as 'jingiatehkur' is not based on blood relations or DNA. This modern DNA based interpretation of 'jingiatehkur' is a misplaced appeal to science for legitimacy. This is an interpretation based on modern science which says that offspring of parents who share similar genes from common ancestors have a high risk of 'homozygous recessive genetic disorders.' The simplest proof of this is that Khasi social custom allows me to cohabit with the daughter of my maternal uncle, but my sister cannot not do the same with his son. In both cases, the closeness of the relationship is exactly the same – that of first cousins. Therefore, Khasi custom of 'jingiatehkur' is not the same as the Western idea of consanguinity which refers to a union between close blood relatives such as first cousins or second cousins.

Therefore, like the political state, the social customs of the Khasis may have emerged out of the need to ensure the survival of the clan based economy which is situated on the clan land holdings, to ensure the continuity of the clan lineage and to ensure that the wealth of the clan is not diluted or transferred. The idea of 'jingiatehkur' could possibly be to enlarge the clan economy by recognizing the different clans that emerged from that same clan economy, or to maintain that economy over a vast geographical region.

There is also the idea that the Clan takes care of its own, hence the 'jingiatehkur' could have also served to deepen the sense of belonging, beyond territorial boundaries. There is also the possibility that after a section of the clan wanders off to create their own economic unit, and changes name according to their new geography or functions, the primary clan wants to remind them that they are part of the same economy. Just to take one example, the Kharshiing clan's matriarch was an alien woman who subsisted in the Blah Clan, so there emerged Kur consanguinity between the two clans.

This base reality of clan economy and village states, out of which the Hima or Khasi states emerged, existed in all of what we now call Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ri Bhoi. Thus, it is a misplaced errand to appeal to any kingdom or Hima to legitimize the idea that a section of the Khasi people, namely the Pnar people, are not Khasis simply because they had a political history that was culturally and legally different from the rest of the Khasi States. This is a misplaced appeal to legitimacy because the Hima or Kingdom is an emergent and malleable reality, but the Clans are the base reality of the Hima and the kur based consanguinity between them exists in all of the present day Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and RiBhoi.

Similarly, just as there is diverse political history among the Khasis, there are also diverse social dynamics which lead to diverse customs, such as the above mentioned case of the custom of Shaw Bhoi. But this diverse social dynamic does not just span the length and breadth of the land, but also of time. First of all, there is all kinds of evidence that Khasi society has become more individualistic. The first is private property. The Khadduh is no longer seen as just the custodian of the ancestral property. The Khadduh now inherits the ancestral property as her private property. With the arrival of private property, the Kni or Maternal Uncle has also lost his governing powers over the property. These are emergent customs.

Another major sign that Khasi society has become more individualistic is the emergence of orphanages, nursing homes, old age homes, women led economic units and single mother households. These were all absent in the clan based economy of old where the father was never seen as the provider or head of the economic unit. So, even if the father passed away or separated from the mother, the children were not left destitute, nor the mothers left to lead the household, as the clan economy provided for both. Another major sign that Khasi society has become more individualistic is the fact that the Clans are seeking legitimation through statutory laws of the Autonomous District Council. Another major change in Khasi society is urbanization, where single family units from different clans, village states, and Himas, settled in urban towns. Urban towns became melting pots of diverse clans and hubs of nuclear households. Another major change in Khasi society that is a result of all the above, is the rise of father-led single household economic units, where the father has more say than in the Clan economic units of old. Amidst these changes in social dynamics, the culture was bound to change but for the same reason – the good of the family economic unit.

The debate over whether matrilineality is sacrosanct and absolute or whether Khasis can adopt their father's surname should be viewed from the point of view of the family economic unit, and the well being of the mother and children, in case of death of or separation from the father. On this note, I will only add that the law of the land provides only for the husband/father to provide financial assistance to the mother and children, in case of separation.

In this time of individualism, rise in destitute children, rise in women led households, rise in nursing homes, dilution of the clan economic unit, rise in single family economic units, it is not only a good but a necessary cultural progression that the fathers take up the responsibility over the family economic units. Thus, it is another misplaced errand to seek to freeze the culture in a statutory law and to appeal to that statutory law for legitimacy of the idea that a section of the Khasi people is not Khasi simply because they have a cultural progression that is different. i.e. that they take the father's surname. The Sixth Schedule and the ADC's were not given to freeze the culture, but, to quote Nehru, to allow the Tribe "to grow according to their own genius."

The statement of object and reasons of the Lineage Act claims that the Law is meant to "prevent claims of Khasi status by unscrupulous persons purely for the benefits, concessions or privileges conferred on the Khasis as members of the Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution of India." The Lineage Act has done nothing to this end, but has instead become a stumbling block for the Khasi society to grow organically according to its own genius. It is time for the KHADC to repeal the Lineage Act, and to introduce a law which will actually fulfil its statement of object and reasons, i.e. an Act for Prevention of Misuse of Matrilineal System by Non-Khasis.

A World Within a Forest: India's Hidden Biodiversity Crisis

By Tanveer Singh

Imagine you are a biologist walking through a forest where the ground floor is a tropical rainforest and the top floor is a Himalayan snowfield - all within the same 1,985 square kilometres, smaller than Goa, and packing more species per square kilometre than almost anywhere else in Asia. And yet, entire floors of this building have never had a scientist set foot inside.

Scientists worldwide discover around 16,000 new species every year- roughly 44 every single day. Northeast India, covering just 7% of India's land area, is quietly pushing well above its weight in that global count. In 2024 alone, this one corner of the country gave science three new frog genera, a blue ant unseen in any record since 1902, a cicada with butterfly wings, and a leafless orchid. These weren't just new species - each was so different from everything already known that researchers had to invent entirely new categories just to file them. Like discovering not just a new book in the library, but a whole new section that the library never had a shelf for. And somehow, this library keeps adding new sections every single year. So the question worth asking is: why here?

To answer that, you have to start small - with a single park in Arunachal Pradesh that is, in many ways, the most extreme example of everything Northeast India represents. Because there is not just any forest. This forest has been waiting to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986, nearly four decades on a list, still not inscribed, because the world hasn't fully figured out what to do with something this extraordinary. The one that holds over 1,000 plant species and 1,400 animal species within a single boundary. The only park on the planet where all four big cats - tiger, leopard, snow leopard, and clouded leopard - share the same forest floor, like a neighbourhood where lions, cheetahs, jaguars, and panthers all live on the same street. That simply does not happen anywhere else on Earth. This is Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh - and it did not become this way by chance.

The secret lies in geography - and Northeast India has an unfair advantage of it. This region sits at the collision point of two of Asia's greatest biodiversity zones - the Himalayas pushing down from the north and the Indo-Burma hotspot extending up from the south. Species from both zones meet here, overlap here, and in some cases evolve into entirely new forms here. There is nowhere else on Earth where this particular collision happens at this scale.

At the centre of that collision sits Namdapha elevating from 200 metres at its lowest point to 4,500 metres at its highest, all within the same boundary. To put that in perspective, that is roughly the difference between standing at sea level in Mumbai and standing at the top of a peak in Sikkim. Each altitude band has its own temperature, its own rainfall, its own set of creatures that have never needed to travel up or down to survive. The tropical frog at 300 metres has never met the moth living at 3,000 metres. They are neighbours on a map but strangers in every biological sense.

That separation is exactly what makes new species possible. When two populations of the same animal get physically cut off from each other by steep terrain for thousands of years, they stop interbreeding. They start evolving independently, adapting to their own little world. Until one day, the differences between them are so large that science has to give them entirely different names. Namdapha's vertical terrain has essentially been running a species-making machine, uninterrupted, for millennia - and we are only now beginning to discover the results.

Namdapha does not give up its secrets easily - but when it does, they arrive in clusters. In 2024, researchers found three new frog species in its marshes - Gracixalus patkaiensis, Alcalus fontinalis, and Nidirana noadihing - each so different from anything previously known that scientists had to create entirely new genus categories just to classify them. Think of it like finding three new fruits that don't belong to any existing family - not a new type of mango, but something that makes the entire mango family look incomplete.

But the frogs were not even the most dramatic story from this park. The Namdapha flying squirrel had been missing since 1981 - known to science from a single collected specimen - when a team launched 10 separate expeditions spanning 79 days, shining torches into trees every night, searching for glowing eyes in the dark. They finally spotted it in 2022. A creature that had effectively been a ghost for 42 years, still alive in the canopy. It remains Critically Endangered - its identity still not fully confirmed without DNA comparison against that single 1981 specimen in Kolkata. And this is just one park.

Zoom out to the broader Northeast and the pattern repeats. A blue ant in Arunachal Pradesh so vividly coloured it was mistaken for a jewel - the first of its kind recorded in the subcontinent in 121 years. A cicada in Meghalaya with butterfly wings that the local Garo community had known for generations, but science had never once named. A leafless orchid in Lohit district, flowering without a single green leaf, was added to the IUCN endangered list the same day it was formally described. Science is not discovering Northeast India - it is finally catching up to it. The question is whether it is catching up fast enough.

The honest answer is: probably not.

Five northeastern states - Assam, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur - account for 60% of India's entire tree cover loss between 2001 and 2023. The region producing the most extraordinary biodiversity discoveries in the country is simultaneously losing its forests faster than anywhere else in India. Assam alone has lost 340,000 hectares. Mizoram, 334,000. Nagaland, 268,000. Each hectare lost is a floor of that multi-storey building, sealed shut forever before anyone got to open the door.

Think of it this way. The Amazon rainforest took decades of deforestation before the world noticed - and by the time it did, 17% was already gone, triggering droughts across South America, disrupting rainfall patterns thousands of kilometres away, and pushing the entire ecosystem toward a tipping point it may never recover from. Northeast India is not the Amazon. It is smaller, quieter, and receives a fraction of the attention. That is precisely what makes it more vulnerable, not less.

The leafless orchid named and endangered on the same day was not an anomaly - it was a pattern. The Namdapha flying squirrel survived 42 years as a ghost because its forest was intact enough to hide it. That condition is no longer guaranteed. Somewhere in the unexplored altitude bands above 1,500 metres, there are creatures that science has not named yet, calling from marshes that no researcher has waded into. Some of them may disappear before anyone gets the chance.

Northeast India is not waiting to be discovered. It has been here all along - producing life that the rest of the world has no words for. The question is no longer why here. The question is how much longer.

(Tanveer Singh is First year BTech Student, Plaksha University, Mohali)

Letters to the Editor

Reflections on the Shillong International Film Festival

Editor,

The recently concluded Shillong International Film Festival is a welcome and much-needed initiative for Meghalaya. As highlighted in its vision, the festival aims to create a platform for cinematic exchange, celebrate regional and global storytelling, and nurture a film culture within the state. Such intent is both timely and important, especially in a region where access to diverse cinema remains limited. It was heartening to see audiences gathering over three days to engage with films beyond mainstream viewing.

Screenings of films such as The Shape of Momo from Sikkim, Kok Kok Kokook from Assam, and Our Home from Manipur brought depth and perspective to the festival, reflecting the strength and sensitivity of storytelling emerging from the Northeast and beyond. These selections demonstrated what a well-curated festival experience can offer films that stay with you, provoke thought, and open conversations.

However, this promising beginning also raises certain concerns that merit attention.

More importantly, the curation of local films requires serious reflection. A festival, especially one that aspires to be international, carries the responsibility of presenting the best of its region. Unfortunately, some of the local films screened, including Ahor and Kni, were clearly below the standard expected of a festival platform. When placed alongside stronger regional works, the disparity became evident. Such selections not only dilute the overall quality of the festival but also risk misrepresenting the true potential of local cinema to visiting filmmakers and audiences.

If the intention was to highlight local content, the selection process needed to be more thoughtful and rigorous. The fact that some of the films are already available on platforms like Hello Meghalaya further raises questions about programming choices. If such films are to be included, they must represent the finest work available, not merely fill slots within the schedule.

Curation is the backbone of any credible film festival. It is not simply about assembling films but about creating a cohesive cinematic experience that reflects vision, understanding, and sensitivity. This responsibility lies heavily on the curator, who must approach the task with seriousness, awareness, and a clear sense of what constitutes festival-worthy cinema.

Another concerning aspect was the lack of basic festival etiquette. Instances of screenings being stopped before the end credits had rolled reflect a disregard for the craft and effort of filmmakers. Such practices undermine the dignity of the work being presented and fall short of the standards expected from an event that identifies itself as an international film festival.

If the IPR Department, Government of Meghalaya, is truly committed to building a meaningful and respected film festival ecosystem, it is essential to involve experienced professionals in the process. Individuals who have attended, programmed, or participated in national and international festivals bring with them a deeper understanding of curation, audience engagement, and the ethos of festival culture. Their involvement would ensure that the festival evolves with credibility and purpose.

The Shillong International Film Festival is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. But for it to grow into a platform of significance, it must be guided by informed choices, respect for cinema, and a commitment to quality.

Yours etc.,
Bamutlang Nongpiur,
Via email

The Epstein Files Fallout

Editor,

Without a second thought, I believe people everywhere stand in firm solidarity with Salil Gewali in response to his recent letter on the Epstein Files. People across the world, I firmly feel, join him in condemning, in the strongest possible terms, the heinous acts exposed through the Epstein files—acts that have shockingly implicated individuals once held in the highest esteem and admiration.

What has now come to light through the disclosures linked to Jeffrey Epstein is not just a list of crimes. It is power stripped of conscience. The most unbearable truth is that children—defenceless and innocent—were reduced to objects of sadistic gratification. This is not scandal. This is evil. The rage people feel today is not only because of one man's crimes. It comes from the sickening thought that well-known figures—people seen as leaders and role models—may have moved around, helped, or gained from a system built on abuse. When figures we admired fall, they do not fall alone; they destroy the trust of many who still believed in decency.

Salil Gewali's anguish gives voice to this shared pain. His pain is the pain of thinking of a child's tears ignored their screams unheard. It is the grief of knowing that some victims lived with their trauma for so long and so silently that death seemed kinder than living. These are crimes that do not end with trials; they leave scars for generations.

Melinda French Gates spoke a simple truth: no girl should ever be subjected to such horror, and that truth must never be compromised. As accusations are now being discussed openly, even when they involve people at the highest levels of power, one thing must remain clear—justice must be fair, but it must not be softened or silenced. When guilt is established, justice must stand firm. Many have been deeply shaken by the mention of people long seen as moral or intellectual voices—names once spoken with reverence rather than suspicion. Whatever courts finally decide, the shock alone is devastating. It reminds us that eloquence and fame can exist alongside moral decay, and that blind admiration is dangerous.

Institutions cannot escape scrutiny either. The United States Department of Justice and every authority responsible for justice must act without fear or favour. If evidence exists, it must not be hidden, weakened, or delayed. When justice fears power, it stops being justice.

In joining Salil Gewali's call, I urge people everywhere to rise in angry, unrelenting protest against crimes committed against children. This cannot be allowed to fade as a momentary headline. Crimes against children must be treated as the rarest of crimes, deserving the harshest punishment once guilt is established. Anything less betrays the future.

This moment will judge us. History will remember whether we looked away, or whether we stood up—loud and unafraid. Let our condemnation be loud and clear. Let our empathy be real. Let our demand for justice not fade. If we fail now, we risk surrendering civilisation itself to darkness.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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

"Family and friendships are two of the greatest facilitators of happiness."
—John C. Maxwell

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Drugs and Mental Health

MEGHALAYA has about three lakh drug users which makes it about 10% of the population. Statistics matter but too often they become just numbers. Society still does not feel the need to discuss why the youth take to drugs or to play a more pro-active role in counselling the youth and helping them to get out of the grip of this vice. Some take to drugs to alleviate their anxieties caused by myriad reasons particularly while negotiating the turbulent adolescent years. Parental expectations without the support system that the child needs especially at home – namely understanding, empathetic, supportive parents who are willing to accept that their child cannot be a topper in class, are what push many young people to seek temporary refuge in drugs.

The absence of a safe space in the home where adolescents can speak their minds and know they will be understood and not judged is what pushes the young to drugs. And once they start it is a tough call to get them back on track. What follows is serious mental health problems. It cannot be denied that life is tough and the young understand it, but, our education system is so bereft of life skills where the young can learn to cope with difficult challenges. Most often parents are least equipped to deal with their children because they don't come down to the level of the child and see the world from their points of view and through their lenses. Counsellors and educators in Meghalaya share their concerns about young people who struggle with depression, anxiety disorders, low self-esteem especially when they see others in the class easily imbibing the lessons taught while they struggle to understand the same. As a result, those who fall through the cracks tend to withdraw and isolate themselves from the peer group. From then on if that youth is not counselled he/she will be on a downhill mental slide. The young confess that they use drugs to cope with academic pressure, with identity (transgenders), broken love affairs and parental pressure. In a sense, parents of today need counselling on how to parent their children without driving them round the bend.

The problem with drug addiction is that it pushes the dependent to commit other crimes to support the addiction. Policing alone does not help. Some senior advocates have stated that drug carriers/peddlers should not be defended and should rot in prison since their aim is to destroy young lives. Otherwise, what happens is a 'normalisation' of the legal rigmarole. A drug seller is arrested, put in jail, gets bail and is back to the same trade. What is important is a societal response to the crises. As of today, drug users are scorned and stigmatised. And there are too few rehabilitation centres to accommodate the large number of users. What's needed are recreational spaces in every dorbar shnong where those caught in this vicious trap can get the right kind of counselling and hand-holding as they trace back their steps to a life restored. Drug addiction does not afflict only the addict. It afflicts the entire society because everyone suffers in some form or the other. Families are afflicted by anxiety and fear and feel helpless even as family peace disappears and the siblings of the addict suffer emotional trauma. It's time for society to come together and address this issue with the seriousness it deserves, else our youth potential is destroyed.

Reassessing Genetic Links in Northeast India: Evidence vs. Narrative

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

When I saw the title "Khasis share a much deeper biological link with the Indo-Gangetic plains," I was greatly intrigued. Upon a little searching, I found that this story is based on the 2026 paper "Admixture and Genetic Connectivity: Autosomal Insights into Indo-Aryan Speakers at the Eastern Edge of the Indian Subcontinent," written by a team led by Gyaneshwer Chaubey, a professor at Banaras Hindu University. The argument made in this paper is that the Indo-Aryan population in Assam, i.e., caste Assamese, has more genetic linkage with Indo-Aryan groups from the Gangetic plains like the Harijan and Kol groups, than the local nearby groups, i.e., Bengali (Indo-Aryan) and Nyishi (Tibeto-Burman). These revealed some very important insights into the history of Assam and the region.

Harijans are what we call Dalits and were traditionally known as "Untouchables." Now, the interesting thing about this group is that although its members now invariably speak the local Indo-Aryan language in the Gangetic plains, genetically they are more related to Dravidian speakers. There are already papers that reveal how Indo-Aryan ancestry (i.e., ancestry connected to the Steppe in Central Asia) is much higher among the upper castes, while South Asian ancestry (i.e., more Dravidian-related) is greater among the lower castes like the Dalits. So, when the Indo-Aryan people arrived in South Asia, they already had a rudimentary caste system, but there was some mixing with the local population. But around 2,000 years ago, this mixing largely ceased, leading to the highly endogamous caste system seen today, where people married within their own caste. 'Who We Are and How We Got Here (2018)' by David Reich is an incredible book for understanding the evolution of the genetic landscape of India and the ossification of the caste system. However, as the system hardened, it also created the danger of recessive genetic disorders becoming more common within a given group.

In hospitals in Tamil Nadu, before administering anesthesia, doctors would ask patients their caste. This is because it has been discovered that the Chettiyar caste, which is a Vaishya or trading caste, can be fatally allergic to anesthetic agents. This particular community also has an infertility problem. All of this has been connected to the practice of consanguineous marriage, where a boy can marry his mother's brother's daughter, his father's sister's daughter, or even his sister's daughter. This has led to the transmission of genetic disorders that have become common within the group, a pattern often seen in communities that marry within their own group.

While the caste system has created the danger of genetic disorders persisting within a population, it also froze the country's demographic legacy. In other words, it is possible to identify which genetic lineage a certain caste or group belongs to. No particular group can claim to be genetically pure, but the proportions of different lineages vary. In the case of Harijans and other lower castes, they have less Indo-Aryan ancestry. But as one goes higher up the caste ladder, the proportion of Indo-Aryan ancestry becomes more prominent. So, I am surprised that this group is being considered Indo-Aryan. But maybe this group was from a time when mixing between Indo-Aryan groups and the local population was still happening. The time period of around 2,000 years makes this possibility more plausible.

> ***"The other group, Kol, is an Austroasiatic-speaking indigenous tribal group. They are related to other Munda populations, and historically the term was used for non–Indo-Aryan groups found in the Chotanagpur plateau, where they are still found today."***

The other group, Kol, is an Austroasiatic-speaking indigenous tribal group. They are related to other Munda populations, and historically the term was used for non–Indo-Aryan groups found in the Chotanagpur plateau, where they are still found today. The term "Kola" is in fact mentioned in the Rig Veda, the oldest Hindu scripture, composed in the Punjab region between 1500 and 1000 BCE. This was the period when Indo-Aryan groups had arrived in India. This suggests that Austroasiatic groups were found as far as Punjab, where they came into contact with Indo-Aryan groups. The many Austroasiatic words that have been adopted into Sanskrit, is proof of interaction between the two groups. So, unless there is another caste group known as Kol (there is in fact such a caste) it is surprising that this group is considered Indo-Aryan. Yes, at one point in time, they were in the Gangetic plains, but they were not Indo-Aryan.

Now, coming back to the paper, it argues that Indo-Aryan–speaking groups in Assam have greater affinity with other Indo-Aryan groups in North India than with surrounding groups from the Northeast. That does not mean there was no admixture with local groups that have greater affinity with East and Southeast Asian communities. In fact, about 24% of the ancestry comes from the latter group. This appears to have taken place between 2,000–1,500 years ago. This mixing, however, is much more recent compared to similar mixing that happened much earlier. This is reflected in the passage: "Interestingly, this proportion closely resembles that of Austroasiatic (Mundari) populations, although the timing of admixture in the Assamese Indo-Aryan group is considerably later than that of the Austroasiatic populations."

There are a few things this passage says. First, a similar mixture happened among Austroasiatic people and the local population. But the group mentioned here is Munda, not Khasi. Secondly, this mixture is older. This claim comes from an earlier 2019 paper, "The Genetic Legacy of Continental-Scale Admixture in Indian Austroasiatic Speakers" by Kai Tätte, which is cited in the 2026 paper. When you read the 2019 paper, the admixture was not between the Munda and Indo-Aryans, but with Dravidian speakers from Kerala, and it occurred between 2,000–3,800 years ago. This date is important because it was around 4,000 years ago that the Khasi and Munda shared a last common ancestor, suggesting that this was the point at which the two groups became distinct from each other. This was also the same period when settlements began to develop around Lum Sohpetbneng, relying most probably on the stone tools produced in Myrkhan as discovered by Marco Mitri, a historian from NEHU. What is important to note is that Khasi are not mentioned in the paper, except in a graph for general representation. The story has conflated Khasi and Munda, who are genetically and linguistically related but had become distinct groups around 4,000 years ago.

For the authors of the Chaubey-led paper, there are also some important points to consider. The fact that the Indo-Aryan group that arrived in the Northeast is more similar to Kol (an Austroasiatic group like Munda and Khasi) and Harijan (who speak an Indo-Aryan language but are genetically more related to Dravidians) suggests that they were originally not Indo-Aryan, but rather groups that originally inhabited the Gangetic plains—i.e., Dravidian and Austroasiatic populations. This had already been indicated by linguistic and archaeological evidence, and now appears to be supported by genetic evidence as well, as seen in this paper. Over time, they adopted Indo-Aryan language and Vedic culture. This is the group that came to the Northeast and mixed with local populations there. This is what I can infer from the paper, which in many ways confirms what is already known. In the preface to Homiwell Lyngdoh's 1937 book 'Ka Niam Khasi', there was already inkling of how India was populated by different groups at various time periods and of the place of the Khasi within it. With slight modifications, that picture is now becoming clearer.

So, technically, the paper is not about the Khasi but about the Munda, with whom the Khasi shared a common ancestor around 4,000 years ago. An intriguing point it raises is that around 2,000–1,500 years ago, when the Indo-Aryans entered Assam, the Brahmaputra may have been known by a different name—perhaps Burlung Buthur or Doima, as it is still called today among the Bodo. Kamakhya was still Ka-Mei-Kha, a sacred site for the Khasi, and many sites dedicated to Hindu worship today must also have probably been sites of indigenous worship. One wonders what the Khasi called the Brahmaputra back then.

These are such fascinating questions, the answers to which I don't know if we will ever get. But the paper, "Admixture and Genetic Connectivity: Autosomal Insights into Indo-Aryan Speakers at the Eastern Edge of the Indian Subcontinent," does give occasion to imagine the past and to reflect on how history is shaped by contingencies. It's not possible to go back to the past, but understanding it can help us see how we got here and what might have been. And I am sure there is much more that we will learn in the near future. I, for one, am excited about it.

(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

Are You Between Two Thieves?

As Good Friday approaches, there is one picture that quietly settles into the mind. Three crosses on a hill. One in the centre. Two on either side. And in the middle, a man who had done nothing wrong, placed between two who had.

Now pause there. Because that picture is not just history. It is happening every single day. Not with crosses perhaps, but with labels.

We have perfected a strange art. We do not need proof. We only need proximity. Place a good person next to the wrong people, and we have already decided what he must be. No investigation required. No questions asked. Just a neat little conclusion tied up with a ribbon of assumption. Stand with the wrong crowd and you become the crowd.

It is an efficient system. Saves time. Saves effort. Saves the trouble of thinking.

Sit next to a loud fool at a meeting and people assume you share his thoughts. Smile politely at someone who is known to be difficult and suddenly you are part of his inner circle. Be seen having coffee with a man who has a reputation for cutting corners and your own reputation begins to wobble like a badly made chair in a government office.

And with it come the labels. Liar. Fraud. Cheat.

Words thrown casually, like confetti at a wedding, except this confetti does not fall away. It sticks. It clings. It settles into your name and refuses to leave.

And once stuck, it defines you in the eyes of the world.

The tragedy is not just that people label you. The tragedy is how quickly others accept the label. Nobody pauses to ask, "Is this true?" We prefer, "It sounds about right." There is a strange comfort in believing the worst about someone. It gives us a sense of moral superiority without any effort.

And that is what makes that Good Friday scene so powerful. It was not just about pain. It was about perception. An innocent man deliberately placed between two criminals. The message to the crowd was simple and effective. Look at him. One of them.

No speech required. No explanation needed. Just placement.

And the crowd believed it.

Which tells us something uncomfortable about ourselves. We are not just victims of labels. We are also enthusiastic distributors of them. We see three crosses and quickly form a conclusion. We rarely ask who the man in the middle really is.

But here is where the connection becomes beautifully clear.

Jesus did not fight the label in that moment. He did not shout from the cross, "Excuse me, wrong grouping." He did not request a rearrangement for clarity. He did not issue a statement distancing himself from the two on either side.

He stayed.

And that is perhaps the most difficult thing for us to understand. When wrongly labelled, our first instinct is to protect. To explain. To defend. To correct every whisper and every raised eyebrow. We want to fix the picture immediately.

He did not.

He allowed the world to misunderstand him completely. For a while, the label seemed to win. The scene looked convincing. Three criminals, one in the middle. Case closed. But only for a while. Because truth does not depend on public opinion. It depends on what is real. And what is real has a strange, stubborn habit of rising.

On the third day, everything changed.

The same man who had been visually grouped with thieves was revealed for who he truly was. Not by argument. Not by debate. Not by a cleverly crafted statement. But by resurrection. By reality breaking through perception. The label placed on him could not survive the truth of who he was.

And that is where this story stops being history and starts becoming hope.

Because many of us have been there. Not on a hill with crosses, but in rooms, offices, societies, WhatsApp groups and whispered conversations. Our names dropped casually into stories we were never part of. Our intentions misunderstood. Our character questioned. Our identity quietly rewritten by others who found it easier to label than to learn.

For a season, the label may stick. People may believe it. The picture may look convincing. You may even begin to doubt yourself, which is the most dangerous part of all. When you start seeing yourself through the eyes of those who misunderstood you, the label has done its deepest damage.

But it is temporary.

Because just as that cross could not define Jesus, neither can a label define you. Position does not determine identity. Company does not rewrite characters. What you are remains what you are, whether the world recognises it or not.

And if you remain steady, if you refuse to become what you have been called, if you hold on quietly to truth without turning bitter or defensive, there will come a moment when what is real rises above what was said.

It may not be dramatic. There may be no applause. But clarity has a way of arriving. Slowly perhaps, but surely. People begin to see again.

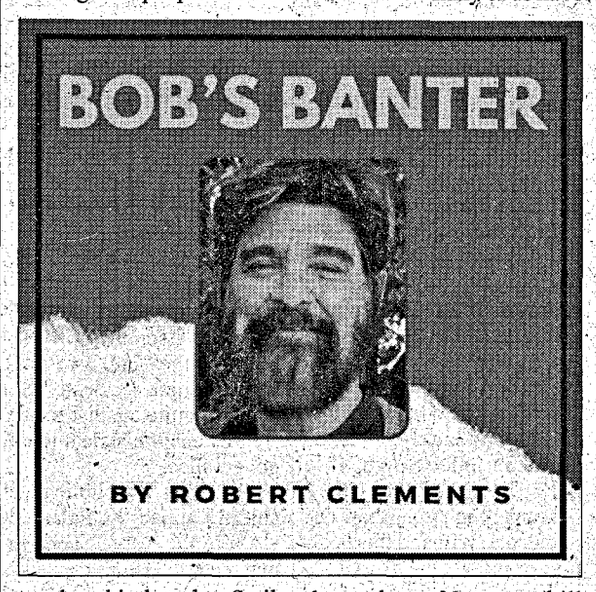
And when they do, the labels fall away, not because you fought them, but because they could not survive the truth.

So if today you find yourself placed between two thieves, resist the urge to panic. Do not scramble to rearrange your position. Do not spend your energy chasing every opinion.

Stay who you are. Because the world may place you anywhere it chooses. But it cannot keep you there.

Not if you are true. Not if you are real. Not if, like Him, what you are has the power to rise…!

(If you would like to read Bob's Banter everyday. It can be sent to you through Whatsapp every morning. Just send your name and phone number to bobsbanter@gmail.com)



Letters to the Editor

Why Destroy Ward's Lake & Other Heritage Sites?

Editor,

Every morning, as I go for a walk along Ward's Lake, I am appalled to see the state to which the lake and its grounds have been reduced. Gone are the days of calm serenity and tranquility that once greeted visitors upon entering; today, it is turning into an exhibition site. There seems to have been a steady decline in the upkeep of the lake over the past few years.

Today, the lake has become a permanent venue for fairs and exhibitions. Its grounds have been dug up, with lawns and flower beds reduced or replaced by multi-coloured gym equipment and temporary structures for events. As soon as one event concludes, preparations for the next begin, with such activities occurring throughout the year.

Surprisingly, the boundary grills have also been covered with hessian sheets, preventing people from even catching a glimpse inside. Large iron sheets have been erected at the entrance, desecrating the lake's old heritage look. The buildings of Shillong Club seem to be encroaching closer each day. Meanwhile, plans to repair and restore the old bridge are gathering dust.

If an exhibition site is truly needed, why is the land opposite the entrance—once part of the Deputy Commissioner's compound—being developed into another commercial complex instead of being used for exhibitions or as a parking space?

Somewhere, our policies and planning appear to be destroying the legacy we have inherited. We seem to be in a selling spree. First, it was the pristine Umiam Lake, and soon Ward's Lake and Lady Hydari Park may also be at risk. The old botanical garden exists only in name and has become a safe haven for stray animals.

This is a tragedy unfolding before our very eyes, and sadly, there is little public outcry. Mature trees—some perhaps centuries old—are being cut down in the heart of the city. Heritage sites are being converted into commercial projects, and laws and regulations are being diluted to allow multi-storeyed buildings to come up in every corner. Commercial structures are being permitted within residential areas, and public spaces are increasingly being converted for commercial use.

At this rate, it will not be long before the few remaining old characteristics of Shillong—which we all cherish so deeply—are lost forever. Although the government may seem indifferent, concerned citizens must continue to raise their voices so that such policies can be reconsidered and halted. We cannot allow the heritage of Shillong to disappear forever.

Yours etc
B. Dutta.
Shillong-1

Public panic over LPG KYC in wartime

Editor,

War in Western Asia has put people across the country on edge. Well, an advisory from the District Commissioner's office in Shillong about e KYC and Digital Authentication Compliance (DAC) has only added fuel to the fire, pushing an already tense public into near-panic. So much so that, for several days, many have been rushing to stand in line since early morning outside the offices of gas agencies in the town. Intermittent rain did not dampen their determination to complete the mandatory compliance procedures. In several instances, people have had to stand in queues for over 5 to 6 hours, often with little clarity about the process or timelines. Some also complained about the snappy behaviour of office staff, who lose their cool when consumers make humble queries about authentication. For elderly citizens, daily wage earners, and those with health concerns, the ordeal is extremely stressful. Needless to say, one single day spent in a queue often means a day's livelihood lost.

Keeping in view the severe trouble faced by consumers, I urge the agencies to arrange e-KYC authentication at the "cylinder delivery points," using laptops, with internet connectivity obtained from nearby houses on a nominal payment. Yes, mobile verification units or temporary help desks in localities would make life much easier, eliminating overcrowding at agency offices. This would save poor consumers from needless suffering and harassment.

Also, if possible, the honourable DC's office may consider issuing a notification to "defer KYC hassles" for another couple of months until the situation arising from the war is resolved. Come what may, the public should not suffer.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Cyber Security Advisory Requires Public Attention

Editor,

As we are already witnessing rising cases of cyber fraud through messages on our mobile phones, another advisory issued by the Government of India's agency, CERT-In, on 26 March 2026, deserves serious public attention. It highlights significant vulnerabilities found in Apple devices such as iPhones, iPads, Macs, and Apple Watches.

This may appear to be a routine technical warning, but it concerns the safety of personal and financial information that most of us store on our devices. Today, our mobile phones and computers are not just communication tools—they often contain banking and other sensitive details, official documents, personal photos, passwords, and identity-related data. If such information is exposed, it may lead to financial loss, identity theft, and long-term misuse.

The advisory indicates that cyber attackers may exploit these weaknesses to bypass security systems, gain unauthorized access, and even interfere with device functions. More worrying is that such attacks can happen silently, without the user's knowledge, until harm has already been caused.

In this situation, it would be wise for all of us to remain cautious. Many people tend to ignore software updates, thinking they are unnecessary or time-consuming. However, these updates are released specifically to fix such security issues. Ignoring them is similar to leaving one's door unlocked.

I feel it is important for us to update our devices without delay, Avoid Clicking on Unknown Links, install apps only from trusted sources, and use strong passwords along with available security features. Such advisories should be taken seriously, and timely action can help prevent avoidable risks.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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

C M K

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Trump's dilemma

DONALD Trump is obviously tired of the war. Clearly he has limited options – and worse, Iran is fighting fit despite major losses it suffered to its key installations and the loss of some of its top governmental functionaries in missile hits. On Thursday, when Trump addressed his nation, Iran punctuated the address with missile hits on Israel and the UAE in quick succession. A threat from Iran to target as many as 18 US tech-firms in the Middle Eastern region could now be sending shivers down the spines of techies. The warning from Tehran sounds ominous – that, "from now on, for every assassination (by the US), an American company would be targeted." Techies working with the US firms across the Middle East could now be sitting ducks.

Iran is also in no mood to lift the blockade on the Strait of Hormuz, halting movement of ships from and to the Western shores, causing a huge economic impact on the US, Europe and the rest of the world. Trump has hinted two days ago that he might as well stop the war. His threat to quit NATO is understandable. The UK and the rest of these nations are not willing to join the war. This was unlike the 2003 Iraq war that the US waged, when UK and other western powers sided with then president George Bush Junior. Trump's previous statement was that he might end the war even if Iran failed to lift the blockade on the major shipping route. Now he blows hot and cold. A month after the war, the US and Israel have not been able to firmly take the upper hand. Trump's dilemma, and drag, are principally on taking the war to the next stage – namely of engaging Iran in a ground-level fight. Iranian soldiers are among the best trained militaries in the world, unlike the weak military footing of Islamic nations other than Pakistan. American might is principally air-borne through missile strikes, as was also proven in the Iraq war. Luckily for the US, Saddam Hussein's largely demoralized military abandoned their arms and disappeared into thin air in 2003, leaving Hussein to the wolves. Trump, however, has no such luck. A bloody battle on the ground could spell trouble for the President as each body bag that reaches back to the US from the theatre of war would raise a question mark on Trump. The Vietnam War ended in disaster for the US as Americans got deeply upset over the huge casualties on the ground.

Trump, emboldened by his 'seizure' of Venezuela without firing a single shot, waded into choppy waters through his aggressive foray into Iran. While he managed to hit and kill top Revolutionary Guard figures, the US-Israeli joint fight turned into a prolonged engagement, it having entered the second month, hugely and adversely impacting the global economy. Prices across the world have gone up. China has raised its fuel prices while oil, fertilizers and construction material became dearer in India in recent weeks. Trump's speech gave no clarity about the duration of the war – meaning the war's impact on the global economy would be worse.

Politics Consumes Us; We're Too Busy For 'Real' Issues

By Patricia Mukhim

Gauging by the news we read every single day the Government and its enormous apparatus cannot be accused of not working. The Chief Minister and his colleagues are either distributing cheques or some award or certificate of merit in some field or the other. Politics demands optics and politicians have worked around that. They get plenty of photo-ops on a given day. Those in the Opposition seethe with anger because they are unseen except when they fret and fume; shout and bang tables during those sporadic Assembly sessions which come like seasonal storms.

And what about all of us citizens? What is it that consumes us and our thoughts for the most part of the day, other than our smartphones which currently take up so much of our time. I think the algorithm on my phone is wired to the current war; hence every five minutes it gives me breaking news about who bombed whom. In the end all the parties have bombed each other to smithereens but we are yet to see this war reaching its final stages. All calculations by the "most powerful country" and its orange-haired president have gone awry and Isreal is playing footsie with him while pulling all the strings that make this war rage like an inferno.

Closer home we have such terrifying news that shock us out of our senses. Or are we even shocked? The adolescent boy from Nongrah whose body was found at Mawpat six months ago was actually strangled to death by some mentally sick man who couldn't control his rage. He took the life of a young boy just because he told him to do something and the boy was busy watching television. Is that a reason to kill someone, we ask? But when one's mental health is all awry there's not much reason needed to turn violent. And then there's that 16-year old boy who just wrote his ICSE final exams at a school in Assam and had returned home to wait for his results. He left home ostensibly to meet friends but his shell-shocked parents had to receive his lifeless body.

Yes, we are shocked out of our senses to hear such devastating stories yet quickly move on to the next thing and the next because like they say…life has to go on until the next tragedy hits us. We are told times without number that Meghalaya has about three lakh drug users which is about 10% of Meghalaya's population. The Chief Minister reminded us on the day he inaugurated the Shillong International Film Festival that 50% of our youth are below the age of 20. All these data points should make us sit up, take notice and take charge as society. We cannot just wait and throw all responsibility at the Drug Reduction Elimination & Action Mission (DREAM). Sure this programme launched in 2023 is a targeted mission to build a "Drug Free Meghalaya." In its own words, DREAM uses multifaceted coordinated strategy that leverages the combined efforts of the state and local "communities" to eliminate the incidence of substance use in Meghalaya. But let's take a pause and ask ourselves is the word "communities" that DREAM is going to rely on really reliable? Who is the community? Too often we have bandied this word around only to realise that it is but an idiom and not a concrete reality because its suggests that people would automatically rally round an idea. And in this case, they are expected to help solve the impenetrable problem of drug use. Community suggests some kind of unity, a shared vision, goals and action plans and also a spirit of mutual care which is actually a mirage. Groups of people even in the same locality disagree politically, socially, economically and even culturally. Community is therefore more of an aspirational word rather than a reality. Yet we have used this word almost as if communities exist and work on shared goals without the critical community building steps which begins with conversations.

Today we have a plethora of societal crises ranging from mental health crisis, social media pressure, education inequality, unemployment and job insecurity. Then we have climate change which in turn triggers environmental anxiety as new diseases surface and crops fail. There is growing social inequality and discrimination even in hitherto cohesive tribal societies. Now we are divided by affluence and poverty. All these pressures have pushed our young adolescents and adults to drug use and other risky behaviours. Our families are mostly unstable with many single mothers managing single-handedly to earn and feed a family of five or six. For such families, education is an unattainable goal unless Government provides the wherewithal and the kids can study free of cost in every sense of the term.

Add to all of this the identity politics that seems to consume our youth, fed as they on the notion that the "other" is taking away their share of jobs and opportunities, without for a moment thinking deeper that Meghalaya is a state not entirely inhabited by tribals. When the state was created there already existed non-tribal residents whose children are now the fourth and fifth generation and as per the Constitution they have certain rights as Indian citizens, which some of our frenzied youth with an eye on politics don't seem to see. They tend to believe that Meghalaya is a different universe and not a part of India. Perish that thought for reality is a different ball game.

After every election, no sooner has the government been formed when we are ready to throw shoes at politicians adorning the governmental responsibilities. It never occurs to our blindsided minds that we have repeatedly elected the wrong people for the wrong reasons because most of us who knew better, decided to keep our mouths shut and allow the half-baked to shout slogans and songs and carry the day by capturing the emotions of the unthinking lot whose idea about elections is how much money and liquor to pocket during the month-long campaign. Then when the Government is formed we begin to count the loopholes!

And then we are a society divided by religion, by ethnicity (Khasi versus Jaintia versus Garo versus others) and by wealth ranking. The wealthy have their own priorities and groups they share similar thoughts with those that they form a social group. The underdogs have their own groups but these groups are not organised around an issue that the society is grappling with. Drug addiction is spiralling out of control and it is attributed to poor mental health. Yet we don't have enough de-addiction and counselling centres that are good yet affordable. There are no safe spaces in our localities where the troubled youth can share their angst without being ridiculed or judged. We have too few recreation centres where the young can just sit and talk. Not every young person has to play football or basketball. They may have other interests. Talking about our homes, they are no longer places where the young feel safe and free to express themselves because the moment they say something, the parents who are already overworked and carry their work stress home, tell them to shut up and leave them alone. It's natural for children to prefer to spend time with friends or with their mobile phones. For most young people their parents are their enemies because those parents don't understand their deepest angst. In such a situation don't we as a society need a lot of psycho-therapists to attend to the number of youth afflicted by mental health problems? Does the Government treat this as a priority? Do we demand for such facilities?

DREAM may be doing their best but without the collaboration of the people of every locality they face an uphill task. If people in every locality can rise above their differences and be motivated to find a common purpose in addressing the reasons why the young turn to drugs and arrest that downhill slide then we still have a chance of reclaiming young lives else they are doomed to an existence of hopelessness. Instead of the much-touted demographic dividend that governments spout out incessantly, the young will become an economic and social liability with far reaching consequences, even while families suffer the pangs of seeing a family member chained by drug dependency.

So far we have taken the word community for granted as if it can be summoned at will to carry out a defined task; any task at all. That's the wrong assumption. A community is a diverse group of people with equally divergent interests. However, solidarity can be built around shared beliefs, shared values and objectives and the crisis confronting us all today – Drug Addiction – which is claiming young lives, destroying futures and creating miseries in families. Such a community bonded by one common goal is likely to achieve its mission and perhaps lead to better outcomes in other spheres too – politics being one important sphere as it decides which way the state goes – uphill or downhill.

The adolescent boy from Nongrah whose body was found at Mawpat six months ago was actually strangled to death by some mentally sick man who couldn't control his rage. He took the life of a young boy just because he told him to do something and the boy was busy watching television. Is that a reason to kill someone, we ask? But when one's mental health is all awry there's not much reason needed to turn violent. And then there's that 16-year old boy who just wrote his ICSE final exams at a school in Assam and had returned home to wait for his results. He left home ostensibly to meet friends but his shell-shocked parents had to receive his lifeless body.

The West Asia Conflict: Bitter Pill for India

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

As the second month of hostilities commence in West Asia, the world is watching how those who unleashed the aggression seem caught in an impasse from which no easy way out appears and which their egos, more than their strategic imperatives, refuse to let go. US President Donald Trump's telecast statement to the American people, his first since he launched the war against Iran on February 28, did not give any indication of what lies ahead.

Concerns are mounting across India and the world as prolonged hostilities are hammering the global economy, barely getting over the Covid crisis, with no happy ending in sight. Trump's address further raised energy prices and hit stock markets, while fuel shortages are peaking. The war is hitting the common man everywhere, from Colombo, Chennai, Comilla, to Mawsynram, Manila and even Minnesota.

Precious lives are being lost, mostly of innocents caught in the deadly crossfire in countries which are not even parties to the war. While the number of casualties has not been quantified, the Ministry of External Affairs confirmed that "some Indian nationals have lost their lives or are missing."

Scarcity of cooking fuel is pushing people, particularly across South Asia, toward hunger. Livelihoods are being lost among the unorganised labour force while thousands of self-employed street vendors, smaller restaurants and eateries are being forced to close shop, facing a scary, insecure future. For middle class households across India, everyday snacks like 'samosas' or 'dosas' have become scarce, causing an unintended push toward a healthy population!

For those worst hit, it is difficult to comprehend that they must contend with hunger and deprivation because some old men in distant lands decided they did not like the nature of a particular country's leadership.

It is apparent that President Trump did not expect the war against Iran, launched along with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to last this long. His idea was to blitzkrieg Iran's defence and nuclear facilities and, having removed the top leadership there the first night, expect the Iranian people to rise in support of the US saviour. That has not happened.

While ordinary Iranians face death and devastation, the remains of the country's leadership retaliated against the aggressor in an unprecedented and targeted manner to optimise their advantages. The collateral damage has set the global economy on fire, sent fuel prices skyrocketing and wreaked severe damage across West Asia and beyond. Additionally, the uncertainty of when, or indeed if, hostilities will cease is straining international relations.

For India, at every level, the situation has been fraught. From the foreign policy perspective, images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi hugging his Israeli counterpart in Israel the morning before the attacks happened against Iran indicated that New Delhi stood with the aggressor. That India did not immediately condemn the targeted assassination of a head of state inside his sovereign country indicated a level of indecision which does not behove a country seeking a permanent place in the UN Security Council.

It is a different matter that this conflict in West Asia has shown up the United Nations for exactly what it has become; a paper tiger. India's initial reactions to the war also appeared to dispel any semblance of bipartisanship in global conflicts. New Delhi may have begun urging for a cessation of hostilities, but the loss to its credibility as a neutral umpire is doubtless. Iran is a close neighbour with which it has civilizational ties and shared strategic interests, most recently in Chabahar port, yet India chose to remain silent against the aggression even when Tehran urged New Delhi, as chair of the BRICS group, to condemn the aggression and targeting of its leadership.

New Delhi similarly chose not to condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine, but it did issue strong statements on the need for nations to maintain territorial integrity, and PM Modi did tell Russian President Vladimir Putin this was "not an era of war." Now, other than generic statements seeking a cease fire, PM Modi has not publicly told his friends in Tel Aviv and Washington to end the war, although Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian has been urged to cease and desist from targeting other countries. To New Delhi's credit, Tehran's current leadership has chosen to stand by the people of India and allow the passage of Indian vessels through the blockaded Strait of Hormuz, thereby easing the government's fuel procurement worries.

However, India, now a bystander in the conflict, is not out of the woods. West Asia, where the conflict is raging, is of critical importance to India. Nearly 10 million Indians live in the region, separated from the homeland only by the Arabian Sea, and send home close to USD 50 billion annually, or over 35% of India's inward remittances. In 2025, the total remittances from the Indian diaspora totalled USD 135 billion, around 4% of India's GDP. These contributions exceeded foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, and amounted to over 40% of India's trade deficit. According to the 'Economist,' around 38% of the amount sent by Indian citizens overseas comes from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. The region is critical for India's trade, energy security and strategic interests.

New Delhi can do little but work the phones with leaders and officials and keep urging a cessation of hostilities, but the erosion and diminution of its global authority has been exposed in a region where it has worked very hard in recent decades to gain trust and goodwill and shore up vital strategic interests.

Other than the huge financial and strategic stress, and considerable loss of face, even more galling for India is the fact that the US has opted for Pakistan to play a mediatory role in the crisis. A flurry of diplomats has been descending on Islamabad and senior Pakistani officials are visiting key capitals, including Beijing and even Ankara, to try and find acceptable grounds for the involved parties to resume direct discussions on how to end the war and control its spiralling global impact. A successful outcome from Islamabad's efforts, if it happens, could make the cessation of hostilities a very bitter pill for New Delhi to swallow.

Letters to the Editor

Telangana Government's Elder Care Law – Not Ideal But Necessary

Editor,

The country already has a specific law for elderly care — the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act — brought in during the first term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Under the Central law, the neglected parents will have to apply to a tribunal constituted by the state government under a sub-divisional officer, who is ranked deputy collector or sub-collector.

While the Central law is wider in its application, the Telangana law is applicable specifically to employees. The Central law is stronger as it bars civil courts from granting any injunction against the order passed by the tribunal. under the law. According to the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India, 2021, 52 percent of India's elderly experienced abuse.

Telangana's accountability law over welfare of government employees' parents reflects a pressing need, especially in a country that often invokes ideals, yet increasingly falls short in practice. The state reports disturbing figure of elderly abuse yet punishing with social disapproval underscores the gravity of the issue

The Bill, which awaits Governor's assent to become a law, will be applicable to government employees, as well as those in the private sector, and aims to ensure a life of dignity, welfare, and financial security to senior citizens in the state.

The Telangana Employees Accountability and Monitoring of Parental Support Bill, 2026 has been passed by the Telangana government, broadly in line with the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. The key difference is that the new Bill expands the scope of the law to include private employees, in addition to government staff and elected representatives. While provisions such as a salary deduction of 15 percent or Rs 10,000, whichever is lower, remain unchanged, Telangana has gone a step further by proposing an institutional mechanism to ensure effective enforcement.

This raises a difficult question: can legislation alone address what is essentially a moral crisis? Existing laws, including the central Act and similar measures in states such as Assam, Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh, have not fully alleviated the problem. Even so, given the scale of the issue, enforcement remains necessary. At the same time, legal measures must be complemented by greater awareness—both of the law and values it seeks to uphold. In an era increasingly defined by nuclear families, and perhaps moving toward greater individualism, what is needed is not just regulation, but a broader cultural renewal.

Under the Central law, the neglected parents will have to apply to a tribunal constituted by the state government under a sub-divisional officer, who is ranked deputy collector or sub-collector. The Telangana law empowers designated authorities, including district collectors, to issue salary apportionment orders and deposit the money into the parents' bank accounts. India is one of the few countries where parents spend most of their income to provide a better life to their children. jobs, nuclear families and changing lifestyles have weakened these traditional support systems. Increasingly, reports emerge of elderly parents living in neglect, financial insecurity and emotional isolation despite having employed children

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Where is the Ward's Lake Bridge

Editor,

The MDA Government has been doing everything in and around Ward's Lake barring the construction of the bridge which is the actually the main attraction of the Lake. Last heard, some local architectural firm had made a project proposal to construct the bridge in a manner that would vestiges of the old while taking on new features. Nothing has been heard of that project and the bridge, which is a favourite haunt for people feeding the fishes there and watching them splashing around because they say it gives them a thrill, has been kept closed to tourists for over three years now.

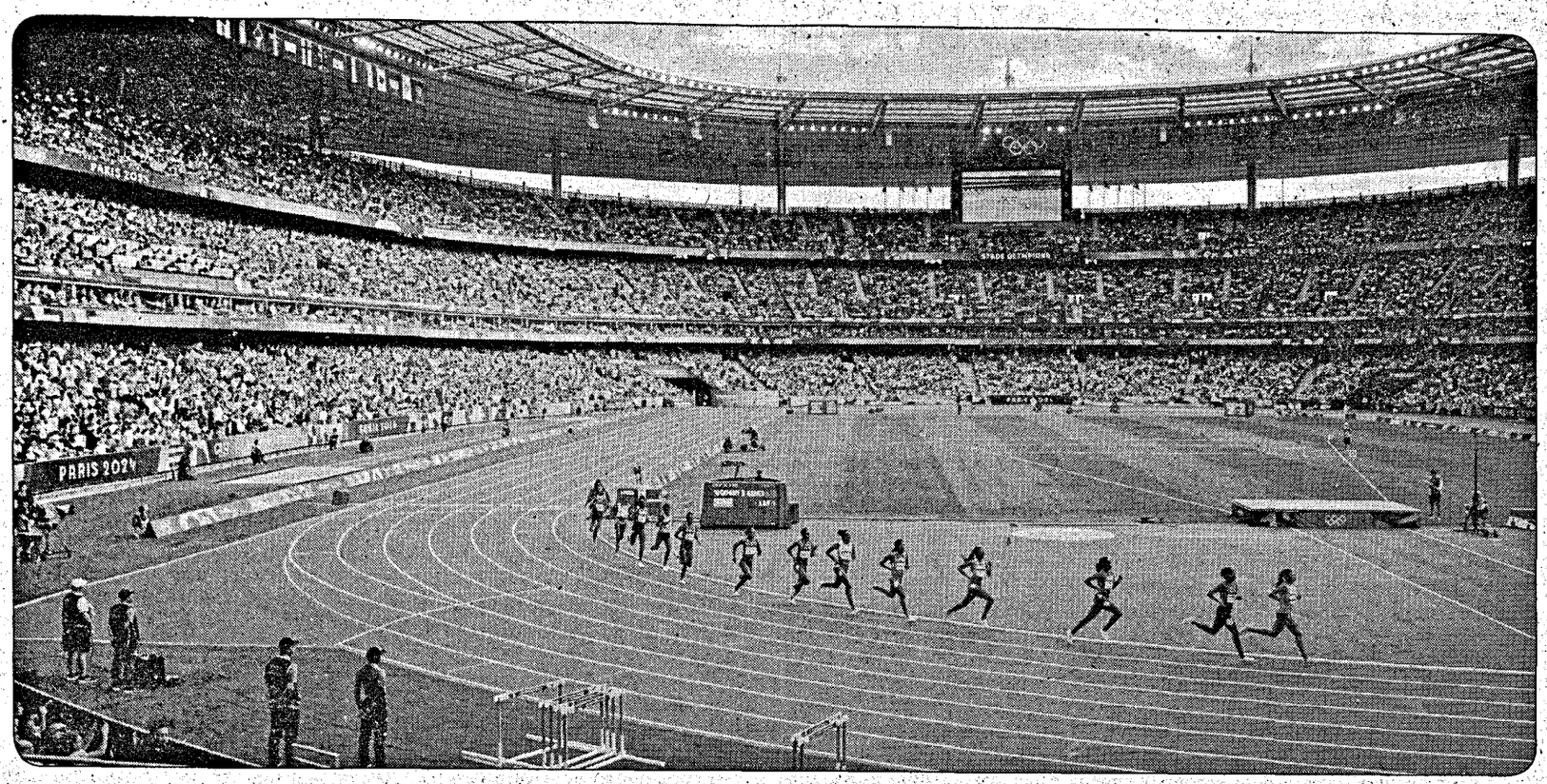
No one really knows why there is so much construction within the Lake area which should actually remain a free ground where people can just sit and relax. Why even have a market inside a Lake? Some people in the Tourism Department seem hell bent on destroying some of the most visited tourist sites. I wonder why and also where they get their harebrained schemes from. Now the Government wants to lease out land for building a hotel right in the middle of the Umiam Lake. The very thought is horrifying because the sewage would then find its way into the Lake and at what cost to the environment? Clearly someone in the Tourism Department is hyper ambitious and that ambition needs to be nipped in the bud.

Yours etc.,
John D Rani,
Via email

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

C M K

Trans women in sports: Genetics of sex are complex



Last week, the International Olympic Committee announced it will determine whether athletes are eligible for women's events by mandating a once-in-a-lifetime screening for the male-determining gene, SRY.

But this new rule raises many questions — about why "female" is being defined this way, whether there is evidence trans women have an advantage, and whether a "level playing field" in sport is even possible.

Testing for sex

In humans and other mammals, the SRY gene determines sex in the early embryo. This gene kickstarts the development of testes and their production of androgens — male hormones (testosterone and its derivatives), which drive male development.

The SRY gene lies on the Y chromosome. Males have an X and a Y chromosome, whereas females have two X chromosomes.

Over the decades, sex tests changed from anatomical inspection to using microscopes to detect the second X in women or the Y chromosome in men. But testing was slow, and misdiagnosed athletes with sex chromosome variation.

So a test was developed to detect the SRY gene directly. This is the test the International Olympic Committee will use.

But it's not as simple to determine "male" or "female" as you might think. The SRY gene activates a network of dozens of genes that promote testis development or block ovary formation. Variation in any of these genes can produce girls with SRY or boys with no SRY.

Indeed, the scientist who co-discovered the SRY gene has warned that this test misdiagnoses athletes with variant sex genes and chromosomes.

For example, some women have an inactive form of the SRY gene that does not induce testis development.

Other women have a typical SRY gene, and testes that produce androgens, but have an inactive form of the molecule that activates androgens, so their bodies can't use male hormones. The SRY test would misdiagnose these women as biological males and ban them.

Likewise, there are men with two X chromosomes who lack SRY but have other variant genes that override it. According to the SRY test they would be allowed to compete in Olympic women's events.

The International Olympic Committee test must take account of these variants.

What is the evidence for male advantage in sport?

Over decades, physiological studies have shown men have, on average, larger hearts, more efficient lung function and greater muscle mass than women.

As for any trait, there are wide distributions that overlap — for example, there are tall women and short men. However, on average, there can be no doubt men are bigger and stronger than women.

Recent evidence implies that these differences are just the tip of the iceberg. Nearly all our 20,000-odd genes are not on the Y chromosome and are shared by both sexes.

But research in 2017 shows that nearly one-third of our 20,000 genes act differently in men and women. Not just in reproductive tissues, but in heart, lungs, brain — everywhere. The same sex differences are seen in monkeys and are apparent before birth.

In three kinds of muscle cells, 2,100 genes work differently in men and women. So sex differences are much more profound than we had appreciated.

Traditionally, these differences have been attributed to the powerful effects of androgens on development at every stage — in the embryo, through childhood and particularly at puberty.

But experiments with mice with genetically manipulated sex chromosomes have showed many fundamental aspects of physiology — such as fat and energy metabolism — are associated not with SRY or hormones, but with the number of X chromosomes.

And the ongoing health advantages provided by the Y chromosome can be seen by the negative effects when men lose it in some cells as they age.

So there are major sex differences in function in every tissue, and it's not all due to hormones.

But what's the evidence for transgender advantage in sport?

This is much less clear.

Transitioning from male to female requires hormone replacement. This means suppressing androgens and taking oestrogen, which is much more active in females.

This dramatically changes the body. A trans woman taking oestrogen will develop breasts and more body fat, and lose muscle mass. Her testes will also atrophy.

Trans girls may also take puberty blockers before going through male puberty. These medications stop the body producing the surge of androgens that leads to irreversible physical changes.

So the question of whether trans women athletes have a physical advantage over cis women comes down to understanding what irreversible sex differences took place before and during puberty to organ growth and function, as well as any ongoing non-hormonal differences that might affect function in relevant tissues.

Here the evidence is contradictory, and varies according to when and how someone transitioned. Some studies show significant differences in performance indicators and others don't.

There is some agreement that trans women have, on average, longer limbs, a stronger hand grip and greater muscle mass. But after two years, their cardiac and respiratory function resembles that of cis women.

We have no data on gene activity in trans women athletes, so there are questions we can't answer. Do the 2,100 genes in their muscle cells revert to a female pattern of activity? Do other genes on the Y chromosome protect their heart and kidney function? Does the lack of a second X improve their fat and energy metabolism?

Where is this level playing field?

So where does this leave the International Olympics Committee ban on transgender athletes? Do we need more data? Do we need to modify our thinking? I would expect more data would just confirm that trans women who went through male puberty do, on average, have some advantages in organ size and function that are not reversible by hormone therapy or are hormone-independent.

Even if transition was before puberty, non-hormone effects apparent in the early embryo probably manifest as more subtle differences in performance.

These differences may be slight. But cis women may contend they are significant in elite sports, where competitors can win medals by running or swimming 0.01 seconds faster than everyone else.

Like many attempts to regulate human behaviour, this ban founders on human variability.

Further complicating things, there is already great physical variation among cisgender athletes in the very attributes that make them excel at sport. For instance, variation in androgen levels has already provoked calls to ban hyper-androgenised women and to mandate allowable hormone levels.

This gets a bit ridiculous — do we ban exceptionally tall women from playing basketball? Participation in sport is important for health and social connections. Sometimes it's a lifesaver for trans women.

So discussing alternatives — such as open competitions that run alongside the Olympics, or categories based on something other than sex — remains crucial.

But maybe we need to admit that the playing field in sport can never be truly level. Elite athletes are probably off the charts in many physical and physiological attributes. Is this fair on the rest of us? *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Jenny Graves, La Trobe University

'Star - Gazing'

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

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Mercury on your solar return chart and it will give amazing results. You will receive positive responses from your boss and seniors. Your progress in work will also be good. Your financial condition will be better than before. Your investments will also bring good results. You will also buy some valuable and expensive items for your household needs. You will also get good news related to your job and business. You will also enhance your knowledge and skills on job. You will also receive favourable response for your marriage. Your family will remain on your side and will also support you fully. The talks on marriage will move further, for people eligible for marriage. Your activities will continue in many fields. You will feel better than before.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) You will not deviate from your objective. And you will take life as a challenge. You will be burdened with responsibilities in your job/work but will not feel tired. Your tasks will get completed within specific time frame. You will also focus on your internal strength and need not look outside for support. You will have gains in business. Your financial condition is going to be good. You will work hard and use your entire efforts in earning money. You will give maximum time to your family. It will benefit you a lot and you will come close to your near and dear ones. You can also enter new love ties leading to marriage. You will spend money on luxuries, vehicles, jewelry and house. These things will attract you. Routine work will go on smoothly. You will win people's hearts too.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) It is going to be a hectic week for you. Your workload will increase. You will also get opportunities to rise in your job/work. Along with this, your importance will also increase. You will have good working relations with your seniors. And your colleagues will give you full support. You will remain an enigma wrapped in mystery for others. But you will be full of kindness and empathy. You will also help those in need. You will be much loved too. New work will come to you. Financially you will manage to do well. Your budget will remain under control. You will get support from your spouse/partner. Love mates will have an amazing time. You will be concerned about your family. You will take on more responsibilities than you can cope with. But you will be able to manage the things.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) The time is very benefic and favorable. You will be able to achieve a lot in a very short time. This is the right time to fulfill your interests. You will enjoy good bonding with your seniors. You will also make contact with new people. And will have total control over your business. With your good sense and intelligence, you will find a solution to your problems. You will be able to balance your work and family life. Success will be yours. Your confidence will enhance. You will enjoy good time with your spouse/partner. You will also remain fit and fine. There can be a new addition to the family, that will give you a lot of happiness. You will make all efforts to increase your wealth.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is a very special week for you. You will do something new and will be under no tension. You will be easily able to complete your work with the assistance of your colleagues. You will also have financial gains. You will also have interest towards spiritualism and will perform noble deeds. You will have many wealthy and auspicious days. Your prestige will also increase. You will have new job/business offers. Your communication skills are going to be second to none. Those who are unmarried will get good marriage proposals. You would also like to go to a peaceful place amidst nature to seek some solace. You will be artistic and imaginative. You will also be traditional and fulfill your desires and will also enhance your knowledge.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) You will have financial gains. You will receive new payments. And you will also sign new contracts/orders in your business. Those who are unemployed will get new job opportunities. You will also see a major improvement in your life. You will get support of people around you. You will thus do every work carefully, with a lot of determination and on someone's advice. Newlyweds will be able to understand each other properly and take care of each other. Students will be engrossed in preparing for their job interviews, examination etc. Those who are unmarried will receive marriage proposals. You may become important to someone suddenly. Your self-confidence will be high, and you will not deviate and will also keep on doing your work.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) These are prestige enhancing days. Your financial condition is going to be strong and stable. You will also perform your job efficiently. Your confidence is going to be high, and you will be in total command of situation. You will be able to influence others by your words and actions. Your social life will be active. You will get involved with a person working in your office. You will be able to look after your parents very well. You will be ambitious, but people will still praise you. Those appearing for competitive exams will get lot of success. Your time will be great. You will do prestigious work in politics, society and community.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) Time will be satisfactory. Your financial condition is going to be strong and stable. You will make progress in your job/business. You will also implement new ideas and will take decisions with a cool mind. You will also win praise from your colleagues. You will try to balance your professional and domestic life. Now is the time to pay attention to your family needs too. You will be busy with family work. You will also introduce new schemes in business and get opportunities to increase your profits. You will make all efforts in earnest to increase your income too. Your romantic life is going to be wonderful. Your relations with partner will get better. You will have the power to understand people better.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) It is going to be a pleasant week. You will work hard, and the results will be as expected. New job possibilities are looming large on the horizon. You need to grab them with both hands. You will also solve all your misconceptions. Success in political work will be achieved. Your popularity will also peak. There is no looking back now. Your children will make progress in their work field. Your mental and physical ability will improve. You will come close to your family members. It is time to fulfill your certain desires. We don't get such opportunities time and again. You will be extremely pleased and happy because the work will be finished according to you.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) The beginning and end of the week is going to be particularly good. You will make new contacts and have good gains. Your financial condition will keep getting better. A special person will come into your life all of a sudden leading to a warm and fulfilling relationship. You need not take unnecessary risks in your job. You will be worried about the family issues. You can get trapped in any trouble. The colloquial position between the father and son will remain. It is time to introspect and think deeply about your life in general and how you want to make progress further. You will make efforts to take care of children's career. Students will focus on their studies. You will also be involved in a wedding program. You will have satisfaction in job.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) It is going to be a wonderful week for you. There is going to be a possibility of business development. You will plan a major expansion in business. You will make progress in your job. There will be a feeling of satisfaction in your professional work. All the career-related tasks will gain momentum, and the new work will also be planned. Success will be with you. In the decisions related to career or business, take advice from seniors. Peace and happiness will prevail at home. Your mate will be a source of inspiration. You will come closer to someone very dear. You may get separated from someone special. But things are looking better for you after a long time.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) Time is gold and you will value it now more than ever before. You will take slow but sure steps to rise in your work. Your personality will radiate and you will be able to leave a mark on others. Your enemies will fear you. You may receive an invaluable inheritance. Your legal disputes will get resolved. And you will be at your manipulative best, but you will be diplomatic too. You will enjoy a wonderful marital life. Husband and wife will share amazing bonding. The work you used to think very difficult would seem too small. There would be arrival of a new person in your life. You will be attending a party or ceremony. You will spend time peacefully there.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) You will be enlightened in your efforts to change your destiny. Time and tide wait for none. You will feel a lot more comfortable with positive developments taking place in your life. You will get good news from everywhere. Relationship between wife and husband will be loveable. Your health will be fine. The relationship between father and son will become sweet. You will perform noble deeds and will engage yourself in social work. You will make great efforts and will be successful in accomplishing top position in any competition. In matters related to love and romance, you will get success. Students will work hard. You should work wisely and carefully on many subjects.

As US President Trump orders UFO data release, a question beckons:

WHAT WOULD ALIENS THINK OF US?

For generations, human beings have wondered: What would alien life from another planet be like? But we rarely ask the opposite: What would they think of us? It's a question that can produce some, well, uncomfortable answers if you happen to be an earthling.

"If I were looking at Earth from a distance, I would be pretty disappointed," theoretical physicist Avi Loeb says. "Most of our investing is dealing with conflicts to prevent other people from killing us or us killing others. Look at the Ukraine war over a little bit of territory. That is not a sign of intelligence." The debate on whether little green men or UFOs are among us escalated in February when former President Barack Obama, responding to a podcaster's question, said aliens are "real," but he "hasn't seen them" and "they're not being kept at Area 51." President Donald Trump later announced on social media that he was directing release of government files because of "tremendous interest." Stepped-up interest in UFOs also is swirling as the United States heads back toward the moon with Wednesday's launch of NASA's Artemis II mission. The four astronauts aboard will do a fly-around of the moon before returning to Earth.

In a world riven by war, civil unrest, climate change and divisiveness, it's easy to wonder what newcomers to Planet Earth might make of us and our struggles. Whatever the case, well over a majority of Americans echo the sentiment of the slogan from "The X-Files": "The truth is out there." A 2021 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center showed about two-thirds of Americans said their best guess is that intelligent life exists on other planets. About half of U.S. adults said UFOs reported by people in the military are "definitely" or "probably" evidence of intelligent life outside Earth.

"We don't want to think this is the only place in this extraordinarily and incomprehensibly large universe where life and intelligence and even technology have emerged," says Bill Diamond, president and chief executive of the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California.

"It sort of says about humans, 'We don't want to be alone.'"

Something is up there. But what?

Americans have been fascinated by the thought of life outside this planet following the recovery of debris in 1947 near Roswell, New Mexico. The military initially said the material was from a flying disc, only to reverse course and tell the public it was from a weather balloon.

Hollywood ran with it. Flying saucers, little green men and eventually humanoid gray aliens became part of popular culture. April 5 even is celebrated annually throughout the iconic "Star Trek" franchise as "First Contact Day" to mark the date in 2063 when humankind, in "Trek" canon, first made contact with Vulcans.

Much in the popular culture suggests any aliens might be aggressive. Priscilla Wald, who teaches about science fiction at Duke University, has a theory as to why.

"It seems to me it's a reflection on who we are, that we're projecting onto aliens the way we treat each other," Wald says. "So the aliens are coming down, they want to conquer us, they're violent. Who does that sound like? It sounds like us." In 2024, the Pentagon released hundreds of reports of unidentified and unexplained aerial phenomena. However, that review gave no indications that their origins were extraterrestrial.

On two separate occasions, Debbie Dmytro saw things in the sky over Michigan's southern Oakland County. The greenish object Dmytro says she saw March 1 in the sky over Royal Oak, Michigan, looked like neither plane nor helicopter. Dmytro, a 56-year-old medical professional, acknowledges that it could have been some type of commercial or delivery drone.

What she saw in 2023 in the same general area north of Detroit is not so easily explained.

"Four yellow lights, yellowish golden lights and they were all flying very, very low," Dmytro remembers. She says the lights were about 100 feet (30 metres) up at their nearest.

"I've never seen anything so low without any noise and flying in complete uniformity," she says. "Is it something man-made? Is it something that's not manmade? Who knows?" Who knows indeed? UFOs, the term for unidentified flying objects, has in recent years given way to UAP - unidentified aerial phenomena or unidentified anomalous phenomena.

"Absolutely, there are such things" as UAPs and UFOs, says Diamond, whose SETI - Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence - seeks to explore, search and understand the nature of life and intelligence in the universe.

"People observe things in the sky that they can't immediately identify or recognize as either human engineering such as planes or drones or helicopters, or animals, such as birds, and therefore they don't know what they are," Diamond says.

Time for the truth

Like so many, Dmytro wants to know what the government knows. "I think there's more information out there. I'm open to learning more," she says. "I have an open mind. It's always about scientific proof." Retired Rear Adm. Timothy Gallaudet says evidence clearly shows there are UAP zipping around the airspace and in the oceans.

"The nonhuman intelligence that operates them or controls them are absolutely real," Gallaudet says. "We've recovered crashed craft. We don't know if they're extraterrestrial in origin." Gallaudet worked as acting administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. He participated in a 2024 congressional hearing on UAP disclosure and says the release of government files promised by Trump is something people find of interest. He just hopes the president follows through.

There are billions of galaxies in the universe and each has billions of stars, so the likelihood life developed elsewhere is fairly high, according to University of Michigan Astronomy Professor Edwin Bergin, who teaches about looking for life elsewhere.

He believes that if intelligent beings navigated vast distances to reach Earth they would make themselves known - despite humanity's penchant for creating chaos.

"I would think that they would look at us like we were crazy ... but they would come out," he says. "I mean, why come here otherwise unless you're going to sit and observe." Loeb, director of the Institute for Theory & Computation at Harvard and head of the university's Galileo Project for the Systematic Scientific Search for Evidence of Extraterrestrial Technological Artifacts, believes in the likely existence of extraterrestrials.

"They might be laughing at us," he says. "They might be watching us ... to make sure we will not become predators, that we will not become dangerous to them." *(AP)*

"The strength of any weakness within us is the degree to which it is feared."

—Guy Finley

The Shillong Times

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Laws, people's plight

IN what comes as a breath of fresh air, Parliament has passed a new edition of the Public Trust Bill 2026 or the Jan Vishwas Bill – which, in sum, rules out jail terms for nearly 800 crimes of a minor nature, encompassing 79 es are now pending before courts – a shameful scenario,laws. Emphasis is mainly on crimes relating to land-grabbing, law violations by motorists etc. It has been stated that as high as five crore petty cas which is made more shameful by the fact that these cases drag on for years. The government keeps enacting laws and occasionally puts itself in action mode to correct wrongs. Over a period of time, things have been adrift, with the parliament and state legislatures acting as factories to produce, reproduce and impose laws on citizens – under a notion that this is the principal job of elected people's representatives.

Other than for the occasional corrections, successive governments blissfully ignored the sufferings these cause for the people. A scenario was created wherein a casual error on the part of an individual could invite a police case, leading to arrest, interrogation and registration of the case before court. In courts, lawyers wait like eagles to extract money from clients. Cases dragging on interminably is also to the advantage of the legal sharks. With a surfeit of new laws arriving by the hour, the result is also that the entire system is getting more corrupted. Courts and judges are getting confused. The Jan Biswas Bill, which could turn into law with a Presidential accent, is laudable. It seeks to avoid filing of criminal cases vis-à-vis crimes pertaining to 317 sections, and instead imposes a fine on condition that a repeat offence could invite harsher punishment. A provision for fine has been removed from 158 kinds of crimes; jail avoided in crimes relating to 29 sections; prescribing only fine and no jail for 113 sections; both jail and fine avoided in relation to 57 sections; no action other than a warning for crimes relating to 63 sections.

Jail terms have been reduced for crimes under 17 sections. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, introduced by the Modi government from 2024, had aimed to modernise the nation's criminal justice system. This was half-baked. Among other things, it introduced community service as a form of punishment for some petty crimes. A total overhaul of the decadent, corruption-ridden system is still a long haul. The government lacks the nerve to act or eliminate vested interests swarming the systems. As long as politicians and bureaucrats can get away with their act, the rest – it is assumed – is fine. Unless the government demonstrates a more comprehensive reformist mindset, things would more or less remain the same. Vested interests have a way of catching up with every situation and turning it into their advantage. Weak-kneed governments and administrators do a disservice to the nation by their acts of omissions and commissions. The Jan Vishwas Bill, delayed as it is for long, is but a small step in the right direction.

The Pnar concept of God

By H.H. Mohrmen

It is somewhat disconcerting that this article is the first attempt to bring our own traditional belief system into the public domain. More ironic is the fact that, while volumes have been written about other God or gods, very little effort has been made to study and understand our own traditional conception of God and deities.

This is an area I have long wanted to explore. Interestingly, I came upon this deeply fascinating subject in the course of my research on *ka Siang ka Pha,* the practice of ancestor veneration in Raid Jowai, supported by the Chief Minister Research Grant 2024–25. This article is just a glimpse of a larger study that I intend to develop into a book in due course.

God and the divinities

At the top of the divine hierarchy in the Pnar belief system is *U Trekirod*, also known as U Syiemblai meaning God the King or the King of gods or the Almighty. Subordinate to Him are *ki Wakhroo Watri*, followed by *ki khon Wakhroo khon Watri*, and, further down the chain of command are, *ki blai najrong cha tbian*. These are the four different hierarchies of god, deities, and divinities but regardless of their rank, all these gods, deities, and divine beings exist to serve *i mon i khe* or the will of *U Tre kirod*.

It may also be mentioned that though the Pnar use the term ki blai, these are not deities or gods in the generally accepted sense of the term. *Ki Wakhroo Watri*, *ki khon Wakhroo Watri*, and ki blai najrong chatbian are manifestations of *U Tre Kirod*, the Exalted One (Lamar D). From the explanations provided, it became clear that while the literal translation of *ki blai* is "gods" or "deities," the term does not carry the same meaning in the Pnar context.

U Tre Kirod is regarded as the Supreme Deity, and all the divinities, along with *ki Syngngia ki Saret* (spirits of the ancestors), dwell with Him at Soorkep, but the divinities represent the Almighty on Earth. At the same time, *U Tre Kirod* is omnipresent and all-encompassing and it is believed that the divinities exist because of Him, through and for Him, to extend His will on Earth.

It is believed that *U Tre kirod* entrusted the *ki Wakhroo Watri* the four divine beings with the authority to provide for and care for His creation. These four divine entities are: 1. *Ka Syiem Wabuh; ka Syiem Wathoo*, 2. *Ka Bei Ramaw; ka Syiem Ramchit*, 3. *Ka Syiem Sngi*, and 4. *Ũ Pa Pyrthat*. They are also referred to as *ki Sookuna Sookujuñ*, the four divine forces exist to serve and care for all the created beings.

Creator and Enforcer of Divine Command

Ka Syiem Wabuh is also known as *ka Blai Synchar ka Nonghukum*, the divinity tasked with governing the Earth and delivering God's commandments to creation. She is responsible for placing and creating all animate beings on Earth (Lamar D). In the Pnar belief system, U *Tre Kirod* is not personally or directly involved in the act of creation. Instead, He delegated the task of creation to *ka Syiem Wabuh*, who, together with other divinities, brought all things on Earth into existence. They were not only responsible for creating everything in the world but also for placing each element of creation in its rightful place.

The other divine servants, known as ki chakri blai or "God's servants," which are spirits and fairies believed to protect people within their respective raids (territorial domains). They are also referred to as ki blai chnong blai thaw or the regional deities or guardian spirits who watch over and protect those living within their territories.

The divinities and spirits, subordinate to *ka Syiem Wabuh is u Thakur*, also called *u khon Wakhroo*, meaning great son though; "son" here signifies a subordinate divine being, not a biological child. In the same way as *u Thakur, serve ka Syiem Wabuh*, he in turn, commands other subordinates, including *u Niangpyrchit, u Niangsyiar, u Niangthyllu, ka Lakachiang, ka Lakawang,ka Langltang, ka Tyrud, ka Tmer*, and *ka Rasong ka Rache* (Lamar D).

These are associated with various illnesses that afflict human families and are collectively referred to as *ki chakri blai* (servants of God). By divine command, *u Thakur* visits the family once in every generation, and when these divinities enter a home, they leave *e tika tinam or i tika blai*, a divine mark symbolising the fulfillment of the covenant between Creator and creation (Lamar D).

Mother Nature

Ka Bei Ramaw provides creation with an earthly dwelling place, caring for and sustaining all living beings. *Ka Rym-aw ka Rymchit* also provides food, drink, and shelter for humans. She is considered to be a spirit close to the creation and whenever there is prayer, offerings or sacrifices, *i e i pyrnah i pyrjiñ* (libation) the first offering is to *ka Bei Ram-aw* (Lamar D).

Ka Bei Ram-aw serves as the Almighty's eye over creation because she embodies nature and sees everything within and around the natural world. By virtue of her closeness to creation, ka Bei Ram-aw acts as a witness to human actions and behavior. When a person dies and is judged, it is *ka Bei Ram-aw* who is responsible for presenting the evidence either for or against the individual. In her responsibility to serve the will of *U Tre kirod*, she is supported by her *ki Wakhroo Watri* who is known as *u Khad*. However the deity subordinate to *u Khad is ka Blai Mynsoo*. The three names given to this divinity namely, *ka Bei-ram-aw*, meaning Mother Nature; *ka Bei Wasa*, the mother who provides shelter; and *ka Bei Wasung*, the mother who provides space for people to farm and work, signify the honour bestowed upon the deity and the role and responsibility she was assigned by *U Tre Kirod*.

U Pa Pyrthad

U Pa Pyrthad is the Thunder God, also called *u Syiem diñ* or the Fire King. He aids in melting, molding, and smelting of iron, and plays a role in recreating and preserving what was created by *ka Syiem Wabuh*, the goddess of creation. The divinities under *u Pa Pyrthad* include *u Biskurom*, and under him are *u Kamar and u Satar* (Lamar D).

Of light and warmth

Ka Syiem Wachit, also called *Ka Syiem Wache*, the queen of warmth and light, is the divinity which provides warmth and light, the essential elements for sustaining life. Her role is to nurture and support the world so that all beings may thrive. The divine hierarchies lower to her also known as *ki Khon Wakhroo ki khon Watri are ka 'Ngi kyllung* the Sun and *u 'Nai kyllung* the Moon, whose servant is *ka Ron Chondi* (Lamar D). It is believed that *ka Syiem Wachit ka Syiem Wache* is the source of warmth and light and she operates with the help of the Sun and the Moon.

Ki Blai Najrong Chatbian

The other divine servants, known as *ki chakri blai* or "God's servants," which are spirits and fairies believed to protect people within their respective raids (territorial domains). They are also referred to as *ki blai chnong blai thaw* or the regional deities or guardian spirits who watch over and protect those living within their territories.

Each raid is believed to have three layers of divine protection they are *ki Ryngkaw ki Wasa* or the nature gods and these are the outermost guardians protecting the entire raid from external harm. *Ki Tawiar ki Takan* the guardian angles is the second protective tier, comprising the guardian spirits or angels of the raid. The third and the last realm of protection are *ki Sooduar ki Sooluti* the four corridors or four pathways; these are the primary or innermost guardians who safeguard the settlement. They are located in the directions of the four winds and are therefore associated with the four pathways or gateways leading into the Raid. The four guardians protecting Jowai are *u Mooralong, u Mookhaï, u Mootong*, and *u Moosniang*. In addition, there are also spirits that dwell in sacred groves, known as *ki khloo blai / khloo langdoh*.

This belief does not imply that people worship rivers, hills, or forests themselves; rather, they revere the spirits that inhabit these natural elements. These are the divinities that *U Tre Kirod* ordained to protect His creation, but there are also internal forms of protection present at the household level.

Ki Blai Ïung Blai Sem

These divinities are belief to reside at the different parts of the *Ïung Blai*. Within the Tre Thlong room in every *Ïung Blai dwell u Biskurom, ka Kpong ka Pyrtuh, ka Kani Pati,* and *ka Ko Pati*. These spirits guard and protect the members of the family, which is why they are called ki blai ïung blai sem, or household deities. These tutelary deities protect all those who belong to the clan.

In conclusion, I believe that to understand the Pnar, one needs to understand their traditional religion, and I owe it to those I interviewed, as well as to all who continue to follow the Niamtre religion. They are the keepers of these ancient traditions and without them we would have lost all this profound knowledge.

The Digital Diet: We Are What We Scroll

By Danny K. Rajee

I want you to do something for me. Right now, before you read another word — think about the last ten minutes of your life. What did you look at? A reel of someone's vacation you'll forget by tomorrow? A news headline that made your stomach drop? A meme that made you laugh for three seconds before you swiped it away like a gnat?

That's your diet. And most of us are malnourished.

There's a particular kind of tired that didn't exist twenty years ago. It's not the tiredness that comes from physical labour or a long day at work — it's a bone-deep, behind-the-eyes exhaustion that creeps in even after a full night's sleep. We wake up reaching for our phones before we've reached for water. We scroll through other people's lives while ours sits quietly in the room, unexamined, unheld.

We've started calling it burnout, doom-scrolling fatigue, digital overwhelm. But I think the honest name is simpler: we're overfed and undernourished.

The food metaphor is worth sitting with. When we talk about a poor physical diet, we understand it instinctively — too much sugar, too much processed food, too little of what actually sustains us. The body gives feedback. It swells, slows, aches. It makes its displeasure known.

But the mind? The mind is quieter about its suffering. It doesn't bloat visibly when we've binged three hours of algorithmically curated content designed to keep us emotionally activated. It doesn't send sharp pain signals when we've consumed forty seven half-formed opinions on a subject we don't truly understand. The damage is slower, subtler, and far more insidious.

The present generation — and I say this as someone living inside it, not observing from some lofty perch — is the first to grow up with infinite content. Not a lot of content. Infinite content. The feed never ends. You can scroll Instagram until the sun comes up and it will never, not once, say: that's enough, go to bed.

That absence of an ending is one of the strangest psychological conditions humanity has ever lived inside.

What does a digital diet actually look like, then? I think about it the way a thoughtful person thinks about food. Not obsessively. Not with guilt. But with some awareness of what's going in and what it's doing once it gets there.

There is content that feeds you — a long-form essay that changes how you see something, a documentary that makes you feel less alone in your confusion about the world, a conversation thread where people are genuinely wrestling with ideas rather than performing outrage. This content leaves you fuller than when you arrived. You walk away from your screen and carry something with you.

And then there is content that merely fills the space. The scrolling that happens not because you're looking for anything but because silence feels unfamiliar. The videos you watch at 1.5x speed because even 1x feels too slow, too present, too demanding of your attention. The group chats that hum with noise but rarely carry meaning.

Most of us are eating the second kind and pretending it's the first.

The present generation is also the first to have grown up being watched. Curated. Performed. The teenager today doesn't just live her life — she lives it with an awareness, however background, of how it might look to an audience. This produces a particular kind of exhaustion that older generations never quite had to navigate: the exhaustion of being both the experience and the documentation of the experience simultaneously.

A digital diet, for this generation, isn't just about consuming less. It's about reclaiming the unrecorded moment. The meal that doesn't become a story. The trip where the phone stays in the bag. The emotion that gets felt rather than captioned.

This sounds like deprivation only if you've forgotten what it felt like before. Most people, once they taste it — real presence, real silence, a morning without a screen — describe it as relief. As coming up for air.

I'm not interested in digital abstinence. I don't think the answer is to throw the phone into a river and move to the hills, though I understand the fantasy on particularly bad Tuesdays. Technology has given us things that are genuinely, undeniably good. Connection across distance. Access to knowledge that previous generations would have considered miraculous. The ability to find your people — your specific, strange, particular people — even if you live somewhere that doesn't contain them.

The present generation — and I say this as someone living inside it, not observing from some lofty perch — is the first to grow up with infinite content. Not a lot of content. Infinite content. The feed never ends. You can scroll Instagram until the sun comes up and it will never, not once, say: that's enough, go to bed.

The point isn't to starve. The point is to eat intentionally.

That means choosing depth over volume. It means asking, occasionally, why you're reaching for your phone — boredom? loneliness? anxiety? genuine curiosity? — and noticing whether what you find there actually addresses that need or just muffles it for a moment.

It means accepting that the algorithm is not your friend. It is a machine optimised for your engagement, not your flourishing. These are different things. Occasionally they overlap. Mostly, they don't.

The most radical thing a person can do in this era is give something their full attention. A book. A conversation. A meal. A walk. The full, undivided, unrecorded presence of a human being.

We are not losing our attention to villains. We are surrendering it, incrementally, willingly, because the alternatives feel harder. Silence requires you to be alone with yourself. That takes practice. That takes something like courage.

A digital diet is, at its heart, a reclamation project. Not of time, exactly — though time matters. Of the self. Of the ability to be bored, to be curious, to be still. To want something because you want it, not because an algorithm decided you should. We are what we scroll. The question worth asking is: is this who we want to be?

"Happiness is a mysterious thing, to be found somewhere between too little and too much."

(Ruskin Bond)

Letters to the Editor

From Socialising to Division - A Pattern We Ignore Online

Editor,

Technologically speaking, our modern everyday life relies on social media for almost everything, from news to entertainment. We have moved from being uninformed to being fed up with excessive information. From beauty products to concert tickets, everything finds a place on our everyday home feed. Our everyday home feed feels like the notice board we used to have in school and college, where all kinds of content are displayed.

But beyond all these techie titbits, what is notable is the introduction of the "Haha" button by Facebook in 2016. It has created a kind of vague habit where people use it indecisively, especially when they don't like or don't agree with someone they interact with online. For instance, if a person from another party posts his party manifesto, others react with laughter simply because it does not align with their own views. When it comes to religious groups, a person may laugh at the preaching of a cleric from another sect or religion just because it is different from his own beliefs. In the same way, a nationalist may laugh at the national matters of another country just because they are rivals in many ways.

In this way, something very small begins to reflect a larger pattern. Social media was initially meant to be a tool that connects people and brings them closer together. I can cite an example from my own usage. I met and made friends through Facebook when I started using it around 2012, and I have known them since then. At that time, I was using a Nokia C1-01 with a small but decent app supported by the now defunct Java OS. That app did not have the overwhelming feed we see today, and there was no "Haha" reaction whatsoever, only a simple Like or Unlike button. Some fellow millennials may describe that time as being "peaceful back then," and in some sense, that is quite true.

At the same time, it is also true that we are already living in a divided world, a world with different thoughts and opinions. However, social media platforms like Facebook have further widened this gap, even with something as small and seemingly harmless as a reaction button. We no longer read to understand. We react to dismiss. Instead, we open a post or image just to laugh at thoughts that are different from our own. This is more harmful on a psychological and social level than it may appear. If we are not careful enough, we may slowly lose our humanity. The "Doom Haha" can damage it for good, without any doubt. And if we lose our humanness, what is left of us?

We are already living in a stage of time where both social media and the AI bubble are about to burst. In 2025, social media demographics suggested that around 5.24 billion people globally, roughly 63 to 64 percent of the total population, were actively reducing or quitting social media due to various reasons, mostly because of fatigue from algorithm driven feeds and not so exciting new developments. This points to something important. We need social media to socialise, not to divide and mar ourselves as a global community. The future of humanity still lies in our hands. We can only make it better than what we have now. The factors that divide us, if possible, must be eradicated today, so that our children can live in peace tomorrow.

Yours etc.,
Sunrise Pohtam,
Via email

Need for Collective Moral Awakening

Editor,

I still remember how the lady police officer broke down upon seeing the lifeless body of the seven-year-old orphan, Kyrshanbor Kharmudai. It sent chills down our spines and left us struggling to even imagine the suffering that the little one must have endured. At this juncture, the effort and dedication of the Meghalaya Police deserve sincere acknowledgment for their response and commitment to justice.

However, what remains utterly unforgivable is the brutality of the crime and the actions of its perpetrator. Kennedy Khongsit must be brought to trial and face the full force of the law for such a heinous act. Justice in this case cannot be lenient. The law must be firm and uncompromising. It must send a clear message that any crime, especially crimes against innocent children will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

The tragic loss of the life of the young boy, taken away in a moment of anger and rage of an adult, is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of children and the urgent need for greater responsibility of us living in the society. This incident and the brutal killing of the four-year-old Insaphira Lyngdoh Mawnai calls for rigorous enforcement of the law, stronger child protection mechanisms and a collective moral awakening. No child should ever have to suffer such cruelty, and as a society, we must ensure that such incidents are neither forgotten nor repeated.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

Illegal Diesel burner : A Ticking Time Bomb in Shillong 's Food Hubs

Editor,

Shillong's bustling markets, from Motphran to Police Bazar, are the heart of the city's culinary culture. However, a hidden danger is lurking in their kitchens. On April 2, 2026, the fire at Shaunak Sweets & Snacks served as a grim reminder that some establishments are prioritizing profit over public safety by using illegal diesel burners.

Due to the ongoing shortage of commercial LPG, some vendors have turned to "diesel bhattis." Unlike LPG, diesel is an industrial fuel not meant for direct cooking. Its combustion releases heavy soot and toxic gases that settle on food and pollute the surrounding air. In a crowded space like Jwain Complex, a single flare-up can lead to a catastrophe.

The use of diesel in commercial kitchens is a blatant violation of FSSAI standards, which mandate a safe, chemical-free environment for food preparation. Furthermore, it violates local environmental norms regarding air pollution and fire safety. The soot produced is not just "dirt"—it is a health hazard that consumers are unknowingly ingesting.

The Meghalaya Food Safety Department must take immediate action. Short-term supply challenges do not justify long-term health risks. Authorities must conduct Surprise Audits and establishments like Shaunak that risk public life must have their trade and food licenses revoked and the heavy penalty must be significant enough to act as a deterrent for others.

Shillong deserves safe food and safe markets. The authorities must act now before the next "ticking time bomb" goes off.

Yours etc.,
Healington Marwein,
Shillong -8

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

"Let your hopes, not your hurts, shape your future."
— Robert H. Schuller

The Shillong Times

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Irrational & Populist Demands

PRESSURE groups in Meghalaya don't have enough issues to ensure that their names appear in newspapers and YouTube channels every single day so they have to invent trivial issues to trigger the imagination of an unthinking public led solely by emotion. This is not the first time that the controversy of finding an appropriate name for this state had created an uproar. The issue had gripped the minds of the political leadership at the time of fighting for a separate state. But they obviously hit a rock in trying to arrive at a mutually acceptable nomenclature. Some had suggested names like KhaJaGa state and all kinds of acronyms which were not agreed to by one or the other ethnic community. This time a pressure group from the Garo Hills has petitioned that the name of Meghalaya should change to Khasi-Jaintia-Garo Land. Such ridiculous suggestions are not only a waste of time but reveal how pressure groups try to earn brownie points. There are many pressing issues in Garo Hills with education or the lack of it being a major crisis point. There's a huge vacuum in health care and other governance issues. But such issues are never flagged. In fact, very few citizens from Garo Hills express their views before the media. Issues are regularly articulated by one or other pressure group as if citizens have outsourced all their problems to those groups.

Those who suggest the name change argue that "Meghalaya" is a Sanskrit-derived name meaning the abode of clouds, a name coined by noted Indian geographer, Shiba Prasad Chatterjee way back in 1936. This name is most suited for a region that's covered with cumulus nimbus (low lying, cotton-like puffy clouds) or cirrus clouds (thin wispy white high altitude clouds) generally seen in the evenings. Imagine arriving at a consensus on a name that is inclusive and acceptable to all. It might take dozens of heated discussions with little hope of reaching a consensus. An attempt to craft the Meghalaya anthem when the state turned 50 met with heated protests because it was not inclusive enough. The anthem used by North East Slow-Food & Agro-Biodiversity Society (NESFAS)in 2015 when they observed the International Slow Food Festival – Ko Mei Ramew is in fact the most inclusive anthem by far.

There is a feeling now that the state's name should reflect the local tribal identity and ethos in the same way that Nagaland acquired its name and so too Mizoram. There are 16 different Naga tribes but they agreed on the name Naga which probably came from the word Naka – a Burmese word for people with pierced earlobes. The word Mizo comes from two words 'Mi' - meaning person and 'Zo' meaning highlander. The fact that people of these two major tribes agreed to the names is nothing short of a miracle else the battles that would have been fought just to agree on a name would have taken many lives. These days indigeneity or indigenousness is being asserted in various forms. This name change is just one such assertion. There may be more to come. As it is, the three tribes are still debating the fairness of the State Reservation Policy which the Khasi and Jaintia claim is not based on the population ratio. Ordinary citizens feel that Meghalaya is already a well-settled name and representative of the three major tribes hence there is no need to upset the apple cart at this juncture. Besides, people already know this state and any attempt to change its nomenclature will have other unforeseen consequences that will affect tourism.

An Earnest Plea for the Allegedly Tainted Teachers

By Fr James Mani (SDB)

In the first week of March 2014, I was shocked to read in the newspaper the news concerning the termination of 246 teachers from service as they had been found to have access to unlawful methods to get teaching posts in primary schools of Meghalaya.. They had been termed as "TAINTED TEACHERS".

It was all the more shocking to me as some of them had been my students and friends whose credibility I never questioned earlier. But as these friends of mine under the investigation of CBI, had been termed "TAINTED," I accepted the judgement of the Court..

But as years rolled by , and witnessing the malpractices exercised by some of the government and non-government departments, I doubt the credibility of some of these institutions (CBI, ED.,NIA)

The cases relating to Fr. Stan Swamy, aged 83 years,the catholic priest who was falsely accused of having links with Maoists after the government agencies had downloaded questionable materials into his laptop and who ultimately dies in the lock-up, the false and unfounded accusation and imprisonment of Shri Arvind Kejriwal, the ex-Chief Minister of Delhi, known for his total integrity and good governance, of Mr. Manish Sisodia, the deputy to Shri Arvind Kejriwal, of Shri Sanjay Singh, of Shri Sonam Wanchuk , who champions the cause of people in Ladakh, of the Christian nuns arrested and jailed while travelling by train, branding them as agents of human trafficking, are just few examples from the many outstanding failures of the departments in which I had reposed great trust. .

As per the information received during this period, all these teachers had gone through all the required norms and formalities when they applied for the post of Assistant teachers in the Lower Primary school.

They had successfully completed the SET (State Eligibility Test) and the interview, or had completed any of the UG courses with 45 % marks and the interview.

These teachers were appointed as Assistant Teachers in Government Lower primary Schools under the recruitment process initiated vide Notification No. EDN.360/85/Pt.11/428 Dated 24.11.2008 and Advertisement dated 10.12.2008 .

On 4th Jan. 2010 the appointments were made and those who received the appointments were asked to attend the orientation program in the different Diet centres.

The newly selected teachers were appointed in different primary schools of Meghalaya.

Then comes the most unexpected event.. the termination of teachers in February 2014. It came as a thunderbolt. The termination of teachers from Service was due to the finding of the High Level Scrutiny Committee (HLSC) constituted under the directions of the Hon'ble Gauhati High Court (Division Bench) in WA No.52 of 2011..

HLSC relied upon the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) report which alleged manipulation of marks and interference by public functionaries during the selection process.

The entire matter was comprehensively adjudicated by the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya in its common judgement dated 02.11.2017 in WA No.52 of 2011, whereby the selection process for certain centres (Shillong Sadar , Jowai, Amlarem , Tura, and Dadenggre) was annulled, with a direction that only "UNTAINTED" teachers may be allowed to continue as a stop-gap arrangement.

"They did not know where and who to turn to. They had already given unstinted service in the various schools of Khasi – Jaintia, Garo regions for a couple of years.. It was not just their lives but of the entire families that were shattered. They had been defamed."

The lives of 246 teachers came to a sudden halt. They did not know where and who to turn to. They had already given unstinted service in the various schools of Khasi – Jaintia, Garo regions for a couple of years.. It was not just their lives but of the entire families that were shattered. They had been defamed. They felt that they had been falsely accused. They had been hurt beyond repair. They felt that they had been thrown right down a precipice…

The selection of the teachers was entirely the responsibility of the Selection Committee. If they had noticed anomalies with any of the documents submitted by the candidates to them, action should have been taken immediately. Besides, the disqualified teachers were forbidden henceforth from applying for any Government jobs in Meghalaya.

Thus started a life of uncertainty, disillusionment, and poverty for the 246 teachers. They did not know how to handle the situation. The whole society looked down on them as dishonest persons. They could not seek alternate appointments elsewhere. All the doors were closed to them.

The Hon'ble Supreme Court vide its Order dated 06.04.2018 in SLP© Diary No. 40348 of 2017 permitted the above-mentioned teachers to move the High Court and seek redress , recognizing their right to be heard.

Though they had acute scarcity of funds to engage lawyers to take their cause, the All Meghalaya Primary School Teachers Association filed a Review Petition wherein it was specifically pleaded that the tainted teachers who were never involved in any malpractice should not have been punished for the alleged acts of a few.

On 04,09.2025 the Hon'ble court of Meghalaya pronounced the all important judgement Crl Petn.Nos 12,36, 70 & 71 of 2023 , titled CBI v Mazeal Ampareen Lyngdoh & Ors.In the said judgement , the Hon'ble Court has discharged the Education Minister, Smti M. Ampareen Lyngdoh, (A1) , the Director Shri J.D.Sangma (A2) and the Deputy Director, Smti Ameka I. Lyngdoh (A 3) from all criminal liability, holding that there was no sufficient evidence of conspiracy, fraud, forgery, or manipulation and that continuation of such proceedings after 17 years would not serve the ends of justice.

The very foundation of the alleged "TAINTED SELECTION" has now been completely removed by the recent judgement of the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya dated 04.09.2025 in Crl.Petn.Nos 12,36, 70 & 71 of 2023 , titled CBI v Mazeal Ampareen Lyngdoh & Ors.

This discharge order completely exonerates the main decision-makers whose alleged actions formed the sole basis for declaring the selection "tainted" and for terminating the teachers' services The Hon'ble Supreme Court and various High Courts have consistently held that when the foundation of administrative action ceases to exist, the consequential orders automatically fall.

Now that the alleged criminal irregularities have been judicially found to be unfounded and non-existent, the termination of the teachers , based solely on such allegation, has become untenable, arbitrary, and seriously violative of Articles 14 and 21 of the constitution of India.

In view of the changed circumstances, one urges the Government in the interest of justice to take the following actions:

1. Reconsider the termination order issued pursuant to the 2014 actions based on the HLSC report;

2. Reinstate immediately all the untainted teachers who were not found guilty of any misconduct , with continuity of services, pensionary and other consequential benefits

3.Treat the period of unemployment as notional service , for seniority and pension purposes , as the termination was founded on allegations now disproved .

Most of the terminated teachers have rendered invaluable service for several years and were removed from service without any personal fault. Many have crossed the upper age limit, lost their only livelihood and continue to suffer severe financial and social hardships.

What has further shocked me is the fact none of the main accused : Smti Mazeal Ampareen Lyngdoh, nor Shri. Jeffrey D Sangma nor Smt. Ameka I. Lyngdoh has come out openly to help and support and plead for the innocence of these vast numbers of teachers who are still languishing under the weight of the false accusations. They have gone scot free and the world ends there for them. What about putting a word with the government to reinstate their brothers and sisters to their former dignity and wellness.

In these circumstances, it is my earnest appeal to the Government, headed by the Hon'ble Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma, to restore justice and dignity to our teachers by reinstating them to their posts . This will help to remove a grave blot affecting our state which is noted for good governance and fair play in all its dealings. These our brothers and sisters have lost 17 of their youthful years in anguish, uncertainty, and defamation. Can the government bring solace and comfort to the remaining years of their lives?

Garo Hills Mourns the Loss of a Veteran Gynaecologist

By Jairaj Chhetry

A doctor who became, in the truest sense, synonymous with the very art and science of gynaecology in the Garo Hills, Dr. Ardina Koknal Marak embodied excellence, compassion, and unwavering dedication throughout her life's work.

In the annals of devoted medical service and quiet human excellence, her life stands as a testament to perseverance, intellect, and compassionate duty. Born on the 8th of January, 1952, in Kochugaon in the Bodoland region of Assam, she was the cherished daughter of the late Pa Promison R. Momin and Ma Hejini K. Marak. Raised within a close-knit family, alongside one elder and two younger siblings, her early years were shaped by simplicity, discipline, and deeply rooted values.

"From a young age, Dr. Marak displayed a remarkable inclination towards learning. Her formative education began at Tura Christian Girls' School, where her academic promise soon became evident. In 1970, she passed her Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate examination with distinction, securing a first division—an achievement that reflected both diligence and intellectual brilliance."

From a young age, Dr. Marak displayed a remarkable inclination towards learning. Her formative education began at Tura Christian Girls' School, where her academic promise soon became evident. In 1970, she passed her Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate examination with distinction, securing a first division—an achievement that reflected both diligence and intellectual brilliance.

That same year, she entered Cotton College in Guwahati, completing her Pre-University Science course in 1971. Guided by a resolute ambition to serve humanity through medicine, she proceeded to Assam Medical College in Dibrugarh, where she undertook her MBBS studies. By 1977, she had successfully completed her degree, followed by her internship in 1978, thus entering the noble profession she would honour throughout her life.

Her professional journey commenced at Tura Civil Hospital in 1978, where she served as an Assistant Surgeon. Over the next twelve years, she distinguished herself through tireless dedication and a deep sense of responsibility. Yet, her pursuit of knowledge did not cease. In 1990, she advanced her studies at the Regional Medical College under Manipur University in Imphal, specialising in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She completed her MD in 1991, marking a milestone of profound significance.

Dr. Marak holds the rare distinction of being the first woman from the Koknal community to attain an MD degree. She also stands among the pioneering women of the A'chik community to achieve such academic and professional eminence, her accomplishments serving as a beacon of inspiration for generations.

Upon returning to Tura Civil Hospital after her specialisation, she resumed her service with renewed expertise. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to the care of mothers and children, bringing comfort to the distressed and hope to the vulnerable. In the collective memory of the people of the Garo Hills, her name came to evoke trust, skill, and unwavering dedication—so much so that she was regarded as the very embodiment of excellence in her field.

In due course, she was entrusted with responsibilities at the Maternity and Child Hospital in Tura. There, through quiet perseverance and steadfast commitment, she distinguished herself as a devoted and dependable caregiver. Her service in the Government Hospital reflected discipline, humility, and an unshakeable sense of duty, continuing until her retirement on the 31st of January, 2011.

Retirement, however, did not mark the end of her service. Through her association with the National Rural Health Mission, she continued to contribute as a contractual practitioner, offering her knowledge and experience for the welfare of the community.

Alongside this narrative of professional excellence emerges another portrait—one of grace, resilience, and moral strength. She was married to Dr. Prabhat Kusum Das on the 14th of September, 1978, a union that reflected shared values of service and commitment. From an early age, she exhibited a gentle disposition and an earnest inclination toward service. Her upbringing, marked by simplicity and moral strength, shaped her character in profound ways.

"Her professional journey commenced at Tura Civil Hospital in 1978, where she served as an Assistant Surgeon. Over the next twelve years, she distinguished herself through tireless dedication and a deep sense of responsibility. Yet, her pursuit of knowledge did not cease. In 1990, she advanced her studies at the Regional Medical College under Manipur University in Imphal, specialising in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She completed her MD in 1991, marking a milestone of profound significance."

As she grew, she developed both intellectual acuity and a compassionate heart, dedicating herself to the care of others. Though her journey was not without trials, she bore them with dignity and resilience. Through perseverance and quiet determination, she fulfilled her duties with grace, leaving behind a legacy of kindness, dedication, and selfless service.

In reflecting upon her life, one is reminded that true greatness often resides not in loud acclaim, but in silent, steadfast devotion to the well-being of others. The life and service of Dr. Ardina Koknal Marak remain a luminous example of such greatness—an enduring inspiration to all who aspire to serve with integrity, compassion, and quiet strength.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya's Erratic Decision -Making Culture

Editor,

This is with reference to the letter titled "Where is the Ward's Lake Bridge" by John K Rani published in your esteemed daily on April 3, 2026, it is always reassuring to see our citizens' concern for the fate of the Ward's Lake bridge which is an iconic landmark of our city. The "some local architectural firm" mentioned happens to be us "atelier A+." We were formally commissioned in 2024 by the Department of Forests (the custodians of Ward's Lake at the time) to redesign the bridge after it was declared structurally unsafe and closed to the public after it was last renovated post its partial destruction by the Great Assam Earthquake of 1897.

Because the bridge is an iconic public structure—not a playground for design experiments—we conducted a public poll on social media platforms. Over 95% of respondents expressed a clear desire to retain the original form. Taking that seriously, we resisted the now-fashionable urge to reinvent everything in sight. Instead, we carefully studied its history and proposed a design that restored the original British-era bridge, but with a thoughtful addition: to integrated planters of the ficus plant so that it shall someday overtake the steel railings to gradually evolve into a living breathing entity thereby paying homage to our own ancient indigenous knowledge in bridge building technology or craft in this case.

The proposal which was vetted by NIT Shillong, cost a modest Rs 1.5 crores, and was duly submitted and approved by the Forest Department which simultaneously asked for sanction from the Government. That sanction approval, however, appears to have taken the same route as many sensible public proposals—filed somewhere between "under consideration" and "never to be seen again." Shortly thereafter, Ward's Lake was transferred to the Department of Tourism. And with that, the bridge project seems to have vanished—not structurally this time, but administratively.

What has not vanished, however, is the steady conversion of a public green space into an expensive ticketed event ground. One cannot help but notice that the current approach seems less concerned with the citizens of Shillong and far more attentive to "guests"—read: tourists—who are, by definition, temporary. The residents, meanwhile, appear to have been gently repositioned as occasional visitors to their own city.

This brings us to the much-discussed issue of festivals. Contrary to popular belief, the city did not suddenly discover the need for public event spaces. As part of the Smart City initiative, the Government of Meghalaya itself had organised an international design competition way back in 2018 for a "world-class iconic landmark" at Barik Point—a centrally located 3.5-acre site intended to create a space "wherein the people of Meghalaya and tourists can relate with and identify themselves."

Our award-winning proposal for the Barik Project responded precisely to this brief. It included a large, purpose-designed public plaza capable of accommodating festivals, gatherings, and cultural events—without the need for temporary shamianas, visual urban clutter, or the conversion of ecological spaces into makeshift venues. In other words, the very problem we are currently improvising solutions for had already been addressed—thoughtfully, and in advance.

That project, too, has since been put on hold and so we now find ourselves in the rather iconic, sorry, ironic situation where planned, designed, and publicly envisioned solutions remain shelved—while ad-hoc interventions take centre stage.

To summarise: The bridge exists—as a design, vetted and ready. The public supported it. The proposal was submitted. And then, somewhere along the way, priorities changed. The concern expressed in the earlier letter is valid—the bridge is missing. The difference is, we know it was not due to lack of intent, effort, or public will. It simply did not fit into the script of the current Government. Perhaps someday, that script will include the citizens of Shillong as more than just background characters.

Yours etc.,
Aiban S Mawkhroh,
Via email

Conrad Sangma Secures Historic Safeguard for Tribal Identity in Meghalaya

Editor,

The recent development concerning the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) marks a truly historic moment in the political and cultural journey of Meghalaya's tribal communities. The decision to make a Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificate mandatory for candidates contesting GHADC elections is not merely a procedural amendment, it is a powerful reaffirmation of the very purpose for which Autonomous District Councils were created.

Under the leadership of Conrad K. Sangma, the move has been welcomed as a long-overdue correction that strengthens the constitutional vision of safeguarding indigenous rights. For decades, there have been concerns that the spirit of tribal self-governance was being diluted. This amendment addresses those concerns directly by ensuring that the council remains firmly in the hands of the indigenous tribal population it is meant to represent.

The significance of this decision lies in its clarity of intent. Autonomous District Councils, particularly in states like Meghalaya, were established to protect tribal identity, customs, and governance structures. By mandating ST certification for electoral candidates, the GHADC has reinforced this foundational principle, ensuring that governance remains rooted in the traditions, values, and aspirations of the tribal communities.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma's support for this measure reflects a leadership approach that balances sensitivity with decisiveness. At a time when tensions and uncertainties had emerged around the electoral process, his endorsement of the amendment signals a commitment to long-term stability and inclusivity. Rather than allowing the issue to remain a source of conflict, the government has backed a solution that aligns with both constitutional safeguards and public sentiment.

Importantly, this decision also carries deep symbolic value. For many, it represents the culmination of a demand that has existed for generations, an assertion that tribal identity is not negotiable but central to the governance framework in the region. It restores confidence among the people that their voices, culture, and political rights are being protected in a meaningful and lasting way.

In essence, this is more than an electoral reform. It is a defining step towards preserving the unique identity of Meghalaya's tribal communities while strengthening democratic institutions. With this move, the GHADC, supported by the state leadership, has set a precedent that underscores the importance of authenticity in representation.

As Meghalaya continues to progress, such decisions reinforce the idea that development and cultural preservation can go hand in hand. The leadership of Conrad K. Sangma, in backing this historic amendment, has ensured that the future of tribal governance remains firmly anchored in its rightful foundations.

Yours etc;
Jack Syiemlieh,
Via email

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"Every burden is a blessing."
— Walt Kelly

The Shillong Times
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Worsening war

AS the clock ticks by the seconds, the Iran war is escalating to new levels. President Donald Trump has issued a stern warning to Tehran, which rejected it with a wave of its hands. Iran has also rejected a ceasefire proposal from mediators. The President is obviously getting impatient. Five weeks into the war, Iran refuses to be cowed down. It is shooting down American fighter jets and refusing to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the closure of which has caused a huge global economic crisis. Trump's latest warning was that he would pound Iran's bridges and power houses with missiles by Tuesday evening Eastern Time. However, huge explosions occurred in Iran in recent hours, meaning that "letting loose of hell on Iran" by the US-Israel combine was under way. Trump's impatience was evident in the manner in which he expressed himself on his social media page, Truth Social. He used expletives against Iran's leadership. The Iranian embassies simultaneously began "shaming" the Americans with mimes on the downing of a prized US F-35 fighter jet, saying what crashed was rather the" American pride.". The suffering does not confine itself to the Iranians or the Americans or the Israelis – who all are directly involved in the war – but the world at large.

Prices of almost every commodity are shooting up. Even lemons have become dearer, citing the excuse that transportation costs have increased as a result of the supply chain disruptions. But, lemon farmers, or agriculturists as a whole are not benefited. Cartels in the trade inflate the rates at their sweet will and the governments have not been able to regulate the markets. Hotels across the country are facing the brunt as LPG supplies have been hit. Eateries have raised their prices. India's economic mainstay, the construction sector, is hit by massive price increases. And this could further worsen. The second month of the war has been worse –vis-a-vis its impact on public life. The aviation sector continues to face disruptions while flights take circuitous routes to avoid the hotspots in the Middle East. Airfares have increased sharply. If India prided itself for reduced inflationary trends in recent years, the obverse is happening now. The Indian currency is now at a record low. Fears are that, if the war persists, the Rupee could plunge further to 110 per dollar.

Governmental interventions like cuts on petrol and diesel duties have helped regulate prices at fuel stations. Motorists have not been affected much, but whether the scenario would remain the same after the present round of assembly polls is a big concern. How long this war would course through is unpredictable. Iran has its strong military – ranking 16th in the world. The Islamists who run the government there are adamant. Iran's land army is of the size of nearly a million. Their morale remains high. Confronting them on the ground is easier said than done. This would appear to be a predicament for President Trump, who would alternatively raise the intensity of the fight from the skies. The more the war carries on, the worse it will be for people across the world.

Why Has NEHU Not Captured The National Imagination?

By D. V. Kumar

I have just retired from the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong campus. I am deeply indebted to the students, research scholars, colleagues and the staff at the Department of Sociology, NEHU for making my academic life a fulfilling one. Incidentally, the Department is going to celebrate fifty years of its existence this year under the Headship of Prof. Rekha M. Shangpliang, who is the first woman to head the department. I wish the department success in whatever it does.

This article is not about the challenges which the university is currently facing in terms of how it is managed. I understand that the present administration is handling the situation in the best way it could. Much credit is to be given to it for managing the university under very difficult circumstances. This is about a much larger issue. It is about why NEHU, despite the fact that it has been in existence for more than fifty years, has not been able to occupy a significant part of the national imagination. Except in some academic/university spaces, any mention of NEHU in non-academic and non-university spaces invites curious questions such as where it is located, whether it is a public university or not etc.

However, this does not mean that the contribution of NEHU can be undermined. Its products have done and are doing quite well in academics, state civil services, media, politics etc. An impressive amount of data on social, economic and political reality concerning the north-east has been collected by the university. It offers a conducive academic atmosphere. This writer himself has benefited from that and whatever publications he has to his credit are largely due to that. Still one would wonder why it has not been able to get the recognition one would have expected any public university to get at the national level.

One response could be that it is located in a 'remote' part of India and hence goes unnoticed. But Cherrapunji is also located in Meghalaya; yet it is a very popular tourist place in the country. The reason being that there is something unique about it as having recorded the highest rainfall. What one is trying to indicate is that there has to be something unique about a place, an institution or organisation to get the recognition that it craves for. So where does the uniqueness of a university lie? In my understanding it lies in its willingness and readiness to reflect on burning issues confronting the society at large. Failure to reflect and articulate its position on issues of the day, however unpalatable they may be, would make it irrelevant to the society. Routined academic activities such as holding of classes and examinations, awarding of degrees etc. are something which happen in every university and they alone do not add any uniqueness to a university. A university which stands for critical imagination, alternative forms of thinking, questioning of dominant and hegemonic narratives and the ability to take a position however, disagreeable it may be to the power structures becomes unique in that sense. It is then that it begins to capture national imagination.

Perhaps comparison with Jawarharlal Nehru University, arguably the most prominent public university in the country, becomes illustrative. The total population of JNU may not be more than 10, 000, or so. Some colleges in India are much bigger than that. Despite its smaller size, why is that JNU is the most talked about university in the country? What is so unique about it?

My understanding is that historically it has enjoyed enormous ideological dominance which is based on its refusal to justify and legitimize the status quo, its readiness to question every dominant and hegemonic idea and policy, its willingness to embrace alternative possibilities, its power of resistance, its consistent espousal of foundational principles of Constitution such as equality, justice, democracy and secularism. Its history of speaking truth to power has become legendary. That is why it has become a very powerful ideological site. By taking positions on different issues, it seeks to engage with the society at large, arousing its curiosity about the nature of the university and what it actually represents. It is a cumulative process which results in the university capturing the national imagination.

Let us look at some of those happenings in the country where JNU took a very clear and strong position virtually dominating the discourse about them. When Emergency was declared in 1975 by the then Prime Minister of the country, Indira Gandhi, JNU bore the brunt of attacks from the government. It was because many students and teachers of the university were deeply involved in raising protest against what they considered a very authoritarian move by the government. It shot into national fame almost overnight. It had been established only a few years earlier (1969) but it began to be talked about in public spaces, to borrow an expression from Habermas (a great social theorist who passed away recently). JNU symbolised the most trenchant critique about a step which Indira Gandhi took which shook the foundations of the Indian Republic.

Or let us take another development i.e. destruction of Babri Masjid and the Ayodhya movement which also constituted an attack on the foundational principles of our Constitution i.e. secularism and democracy. It was the then JNU historians' statement released in 1989 titled The Political Abuse of History contributed significantly to the debate that surrounded the Ayodhya controversy. It had been praised and critiqued in equal measure but the point is that JNU historians led by an eminent historian Romila Thapar tried to present an alternative viewpoint which they tried to show that it was based on evidence not faith. This significantly impacted the nature of debate which was going on at that point of time about the Ayodhya issue.

Let us look at some of those happenings in the country where JNU took a very clear and strong position virtually dominating the discourse about them. When Emergency was declared in 1975 by the then Prime Minister of the country, Indira Gandhi, JNU bore the brunt of attacks from the government.

Further, when under the pressure from multi-national companies , the government led by Manmohan Singh introduced liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) programme, the strongest critique offered by economists based in JNU captured the national imagination. Perhaps it was the clearest and most unambiguous critique offered on the programme, the basis point of which was that it would lead to deepening of socio-economic inequalities, a fact which has subsequently been corroborated by a number of studies.

More recently, when the UGC introduced equity regulations seeking to end discrimination based on caste, creed, language, religion, gender, disability in university campuses, there was a protest against those regulations and the matter went to the Supreme Court which stayed the implementation of the regulations. JNU students demanded their immediate implementation as they are meant to end discrimination in university campuses which is an everyday structural reality. Of course, they had to face the wrath of the law as some of them were arrested and later released on bail.

In the last decade or so, when universities were sought to be hegemonised and forced into submission, it may not be an exaggeration to say that JNU stood tall, questioning and resisting every attempt to silence it. Organised and sustained attacks on minorities, dalits, gender have frequently become the subject of heated debates at JNU. Genocide in Gaza and the current assault launched by America-Israel combine on Iran have also been critiqued. The examples mentioned above are only illustrative in nature, not exhaustive.

There are a number of other issues where teachers and students of JNU took a clear oppositional position much to the chagrin of the powers-that-be. On most of the major issues of the day confronting the society, the silence of NEHU has been quite disappointing, to say the least. The contribution of NEHU to major debates in the country is not something one would really be proud of. However, there have been some attempts in the recent past to make its presence felt at the national level. The recently edited volume on The Idea of a University : Possibilities and Contestations has sought to critique the way universities are being hegemonised and it is gratifying to note that it has been taken note of at the national level having been reviewed in important national journals. Also, it was pleasing to see some of our colleagues from NEHU taking an active interest in the ongoing critique about the NEP and presenting an alternative paper on educational reforms as part of a larger gathering at the national level. But such attempts are few and far between.

The point is that a university is the space where different issues are critically interrogated, dissent expressed and silence not normalised. It is the space where critique of exploitative institutions and practices is supposed to be encouraged and where every attempt is made to safeguard the foundational principles of equality, justice, liberty and fraternity. If the university does not do that, then it really can not complain about the society not taking it seriously.

(D. V. Kumar is former Professor, Dept of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong)

Career of Allied Health Sciences Profession: Impact, Need, and Future

By Dr.Somsankar Mukherjee

Many Class 12 pass-out students experience confusion about their professional career because this stage marks a major transition from school to higher education or work life. At this point, they are expected to choose a career path, often without having complete knowledge about different options or their own interests and abilities.

The main reasons for this confusion is pressure from parents, society, and peers. Students may feel forced to choose popular fields like engineering, medicine, or government jobs, even if they are not genuinely interested in them. Additionally, a lack of proper career guidance and exposure to diverse career opportunities makes decision-making more difficult.

Another factor is self-doubt. Many students are unsure about their strengths, skills, and long-term goals. The fear of making the wrong choice can lead to anxiety and indecision.

To overcome this confusion, students should seek career counseling, explore different fields, and understand their own interests and capabilities. Internships, workshops, and discussions with professionals can also provide clarity. Making an informed and self-driven decision is important for long-term satisfaction and success in one's career.

Career in Allied and Healthcare Profession.

The Allied and Healthcare Sciences (AHS) have emerged as the cornerstone of modern medicine, evolving from a supportive role to a distinct, high-impact professional stream. A career in this field involves a diverse array of specialists—ranging from medical laboratory technologists and radiographers to physiotherapists and nutritionists—who utilize scientific principles and evidence-based practice to diagnose, treat, and prevent diseases. As healthcare transitions from a "doctor-centric" model to a "team-based" approach, the AHS professional is no longer a peripheral figure but a primary driver of clinical outcomes.

Impact on Society: The Case of the North Eastern States of India

In the unique geographical and demographic context of "states of Ashtalakshmi", the impact of Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) is transformative. The state faces distinct challenges, including difficult mountainous terrain, high incidences of non-communicable diseases like cancer, and a need for improved maternal and child health indicators. AHPs act as the bridge between tertiary medical centers and remote community health settings.

For instance, a skilled medical imaging technologist in a Zonal General Hospital ensures that a patient in a remote area of "Vibrant Villages" doesn't have to travel to a metropolitan city for a critical diagnosis. Similarly, physiotherapists and occupational therapists provide essential rehabilitation services that prevent long-term disability, directly enhancing the "Ease of Living" for the local population. By decentralizing healthcare expertise, AHPs reduce out-of-pocket expenses for families and strengthen the state's resilience against health crises.

The Growing Need and Demand

The demand for allied health professionals is reaching a fever pitch, both nationally and within the state. The Government of India has recently announced plans to add 100,000 AHPs over the next five years to address severe workforce shortages. In Arunachal Pradesh, this need is even more acute due to the expansion of healthcare infrastructure, such as the operationalization of new medical colleges and nursing schools.

The implementation of the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions (NCAHP) Act, 2021, has further formalized this demand. This regulatory shift ensures that every professional is registered and every institution maintains high standards, making the "paramedical" label obsolete and replacing it with the respected title of "Healthcare Professional." As the state scales up its diagnostic and emergency care facilities, the requirement for specialized technicians in anesthesia, dialysis, and emergency medicine is expected to grow exponentially by 2030.

Future Life and Career Prospects

The future for an AHS professional is one of stability, respect, and continuous growth. Unlike many traditional sectors, healthcare is "recession-proof," and the specialized nature of AHS roles provides high job security.

- Career Diversity: A graduate can choose between clinical practice, healthcare management, academic research, or medical technology sales.
- Technological Integration: The next decade will see AHPs working alongside AI-driven diagnostics, robotic rehabilitation, and advanced tele-medicine platforms, keeping the profession at the cutting edge of innovation.
- Academic Elevation: With the introduction of standardized, competency-based curricula (such as those being implemented for the 2026-27 session), professionals now have clear pathways for post-graduate and doctoral studies, allowing them to become leaders in healthcare policy and education.

Ultimately, a career in Allied Health Sciences is a commitment to the "Five Pillars" of healthcare: preventive care, modernization, workforce optimization, digital integration, and equity. For a young professional, it offers a life of profound purpose—transforming scientific knowledge into a better quality of life for the community while securing a rewarding and prestigious professional future.

(The author is Chairperson: Arunachal Pradesh Allied and Healthcare Council)

Letters to the Editor

Selective Enforcement on Modified Exhausts: A Growing Concern

Editor,

In recent times, traffic enforcement authorities have intensified their crackdown on vehicles fitted with modified exhaust systems, citing concerns over noise pollution and public disturbance. While this initiative is necessary and widely supported, an emerging issue of selective enforcement has begun to raise questions about fairness and consistency in policing.

Across many cities, owners of scooters and standard motorcycles are being fined heavily for installing aftermarket exhausts that produce excessive noise. These actions are justified under existing motor vehicle laws, which prohibit modifications that alter a vehicle's original specifications and contribute to environmental pollution. However, a noticeable pattern has surfaced: certain categories of motorcycles—particularly popular models like Royal Enfield, often referred to as "Bullet" bikes—appear to be receiving leniency despite having equally, if not more, disruptive modified exhaust systems.

It is important to note that not all Royal Enfield motorcycles are inherently noisy. In fact, stock Royal Enfield bikes that comply with BS6 emission norms are manufactured to meet strict noise regulations and do not produce excessive sound. The issue arises only when these motorcycles are fitted with illegal modified exhausts that amplify noise beyond permissible limits.

This perceived neglect has sparked frustration among the general public. Riders of scooters and smaller bikes often report being stopped, inspected, and fined without hesitation, while louder, heavily modified Royal Enfield motorcycles pass through checkpoints without scrutiny. The inconsistency not only undermines the purpose of the law but also erodes public trust in enforcement agencies.

Noise pollution is not selective—it affects everyone equally. Whether the source is a scooter, a sports bike, or a cruiser motorcycle, the impact on communities remains the same. Therefore, enforcement must be uniform, without bias toward brand, engine size, or perceived status.

Authorities must ensure that all vehicles, regardless of type or popularity, are subject to the same standards. Transparent guidelines, regular checks, and accountability in enforcement practices are essential to restore public confidence. Moreover, awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate all riders about the legal and environmental implications of vehicle modifications.

In conclusion, while the crackdown on modified exhausts is a step in the right direction, its effectiveness depends on impartial implementation. Equal enforcement of the law is not just a legal necessity—it is a cornerstone of justice.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Letter of Appreciation

Editor,

I truly appreciate The Shillong Times for publishing Architect Aiban S Mawkhroh's letter concerning the neglect and utter disregard of the present dispensation in the state to well- meaning and professional detailed project reports on renovation of the iconic Wards Lake and the huge space at Barik by local architectural firm "Atelier A+." Perhaps this letter will induce the powers that be to pay due attention to the fairness and justification of awarding projects to merit-based to homegrown professionals

Yours etc.,
F Warjri,
Shillong -3

When Digital India stops at the Hospital Gate

Editor,

We live at a time where a flight can be booked in seconds, a fee can be paid with a tap, and money travels faster than thought. Yet, step into certain government offices, and it feels like time quietly slows down.

Notice the difference?

The private sector moves with the world, adapting, upgrading, refining. Meanwhile, some government-operated institutions remain anchored to cash and queues, to the small ritual of counting notes and making the public dig for coins in their pockets and purses.

I felt this sharply during a recent visit to Shillong Civil Hospital. In a place where urgency should define every process, something as simple as a payment becomes a delay. Waiting for the unknown amount, arranging cash for the exact amount while the long queues stare with wide eyes, it all adds up to friction where there should be flow.

And beyond inconvenience lies a quieter concern. Currency notes have travelled more than the patient collecting germs and what not, and finally find their way into a healthcare environment.

What makes this more striking is that the solution is not distant or complex. It already exists. Digital payment systems are not futuristic ideas. Even a vendor selling betel nut uses one. The Government itself advocates innovation, asking individuals and groups to brush up their minds to search for innovative solutions to prevailing problems and submit them to such initiatives launched by the Government.

Well, I think the Government itself should participate too, with the idea titled "Digital and Seamless Payment in Government Hospitals" and it might even win a trophy for the new proposal and idea to such an introduction.

Pun aside, the question remains, gently but persistently: why are these existing solutions not fully embraced when they are needed the most? Modernizing payment systems in public hospitals is not just about convenience. It is about dignity, efficiency, and aligning essential services with the rhythm of the present.

A small change, perhaps. But one that could ripple through the everyday lives of many.

Yours etc.,
Leonel Lyngdoh,
Via email

Marks Do Not Equal Learning Outcomes

Editor,

With the SSLC results of the Meghalaya Board of School Education having been declared on April 7, there is the usual mix of excitement and nervousness in thousands of homes. For students, it's a big moment; for the education system, it's a time to take a hard look at itself.

If we look at the results over the past few years, a clear pattern begins to show. The pass percentage was 52.90% in 2021, went up slightly to 56.96% in 2022, dropped again to 51.93% in 2023, and then rose a little to 55.80% in 2024. Then suddenly, in 2025, it jumped sharply to 87.10%. This years the pass percentage stands at 86.84%. For four years, the results were stuck roughly between 50 and 57 percent, which suggests not real progress but a kind of stagnation.

This is why the 2025 result stands out so strongly. A jump of over 30 percentage points in just one year is not something we can take at face value. It naturally raises questions—what exactly changed? Was it better teaching, changes in exam patterns, evaluation methods, or something else within the system?

Looking at this more closely, two things become clear. First, for several years, the system was clearly struggling, with nearly half the students not making it through. Second, while the 2025 improvement is encouraging, it needs to be seen in terms of actual learning on the ground. A higher pass percentage does not automatically mean students are learning better.

There is also the issue of inequality. Even now, some districts perform much better than others, showing that where a student studies still makes a big difference. Students in rural and remote areas continue to face challenges—lack of teachers, limited academic support, poor infrastructure, and fewer learning opportunities. Unless these gaps are addressed, improvement will remain uneven.

Now that the 2026 results are also out, one can only hope that those results reflect real learning and fair opportunities for all students. The 2026 results show a slight fall in percentage from 2025 but hopefully there are clearer signs of genuine progress across the system.

In the end, results should not just be about numbers and percentages. They should tell us how well students are actually being prepared for the future. The real question is not just how many have passed, but how well they are ready for what comes next.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj
Via email

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C M K

"Where there is no struggle, there is no strength."
— Oprah Winfrey

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Assam Elections: Himanta's Dilemma

A political bombshell erupted some days ago after the Congress party alleged that Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, wife of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, holds three foreign passports. The allegation, made by the Congress Party at a press conference, has triggered a sharp exchange of accusations, legal threats, and counter-claims, turning what began as a political charge into a high-stakes national debate. The controversy began when Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera claimed that Riniki Bhuyan Sarma allegedly holds passports from three countries—the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Antigua and Barbuda. The Congress argued that if such claims were true, they would raise serious legal and constitutional questions, since Indian law does not permit dual citizenship, let alone multiple foreign passports. The party also called for a probe into the matter and sought clarity on whether proper disclosures were made. The allegations however, did not stop at passports. Congress leaders also raised questions about alleged foreign assets and overseas business interests in Wyoming, USA, a tax haven used by many Indians to park their funds in. For the Congress this was the trigger they were looking for to pillory Himanta Biswa Sarma who earlier went hammer and tongs at Assam Congress leader, Gaurav Gogoi. Gogoi whose wife, a British citizen, is being accused of working for Pakistan. The Congress has linked the whole issue to a lack of transparency and public accountability, especially since the person concerned is the wife of an elected head of government. That these claims came just days before crucial political developments in Assam have rattled Biswa Sarma who vowed to jail Pawan Khera.

As expected, Rinikl Bhuyan Sarma categorically denied the allegations, calling them baseless and fabricated. She questioned how an Indian citizen could hold three passports and dismissed the claims as politically motivated. Biswa Sarma also rejected the charges calling them defamatory. An FIR against Khera was promptly filed by the Himanta team and the Assam Police has promptly landed at the house of Pawan Khera in Delhi ostensibly to search for manufactured evidence. This development has deepened the political confrontation and transformed the issue from a campaign allegation into a legal dispute. The exchange of accusations has since intensified, with both sides accusing each other of misinformation and political vendetta. Beyond the immediate political drama, the episode raises larger questions about transparency, ethics, and the tone and tenor of the political discourse in this country. While Opposition parties have a legitimate role in demanding accountability and seeking clarification on matters involving public figures and their families, they must have ample evidence to bolster their arguments. If the allegations cannot be proved in a court of law the Congress risks losing face and credibility apart from lowering the standard of public debate.

The present controversy also reflects the growing trends in contemporary politics, where personal allegations increasingly dominate electoral narratives. Instead of policy discussions, political contests often revolve around accusations, counter-accusations, and legal battles. This takes away the focus from governance deficits particularly in and around Guwahati city where civic delivery systems seem to have collapsed. These personal battles have instead dominated the political landscape. Ultimately, the allegations, serious as they are, will have to be investigated and undergo due legal processes. Until such time the three-passport controversy and foreign funds remain just a political flashpoint.

From Garo Hills to Assam: The Ripple Effects of the GHADC Decision

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

After much violence and strife, the issue of non-indigenous, non-tribal participation in the GHADC (Garo Hills Autonomous District Council) has finally reached a conclusion. C.H. Vijayashankar, Governor of Meghalaya, approved the legislation that bars their participation in ADC elections by making possession of an ST (Scheduled Tribe) certificate mandatory for filing nominations. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma himself broke the news on social media, thanking the Governor for the decision. The NPP, of which Conrad Sangma is the President, did not waste the opportunity to claim this as a victory for the party. This is quite ironic, considering that before the issue escalated into violence, Conrad Sangma and some of his cabinet ministers did not show much enthusiasm for it, as attested by their public statements.

During the early stages of the demand, NPP leader and cabinet minister Timothy D. Shira had defended the participation of the non-indigenous population in the GHADC, arguing that this practice dated back to the early days of the inception of the ADC. This, he claimed, was due to the spirit of brotherhood that existed among leaders during the independence movement. He did admit that in the present context this may need to change, and the non-indigenous population may no longer be given the right to vote. On the other hand, Conrad Sangma was evasive about the issue, terming it a "very complex problem... it has got multiple complications, connotations, and impacts at all levels." So, while the party and the government may term this a significant achievement, it is more accurate to acknowledge that they were forced to accede to the demand due to immense pressure from various pressure groups and political parties, especially the BJP, Congress, and the TMC, particularly leaders like Bernard Marak and Mukul Sangma. However, while hesitant in the beginning, it must also be acknowledged that Conrad Sangma was instrumental in getting the amendment passed by the Governor to bar the participation of the non-indigenous population in GHADC elections.

The Governor is more accurately described as a representative of the Union Government, and anything they do has immense legal and constitutional implications. Their role has come into sharper focus in recent times, when the actions of some Governors have come into direct conflict with their respective state governments. A very good example of this was R.N. Ravi, the former Governor of Tamil Nadu, who declined to pass the NEET Bill passed by the legislative assembly, claiming that it meant the "Bill is dead" (an argument later refuted by the Supreme Court), and also refused to re-induct K. Ponmudy into the cabinet after the Supreme Court had suspended his conviction in a corruption case, attracting the ire of the Chief Justice of India for defying the top court. It is difficult to imagine that all of this, done to humiliate the DMK-led government, was not at the behest of, or tacitly encouraged by, the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre. Now, on the eve of the very important West Bengal elections, he has been appointed Governor of the state, giving rise to speculation that his role will be highly critical in determining the final outcome. As the elections draw near, we can expect conflict between the TMC-led state government and the Governor very soon. It is in this context that C.H. Vijayashankar's assent to the amended rules barring the non-indigenous population from contesting elections in the GHADC has to be understood.

C.H. Vijayashankar would likely not have given his assent unless he was assured by the Union Government that his decision was legally and constitutionally tenable, or that he would be supported if it were challenged. Some form of support does appear to exist, as seen from the fact that in a press conference, senior BJP MP Ravishankar Prasad alleged that the unrest in Garo Hills was caused by infiltrators (i.e., illegal immigrants). He also claimed that while only certified Adivasis (meaning indigenous people) are allowed to contest, infiltrators marry local women to obtain false certificates to contest and win elections in the GHADC. This, he argued, alters the demographic balance of the region and directly affects the land, political rights, and representation of indigenous tribal communities. The BJP, under Bernard Marak, was in fact among the first to demand that the non-indigenous population be barred from taking part in GHADC elections. It is difficult to believe that the central party leadership is unaware of what local units are demanding, especially since any change in political participation in Sixth Schedule areas will have far-reaching implications beyond Garo Hills.

Before the amended rules were cleared by the Governor, Conrad Sangma had met him, and it is likely that he impressed upon him the need to approve the legislation. This appears to have worked, as the BJP would have realized that its chances of forming a government in the state are negligible for the foreseeable future. The best it can hope for is an alliance with other parties, and the NPP is the most viable partner. Congress and the TMC are political rivals at the national level, while the UDP is a Khasi-centric party. The same can be said of the VPP, which, despite trying to broaden its appeal, draws much of its support from Khasi voters across Khasi and Jaintia Hills through its Jaidbynriew politics, making alignment with the BJP's Hindutva politics difficult (for example, the Vande Mataram controversy). It also appears that Conrad Sangma has good personal relations with national leaders, which helps in securing political favors, such as favorable financial allocations. However, despite these relations, some popular demands, such as the introduction of the ILP and inclusion of Khasi and Garo in the Eighth Schedule, do not seem to have progressed, suggesting that this relationship has its limits. In this case, however, it is likely that before approaching the Governor, he consulted senior BJP leaders and secured assurances of support for passing the legislation. This is critical because the amendment in Meghalaya will have implications in Assam as well, where the BJP is currently in power and hopes to return for a third term.

Indigenous communities in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao are already following developments in Meghalaya with great interest. In a recent election rally in Maibang, Dima Hasao, Conrad Sangma spoke about stopping the slow dilution of the Sixth Schedule in the name of development. Former Congress leader Daniel Langthasa, who recently joined the NPP, is contesting from the Haflong constituency. He was also the convener of the Sixth Schedule Protection Committee. In Karbi Anglong, there have been demands for the eviction of immigrants from North India who are illegally occupying land in Sixth Schedule areas. These immigrants are also contesting ADC elections and currently have one representative in the KAAC. There is, therefore, significant interest among indigenous communities in these territories regarding the amendment barring non-indigenous participation in ADC elections. Once the GHADC elections are held and new legislators are sworn in, the legality of the amendment will likely be confirmed. Indigenous communities in Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, and possibly Bodoland may then demand similar measures in their regions. In fact, the NPP could use this issue to make inroads into indigenous territories in Assam by promising similar policies if given control of the respective ADCs.

Regarding Bodoland, the situation may be more complicated because the tripartite agreement between the Union Government of India, the Assam Government, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force provides for dedicated seats for non-indigenous populations. Still, for some emerging Bodo politicians, this could become a significant issue aiding their political rise. In fact, indigenous individuals from these territories could approach the courts, citing the GHADC precedent—and potentially future precedents in the KHADC and JHADC—to argue that non-indigenous populations should be barred from contesting ADC elections. What will be interesting to see is the reaction of the BJP government if it returns to power. In Garo Hills, the non-indigenous population in question is largely Bengali Muslim, but in Assam it could include Bengali Hindus, North Indian settlers, and other non-Muslim groups who form part of their voter base. Also, will an upper-caste Chief Minister (with genetic and historical connections to North India), rather than a Saikia, Bordoloi, Borphukan, or Borgohain, support such measures? It will be interesting to see. Conrad Sangma was correct in describing the issue of non-indigenous participation in ADCs as having "multiple complications, connotations, and impacts at all levels." We will soon find out how accurate that assessment was.

(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)

Kunki Chowdhury – A Ray of Hope, Or is She?

By Binodan K D Sarma

By the end of the 2026 general elections in Assam, one term that could become popular amongst the citizens is "Gen-Z." The few uninitiated may get confused with the term's striking phonetic similarity to "Genji" – the Assamese term for vest. And perhaps in some symbolic manner, they are not far from thinking so, since this could be a life vest for the dipping standards of Indian politics in general. Politics of late, has become murkier, and atrociously vindictive. Politics is now 'mid', 'cheugy' and 'basic' if we were to hear the opinion of the Indian Gen-Z. Yet, in Assam, a Gen-Z electoral candidate from Central Guwahati constituency, Kunki Chowdhury has 'aura farmed' her popularity. Her foray into the world of politics contesting against a BJP veteran like Vijay Gupta has got the internet and media discussing and debating feverishly. It has drawn interesting opinions from the likes of Parakala Prabhakar, the noted economist and husband of India's finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. Mr. Prabhakar in a video message on social media platform Instagram, has lauded Kunki's presence as a ray of hope not just for Assam but also for Andhra Pradesh to inspire the Gen-Z to move away from political apathy and participate on ground, head-on to contest the hegemony tendences of politics in Assam.

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Why Kunki's debut is creating such a strong sentiment can perhaps be understood by the collective apathy of young voters across Assam and perhaps even India seeking fresh blood to take on real issues and not religion based partisan politics. There has been much noise about the change that Balen Shah and his merry men and women have brought about in Nepal. And this is something that seasoned players like Gupta and the chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, are aware of. That Kunki is a formidable force and that her campaign rooted in real issues that people seek solutions for from their elected representative.

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Assam has close to 29% of voter base who are between the age group of 18-29 age bracket. This group is a formidable decisive factor if they decide to cast votes in favour of a change that impacts them. Multiple studies have revealed that they are motivated by real changes that impact society and their lives rather than divisive issues like caste and religion, which is the dominant narrative of most of the Indian election campaigns, specifically BJP's. Kunki has not escaped this onslaught either. The chief minister issued a press statement on her mother's food choices being anti Hindu/Sanatani. So much so, he repeated this statement multiple times in his campaign. What followed this attack is the more interesting part. The internet, across India and Assam rallied behind Kunki. Influencers and content creators came heavily on the chief minister as well as on the kind of politics that was on display. The old-school political campaign was being challenged on the internet, the medium that holds maximum influence for Gen Z voters. Kunki herself dealt with the episode with utmost grace condemning the CM for his statement but not vilifying him. This is where the Gen-Z audience excels. Unlike recent old school politicians who stoop to personal attacks, the young candidates, learn to look beyond and speak the truth gracefully.

A big question arises here – Will all this support across the internet, get Kunki votes? On ground the case could be different. The constituency she fights in is new. The 1.91 lakh voter base is dominant with a large faction of non-Assamese population, which in a way could favour the candidature of Vijay Gupta. But the voters have always surprised us. They often tend to look beyond identity to support cause-based, politics. The area is fraught with basic amenity issues like water supply, bad roads, water logging, garbage dumping and traffic jams. In this case Kunki's education background in education leadership from the prestigious University College London plays an effective role. Her campaign is designed in similar lines of how Mamdani shaped his narrative in New York to become a mayor. She candidly speaks of the possible solutions she aims to bring for her constituency to solve these issues. Her "Knock every Door" campaign has gathered much noise, compared to what a 70-year-old Gupta, seems to be promising. This is also something that one should note of the Gen-Z – they like to keep things simple and easy to comprehend. Complexity leads to anxiety and Kunki wants to avoid this while making her electoral promises. Assam goes to vote on April 9. Kunki's fate will be decided on that day. And so will be Assam's and central Guwahati's. And irrespective of the result, Kunki will remain a name to be reckoned with. She will continue to inspire, hopefully new faces across India, to discard the political apathy and step into the race beyond the social media activism that this generation actively engages in. India needs this desperately, so that the country and her states look beyond divisive politics, and the citizens taste progressiveness with results and not empty words.

(The author is an avid reader and observer of politics in India. The opinions expressed here are personal)

Letters to the Editor

The Sacred Cannot Be Secularized

Editor

When the dead of winter finally breaks, the earth does not simply thaw; it awakens. It is a time of profound renewal, a new beginning where the soil prepares to receive the seed, and the land breathes with life once more. For generations, our ancestors recognized this transition not just as a change in the season, but as a divine moment to celebrate Mother Nature. The festivals we hold, the rhythms we beat, and the dances we perform during this time were born from this deep reverence; an expression of pure gratitude to the earth, the rain, and the life-giving forces that sustain us.

Yet, this profound connection to the sacred earth sits at the center of a painful chasm that has existed within indigenous communities between those who held fast to traditional ways and those who converted to Western religions. Historically, the rhetoric from converts and missionaries was merciless: traditional practices, beliefs, and worldviews were branded as "barbaric," "savage," and "demonic."

If you argued that they gave education, they bought education to spread their ideology, when the western Education was brought to India the goal as mentioned in the Macaulay's minute is to raise a group of "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This will enable locals to engage with British officials and hence less resistance against the colonialists and this will enhance the plundering and looting in the country and fund the other exploitations by the British Empire. At the same time the practitioners of the old ways were ostracized, forced into hiding, or coerced into silence and their practices banned by using the infamous Section 144 of the IPC, such as the Pastieh in Raid Ialong or the Behdeinkhlam all over Jaintia Hills which led to the Jaintia Uprising.

Despite this onslaught, the Niamtre religion endured. It endured because a resilient minority refused to let the flame go out. They preserved the songs, the precise movements of the dances, and the timing of the festivals, recognizing that these were not mere social activities, but sacred duties to the ancestors and the Gods.

Now, a strange and unsettling phenomenon is occurring. The descendants of those who dismissed this heritage have encountered a crisis of identity. Having realized that they have not been, and perhaps never fully will be, absorbed into a completely westernized society, they are looking back toward their roots. But they are doing so selectively, and in a way that insults the very traditions they claim to embrace. They don't even know the meaning of Chadsukra, or Shad Suk Mynsiem,or Chad Pliang, or Chad Lahoo etc., or why these festivals are celebrated. Yes it's good and healthy to see our culture and identity grow but we are witnessing a convenient, intellectualized split between "religion" and "culture." These modern reinterpretations claim that the traditional dances and songs are merely "cultural expressions;" aesthetic performances that can be separated from their spiritual origins. They look at a dance meant to praise Mother Earth, to appease the God of Rain, to invoke the spirit of Fire, or to ensure Fertility, and they audaciously claim: "This is just culture, it is not religious."

This is a theological lie. In the indigenous worldview, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. The dance is the prayer. The song is about theology. When you move your body in the rhythm prescribed by the ancestors before you sow, you are engaging in a religious act honouring the Gods for rain and water for a plentiful harvest. To strip the deity from the dance is to leave it an empty shell.

Even more egregious is the increasing trend of performing these traditionally religious songs and dances within Church settings. It is a breathtaking display of double standards. It is a known reality that many church denominations strictly police these boundaries, issuing penalties or entirely cutting off members who dare to participate in authentic indigenous practices(shah ot balang). They draw a hard, punitive line to keep their followers away from the traditional religion, yet simultaneously copy and paste the aesthetics of our dances into their own sanctuaries. They are taking what is valuable, sacred, and true to us, and diluting it until it becomes bare entertainment for an audience that does not understand its depth and also they cannot dance properly as we have witnessed in the past year when they mimicked Shad Suk Mynsiem in Shad Paskha. Their dances were all chaotic while doing a dance which was meant to be uniform and rhythmic or performing the Chad Pliang or Plate dance with paper plates and black tape to stick the plate which is too pathetic to look at.

To be clear, pointing this out is not an attack on Christian beliefs. Rather, it is a necessary defense of authenticity and a strict call to respect originality. The question must be asked of those who seek this partial reclamation: Why do you desire only the aesthetic, and not the essence?

If you truly want to accept your roots, accept them fully. Do not selective-sample our heritage. You cannot love the dance and despise the God to whom the dance is dedicated. You cannot embrace the ancestor-given rhythm while turning your back on the ancestor-given faith. To attempt to do so is an act of spiritual appropriation and intellectual dishonesty.

Instead of settling for a copied, sanitized version, here is an open invitation: Come and witness the original.Experience the true essence of Chad Sukra or Shad Suk Mynsiem in April or the Behdeinkhlam in July. Come see these sacred festivals conducted properly by our Elders of Niamtre, the rightful custodians of our faith and heritage. Experience the profound depth of the rituals as they were meant to be practiced, rather than a diluted performance for entertainment.

The missionaries and the colonizers have long since departed. I know if we are still under British Rule by now nobody would care about our culture; everyone would follow the Western culture and by hook or by crook they will try to erase the ancestor given culture and faith. The era of forced assimilation is over, and there is absolutely no need to fear embracing your roots in their purest form. The traditional songs and dances are not a costume department from which one can pick and choose items to wear when one feels an identity crisis. It is a cohesive, living system that survived centuries of persecution. There are many aspects that constitute a culture such as food, dresses, language etc. but dances and songs are the faces of a culture and identity, these songs and dances are religious and social in nature and by any means you should not separate and draw a line between religion and culture, Preserve the sanctity, respect and understand its value, or leave it alone.

These festivals are in every length and breadth of Niamtre or Niam Khasi hence you can't separate them from culture. Or let me ask you a question, Is the Church slowly transforming Christianity to the religion they once considered as "Savage and Barbaric?"

Anyway, just as nature awakens from the dead of winter, so too does our history, and so do our lives.I really appreciate the Seng Khasi and the Seiñ Raij for preserving our Culture and Faith and we have seen how it blooms in the light of hope and growth. Let this season of renewal be an awakening to the unbroken truth of our heritage. With a thousand prayers, I wish you all a very happy Chad Sukra Festival and Shad Suk Mynsiem, and may the Gods bless you, our land, and our people.

Yours etc.,
O. Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"Colors are the smiles of nature."

— Leigh Hunt

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Whither 125th Amendment Bill

THE 125th Amendment Bill, 2019, which seeks to strengthen the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) is still pending in Parliament. As usual there is complete silence on this Bill in Meghalaya. However, there also appears to be no urgency on the part of the ADCs from other states such as Assam, Tripura, Mizoram etc., which have functional Councils and which are always struggling for resources. Apart from granting more financial powers to the Councils through direct funding from the central government to enable them to carry out their governance measures more effectively, the Amendment also proposes to create Village Councils and Municipal Councils under the ADCs.The purpose of the 125th Amendment is to ensure greater grassroots democracy in Sixth Schedule Areas. Above all it also seeks to reserve at least one-third seats for women in the ADCs. Over and above that the Councils will also be granted powers to propose plans for economic development and social justice at the grassroots level. This would meet the needs of last mile decentralised governance in Meghalaya where basic needs such as water supply and roads are still a distant dream. This Amendment should have been welcomed and the Sixth Schedule states should have persuaded their members in the Rajya Sabha to push for passage of the Bill. But for some reasons the states are dithering to further empower the Councils.

The Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in February 2019 and was referred to a Standing Committee for examination. The Committee submitted its report in 2020. But since then the Bill remains in cold storage with no state pushing for its passage. In fact, it was Meghalaya that sought exemptions from establishing Village and Municipal Councils on the plea that the Dorbar Shnong were already in existence although the mode of selection of office bearers to the Dorbar Shnong is not exactly a democratic one. The Parliamentary Committee found the exemption to be undemocratic. The Bill also proposes to increase the number of members in the ADCs but the criteria for that were not clear. It also proposes to include smaller tribes as being eligible to vote and hold office in the ADCs to reflect population and tribal diversity. There are of course concerns that overlapping authority could create governance conflicts besides lack of clarity on delimitation of constituencies. The Bill looks at a set of clear rules for the composition and functioning of new Councils and stronger framework for the powers and functions of local bodies which are not very clearly outlined as of today. The 125th Amendment would ensure that ADCs could prepare their own development plans and coordinate better with the Dorbar Shnong apart from influencing welfare programmes. As a result development could become more locally tailored to the needs of tribal communities.

Meghalaya was one state that raised concerns before the Parliamentary Standing Committee stating that if passed the Bill could create more bureaucracy and even lead to conflict with the traditional institutions. The Government apparently is not very happy about more financial devolution to the Councils for that could have political fall-outs if the Councils were to perform to their optimum and address the grassroots governance needs. The problem is that there is no public pressure on the political leadership of Meghalaya to press for passage of the Bill. In fact, Meghalaya is the only 6th Schedule State that is resisting passage of the 125th Amendment.

Religion without Conscience Collapses into Disaster: Michael Syiem Affirms

By Salil Gewali

God does not play dice with the Universe

When Michael N. Syiem invited me to his unique musical play 'After Ayodhya: Its Conscience and Man,' I sensed it would be more than music. It was an invitation to step into a world where conscience speaks louder than chants. Michael Syiem, former president of the Khasi Students' Union and chairman of the Maitshaphrang Movement has always been concerned about injustice and the many forms of discrimination that plague modern society. He often speaks about the ignored voices of single mothers and the downtrodden. These are concerns we have discussed together many times.

When the play unfolded, I was filled with awe. To be honest, it does not take long before the play grips you. Yes, the play asks a brutal question --- What happens when "conscience" is silenced in the name of religion? This fact deeply touched me. Through songs, poetry, and dialogue, Michael exposes the rot of fanaticism and the shameless commercialisation of faith by unscrupulous godmen.

Indeed, the first scene where representatives of different religions fight over a patch of holy land, tearing down the sacred structures of others one after another and erecting their own, is not theatre. It, in fact, is a mirror -- one that feels uncomfortably real because we see ourselves in it. How can one justify destroying a sacred structure of another faith, only to raise their own upon its ruins? To truly understand who, when, how, and why the sacred Ayodhya site became a ground of discord, one should have enough patience to look into history. What is certain is that people were "weighed down" by distorted interpretations of religion rather than by sincere devotion to the Almighty, who belongs to "all", and His unfathomable creation.

Michael therefore thoughtfully chooses "conscience" as the central voice of his work, revealing a profound understanding of faith and humanity. Clearly, he is not merely telling a story; he is striving to awaken a moral awareness that many of us have allowed to lie dormant. As Bhogtoram Mawroh, a prolific writer, observed in his article "After Ayodhya: A Play that Interrogates Theatre, Land, and Identity" (ST, February 19, 2026), I too salute Michael for daring to bring such lofty ideas to the stage. He strongly believes that when conscience bleeds, society suffers. The play emphatically reminds us that without "conscience", religion becomes a hollow ritual, politics turns into cruelty, and humanity loses its soul. In other words, once conscience is gone, everything else slowly falls apart. Ultimately, it is a clarion call to awaken the inner voice, the only guide capable of leading us toward compassion, justice, and genuine human dignity.

The play very aptly underlines Karl Marx's famous proclamation that "religion is the opium of the masses." But today, I personally feel it is much worse. It has become a soil that breeds hatred and nourishes bloodshed. At times, one wonders how something meant to unite every human being ends up dividing so fiercely. How did God, the symbol of eternal love and compassion, become the excuse for devilish violence? If a mother's name sparks a quarrel among her children, the fault lies with the children. Likewise, the Almighty is not diminished by our quarrels, but we are, becoming "unworthy" even to approach Him. Strangely enough, we rarely pause to think about this.

To me, nothing is more absurd than believing in the exclusivity of one religion as the sole truth in the universe while dismissing all others as inferior. Such shouts of absolutism have long been exacting a heavy toll on humanity. In this twenty-first century, those who claim that 'my religion alone is the pathway to God' must be reminded of one scientific fact. We now know how unimaginably vast this universe is. With today's incredible advances in technology, astrophysicists have concluded that there could be millions of Earth-like planets in our galaxy, the Milky Way. And what about Andromeda, which is twice the size of the Milky Way? The most astounding thing is not just the Milky Way and Andromeda together, but the entire Local Group, comprising over 54 galaxies, which itself is nothing more than a dust speck when compared to the observable universe. Can we seriously believe that the inhabitants of an infinite number of Earth-like worlds across the cosmos are lining up to recite the same sermons and slogans that originated in ancient India, Judea, Mecca, or Nepal? The fanaticism of such a thought, and the supremacy of one religion, is not only comical but pathetically absurd, collapsing into insignificance before the inconceivable vastness of the Almighty.

An eminent journalist and my mentor, Patricia Mukhim, perhaps a little disillusioned, a few days ago posted on her Facebook wall: "We live on this planet for a limited period, yet we are filled with hate for fellow humans, hatred based on religious differences, ethnicities, and more. Did any of the religious leaders teach hatred? Isn't hatred a human construct that blinds people into believing theirs is the only true religion?" I must say --- these words hit the nail on the head.

Michael's play strikes even deeper when it invokes Tagore's poem "Leave This Chanting." The Nobel laureate poet reminds us that God cannot be confined to places of worship alone. He lives most clearly among the poor, the farmers, and the hungry child -- where the tiller ploughs the soil and the labourers toil for their daily bread. True worship is not chanting alone; it is serving the needy with compassion and without discrimination. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa humbled himself and extinguished the ember of ego by serving those whom society branded as "low caste." He welcomed devotees of every background and blessed them with equal warmth, seeing no distinction of caste or creed before God. Inspired by his master's teachings to see God in every being, Vivekananda declared service to humanity as the highest worship. Jesus Christ taught that feeding the hungry and healing the sick were acts of serving Him directly, and he upheld forgiveness as one of the highest virtues. These are not rituals; they are conscience in action for self-evolution. The Prophet Muhammad, too, embodied mercy and compassion. He gave freely to the poor, choosing generosity over possession, and showed through his life that true wealth lies in service, not in accumulation.

Alas, the saddest reality today is that instead of serving humanity and striving for self-purification, followers of different faiths are busy sharpening their knives in the name of God. Sacred places of worship are often transformed into centres of narrow indoctrination and battlegrounds. The true temple of God lies within our hearts, not merely outside. "Tat Tvam Asi" -- "You Are That" (You are identical to the universal, absolute reality) -- is among the most profound proclamations of the ancient Upanishads --- books of wisdom. This doctrine of the East evoked an incredible "wow" among leading modern scientists such as Schrödinger, Brian David Josephson, and Robert Oppenheimer, as well as philosophers like Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Eliot, and Yeats. It profoundly reshaped their vision of reality and revealed the all-pervasive nature of consciousness.

It reminds us that divinity is not remote but "innate". Any person, irrespective of caste, creed, or status, can realise God -- or more precisely, discover his or her own true Self by practising detached action to calm the mental noise. At the same time, the cultivation of purity of thought, compassion, and selfless service becomes the path to that supreme realisation.

Hence, it may be said that this musical play by Michael reinforces that we must stop fighting over God and start living with Him by serving, by loving, and by being truly human. That alone is the religion worthy of both ourselves and society. By hurting others, we end up hurting ourselves. God does not play dice with the Universe! (Einstein's quote)

(Salil Gewali is best known for his research-based work, "Great Minds on India," which has been translated into fifteen languages. The book carries a foreword by NASA chief scientist, and he is also a member of the International Human Rights Commission).

Moral & Emotional Development of Children a Critical Need

By Jenniefer Dkhar

In an age driven by rapid technological advancement, fierce competition, and the persistent pursuit of material success, the moral and emotional development of children is often pushed to the periphery. Yet, no society can flourish on academic brilliance and economic progress alone. The true strength of a nation lies in the values, conscience, and character of its citizens. The responsibility of nurturing these qualities begins at home and is reinforced in educational institutions, making parents and educators the primary architects of a child's moral and social foundation.

Our home is the first institution where children learn the fundamental lessons of right and wrong, mutual respect, love, and compassion long before they enter formal education. The values they observe and absorb during these formative years remain deeply rooted in their minds and guide them throughout their lives. As parents, we must lead by example by practising honesty, kindness, patience and empathy in our daily lives. Children learn more from what we do than what we say.

As we live in a fast-paced world where there appears to be paucity of time, it becomes even more crucial for parents to redefine our priorities. Without abandoning our professional responsibilities, we need to recognise the importance of balancing work and family life. We live in an age filled with competition, economic pressures, deadlines and the constant push to provide comfort and security for our children. Yet, in doing so, we often unknowingly deprive them of the emotional bond and presence they deeply need. Children need their parents to listen to them, to share their joys and sorrows as well as their challenges and triumphs. They need to feel assured that their parents are always there for them. Values such as empathy, respect, patience, kindness and love cannot merely be taught; they must be practised. When homes become places where conversations are hurried and family meals are rare, children will feel lonely, neglected and emotionally detached, and they will seek attention elsewhere.

We are increasingly exposed to social media and technology, requiring parents, educators and elders to remain vigilant. While social media offers opportunities for learning and connectivity, if used unchecked it can be harmful mentally, emotionally and socially. Constant comparison with unrealistic images of perfection can lead to anxiety and low self-esteem. Excessive screen time distracts children from studies, reading, physical activities and creative pursuits, thereby affecting their academic performance and overall development. What is even more alarming is the availability of morally questionable content such as violence, abuse, bullying, hate speech, vulgarity and inappropriate adult themes that can corrupt young minds and disintegrate their sense of right and wrong. It is incumbent that children are guided to use social media as a tool for learning and growth rather than as a source of addiction and harm.

Alongside parents and the home, educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping young minds. Educational institutions are no less than temples of education as they are sacred spaces where minds and souls are nurtured. Students must not only be taught to pursue academic excellence. They should also be taught tolerance and compassion. Educational institutions should prepare students not merely to earn a livelihood but to live responsibly and ethically in society. By integrating values such as fairness, honesty, integrity, and mutual respect into education, institutions can cultivate individuals who carry these principles throughout their lives.

Our children must grow into women and men who are not only confident and accomplished but also ethical, upright, generous, and tolerant. These values must be firmly embedded in their hearts and minds from an early age so that they stand on solid moral ground. While parents build character at home through love, guidance and examples, educational institutions reinforce these values through discipline, knowledge and moral instruction. The true measure of success should not only be how high students score academically but how firmly their moral values are rooted.

Our children who are the pillars of tomorrow must grow up in a safe and nurturing environment where they become intellectually competent, morally upright, and socially responsible citizens. Both home and educational institutions must work together to sow the seeds of love, kindness and compassion in young hearts and minds. Only then can we hope to build a world marked by peace, hope, and prosperity.

Thus, the responsibility of shaping morally grounded, compassionate, and conscientious citizens cannot rest on one institution alone. It must be a shared commitment between homes and educational institutions, supported by society at large. Academic brilliance without character is incomplete and technological advancement without ethical grounding is dangerous. If we aspire for a future marked by harmony, justice and humanity we must begin by investing time, care and moral guidance in our children. If we wish to live in a world marked by peace, dignity and mutual respect, we must begin by cultivating these values in our homes and classrooms. The future of our society depends not only on how educated our children become but on how humane, ethical and compassionate they grow up to be.

"The values they observe and absorb during these formative years remain deeply rooted in their minds and guide them throughout their lives. As parents, we must lead by example by practising honesty, kindness, patience and empathy in our daily lives. Children learn more from what we do than what we say."

"Children need their parents to listen to them, to share their joys and sorrows as well as their challenges and triumphs. They need to feel assured that their parents are always there for them. Values such as empathy, respect, patience, kindness and love cannot merely be taught; they must be practised."

Letters to the Editor

Rebuttal to "The Sacred Cannot Be Secularized"

Editor,

I write to register my strong objection to the letter "The Sacred Cannot Be Secularized" by one O. Lyngdoh, published on April 9, 2026 in your esteemed daily. While public discourse on faith and identity is welcome, the piece in question is marked less by scholarly rigour and more by sweeping assertions, selective historiography, and rhetorical overreach.

The claim that Christians have fundamentally misunderstood Khasi festivals such as Shad Suk Mynsiem, Chad Sukra, Chad Pliang, and Chad Lahoo etc, and that missionaries uniformly "trampled upon" indigenous traditions reflect a deeply reductive reading of history. The encounter between Christianity and Khasi belief systems was neither singular nor uniformly oppressive. It was complex, layered, and often reciprocal. To flatten this into a narrative of unilateral cultural erasure is not merely inaccurate—it is intellectually irresponsible.

Equally troubling is the attempt to portray contemporary Khasi society as one defined by religious antagonism. This is demonstrably false. The lived reality of these hills is one of coexistence, shared cultural spaces, and mutual accommodation. To suggest otherwise is to distort reality and, more dangerously, to risk manufacturing divisions where none inherently exist.

More concerning, however, is the ideological undertone that seeks to appropriate and reinterpret indigenous Khasi faith traditions through external religious frameworks. The Khasi belief system as stated by one Seng Khasi leader is not an extension of any mainland religious paradigm, nor is it available for ideological absorption. Its distinctiveness is not negotiable. Any attempt implicit or explicit to subsume it within broader constructs is both misguided and intrusive.

At the same time, it is disingenuous to erase or diminish the contributions of early missionaries in education, healthcare, and linguistic development. The standardization of the Khasi script and the expansion of literacy are not incidental footnotes but foundational developments. To ignore these is to engage in selective memory masquerading as critique.

The allegation that Christians historically regarded indigenous faiths as "savage" or "barbaric," presented without credible evidence, reads less like historical analysis and more like provocation. Such language does little to illuminate the past and much to inflame present sensitivities.

What is most regrettable about the letter is its implicit encouragement of division under the guise of cultural preservation. Khasi society has long been guided by the principle of Jaidbynriew a recognition that community and shared humanity transcend religious differences. Narratives that undermine this principle must be called out for what they are: destabilizing and unnecessary. It is very unfortunate that, after remaining in deep slumber for many decades, some outsiders are now irresponsibly stoking the fires of communalism, having realized that the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are a neglected yet fertile ground for mainland religions. We suspect ulterior motives in this content.

If we are to engage meaningfully with our past, let it be with intellectual honesty rather than polemical exaggeration. Our strength lies not in rehearsing grievances but in sustaining the plural, interdependent society we have inherited.

Yours etc,
Kuparmeri Shylla
Shillong-1

Protect Lumpongdeng Island from Unsustainable Development

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw attention to the growing concern surrounding the proposed development at Lumpongdeng Island in Umiam Lake.

Lumpongdeng Island is an ecologically sensitive zone and an important natural heritage of Meghalaya. The reported plans for large-scale tourism infrastructure on the island have raised serious apprehensions among citizens regarding potential environmental damage and loss of biodiversity.

While development and tourism are vital for the economic progress of the state, they must be pursued responsibly. Any project in such fragile ecosystems should be preceded by transparent decision-making, comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments, and meaningful public consultation.

I therefore, urge the concerned authorities to reconsider the inclusion of Lumpongdeng Island in any major development project and to ensure that environmental preservation is given due priority. Protecting our natural resources today is essential for securing the future of generations to come.

Yours etc.,
Donald Albert Kurbah
Mawphlang

The Rilbong Bypass a Short-sighted Idea

Editor,

The ongoing traffic congestion in Shillong has become a matter of serious public concern, with daily commuters facing increasing delays and disruptions across key routes in the city.

Recent measures undertaken to address the crisis , particularly the development of alternative routes through the Rilbong corridor have raised significant questions regarding their effectiveness and overall justification. While the government has initiated steps such as the inauguration of a short 0.185 km link road near the Anjalee petrol pump, constructed at a cost of approximately Rs 3.36 crore, the expected reduction in congestion is limited to just 10–20%, indicating a largely temporary and marginal impact.

Such interventions fail to address the root causes of Shillong's traffic challenges, which stem from narrow legacy roads, rapidly increasing vehicular density, and the absence of a comprehensive and forward-looking urban mobility plan. Instead of resolving the issue, these measures risk offering only short-term relief.

As a resident of Rilbong, I wish to emphasize that this concern does not stem from opposition to development, but from a genuine desire to see Shillong and the state of Meghalaya progress in a sustainable and well-planned manner. The decision to channel traffic through the Rilbong corridor which is already a sensitive and densely populated area has further intensified public concern, as these diversions merely shift congestion from one location to another while placing additional strain on residential and heritage zones.

It is increasingly evident that relying on the Rilbong corridor as a primary solution is neither adequate nor justified. Having also been a student of P.N. Chaudhuri Higher Secondary School, currently working for an MNC, I can personally relate to the unique environment and atmosphere that defines this locality, an environment that plays a crucial role in the learning experience of students. The introduction of increased vehicular movement through this area risks disrupting that very essence, diminishing the calm, safe, and focused surroundings that students deserve.

Shillong urgently requires a long term, integrated approach to traffic management that prioritizes infrastructure development, efficient public transport systems, and scientifically planned urban expansion over ad-hoc and limited impact measures.

Yours etc.,
Debarun Bhattacharjee,
Shillong -4

New WhatsApp Features

Editor,

I wish to draw attention to an important development in digital communication. WhatsApp is reportedly introducing a 'username' feature that will allow users to connect without sharing their mobile numbers. As a regular user, I feel this is a very welcome and much-needed change.

At present, we have to share our phone numbers to communicate on WhatsApp. While this makes connecting easy, it also exposes users to unwanted messages, spam calls, and sometimes even misuse of personal information. Many people hesitate to share their numbers, especially when interacting with unknown contacts.

In this context, the proposed username system appears to be a practical solution. It will allow users to communicate more safely without revealing their personal contact details. This will be particularly helpful for women, students, and professionals who value privacy and wish to avoid unnecessary disturbances.

From a safety point of view, this feature can help reduce risks such as harassment and cyber fraud. It also gives users better control over who can reach them. At the same time, it brings WhatsApp in line with other platforms where usernames are used instead of phone numbers.

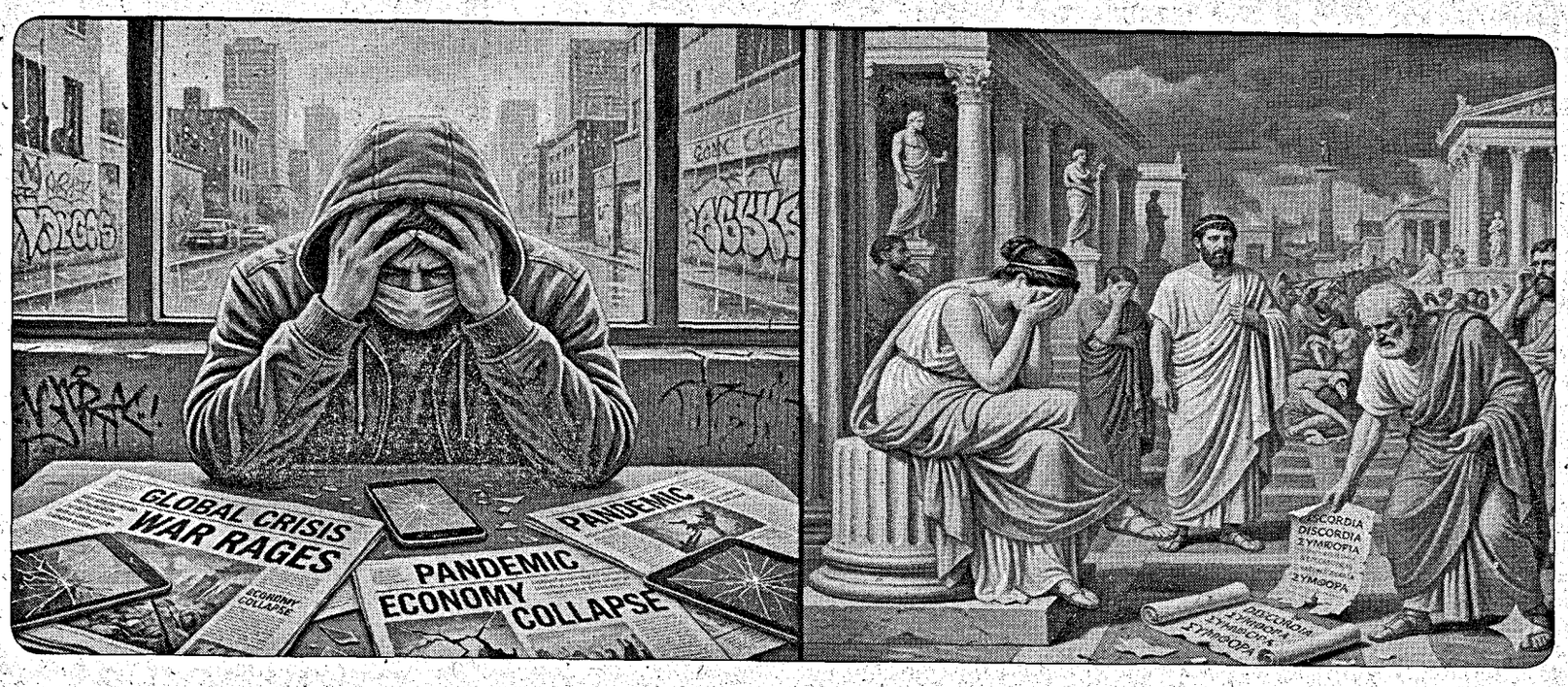
If implemented properly, this could become one of the most useful updates to WhatsApp, making communication not only easier but also safer. I sincerely hope that such steps continue to be taken to protect users and improve their experience.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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

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Ancient Greeks, Romans' despair at world



If you're feeling fed up with the way things are in the world, then, no matter your politics, you are experiencing an emotion people have felt for millennia.

Perhaps you feel helpless. Maybe you feel like the character in the Roman dramatist Terence's play The Brothers (160 BCE), who exclaims:we're enclosed by so many things from which there's no escape: violence, poverty, injustice, loneliness, disgrace. What an age we live in!

What can you do? As we will see, ancient people had different ideas about how to act: One popular option was to retreat- or try to retreat- from the world, renouncing involvement and avoiding society. A less common option was to try to sort things out in the world by yourself, as one person facing all its woes.

Heraclitus' escape

Heraclitus of Ephesus (c.540-480 BCE) is one of the most prominent Greek philosophers known for becoming disillusioned with worldly affairs. Heraclitus - Abraham Janssens (c.1601). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. His main gripe was with politics.

He disliked the insolence and stupidity of politicians and the laws they created. He was also tired of the foolishness of the people, who didn't defend their laws and constitutions: "the people," he said, "must fight for the law as for city-walls".

When his friend Hermodorus was banished from Ephesus, Heraclitus condemned the city for elevating foolish men and destroying good men.

As the historian Diogenes Laertius informs us, Heraclitus told the leaders of Ephesus that they were so worthless they should kill themselves:

The Ephesians would do well to end their lives, every grown man of them, and leave the city to beardless boys, for that they have driven out Hermodorus, the worthiest man among them, saying, "We will have none who is worthiest among us; or if there be any such, let him go elsewhere and consort with others."

When the people of Ephesus asked why an intelligent man like Heraclitus ignored politics and preferred instead to play games of knuckle-bones with children, he apparently said civil life was no longer worth an intelligent man's time:

Are you astonished? Is it not better to do this than to take part in your civil life?

Eventually, Heraclitus couldn't bear it any more. As Diogenes Laertius continues the story, Heraclitus "became a hater of his kind".

He took to wandering in the mountains, living on grass and herbs, but "when this gave him dropsy, he made his way back to the city and put this riddle to the physicians, whether they were competent to create a drought after heavy rain".

He then tried to cure himself by repairing to a cowshed and burying himself in manure.

Living his life in the mountains away from society, Heraclitus' health quickly deteriorated. He died soon after at the age of 60.

Sertorius' dream of escape

Quintus Sertorius (123-72 BCE) was a Roman statesman who distinguished himself by his rhetorical skill and his military victories as a commander against tribes in Gaul.

During the political unrest in Rome in the 90s BCE, Sertorius was sent to command the empire's Spanish provinces. While there, he became an enemy of the ruling faction at Rome and effectively established his own independent rule of Spain for eight years.

Sertorius and his deer- Juan León Pallière (1849). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Sertorius' enemies at Rome sent armies to Spain to defeat him, but were unsuccessful in dislodging him. Sertorius set up his own senate of 300 members.

This included a mix of Romans and members of Spanish tribes. He consolidated his popularity by appealing to local superstitions – he went everywhere accompanied by a white fawn, a symbol of divine power.

After years of threats and toil, Sertorius became sick of it all. According to the Greek historian Plutarch (c.46-119 CE), Sertorius met some sailors "who had recently come back from the Atlantic Islands".

The sailors spoke of a land off the coast of Africa with a warm climate and plentiful food and water. Most importantly, it was far away from all the political and military turmoil.

Plutarch tells us that the words of the sailors made an impression:

When Sertorius heard this tale, he was seized with an amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet, freed from tyranny and wars that would never end.

Nobody today knows for sure what islands these sailors were referring to. Some possibilities are Madeira, Porto Santo or the Canary Islands. Unfortunately for Sertorius, he never found his "escape".

He endured many more years of political and social strife, until he was murdered by conspirators in 72 BCE.

Can happiness come from disengagement?

Many people living in ancient Greece and Rome appear to have recognised that happiness can come from removing oneself from worldly affairs.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (c.341-270 BCE) advised people to seek obscurity and avoid the world. His famous saying is two words: "live unknown". Some disagreed, of course. Plutarch, for example, thought Epicurus' idea was a mark of defeat and a waste of the potential of living:

he who casts himself into the unknown state and wraps himself in darkness and buries his life in an empty tomb would appear to be aggrieved at his very birth and to renounce the effort of being.

Others, however, seemed to favour the idea that disappearing into a a quiet and hidden life, ignorant of the world's affairs, could bring happiness. The Roman poet Horace (65-8 BCE), for example, wrote:

Happy the man who, far from business concerns, works his ancestral acres with his oxen like the men of old, free from every kind of debt; he is not wakened, like a soldier, by the harsh bray of the bugle, and has no fear of the angry sea; he avoids both the city centre and the lofty doorways of powerful citizens.

For Horace, someone who is happy is far from cities and armies, living simply on his ancestral farm with animals and loved ones- with no debt.

Taking matters into your own hands

Some, of course, don't want to retreat from things.

They want to solve problems and make the world around them better. But how can you do this if you're just an ordinary person?

The Athenian playwright Aristophanes (450-388 BCE) had a comical, tongue-in-cheek solution. In his play Acharnians, first performed in 425 BCE, he depicts a man called Dicaeopolis who is fed up with politics.

Dicaeopolis is not only tired of politicians lying and starting endless wars; he is also tired of people voting selfishly for handouts and for harmful policies. The people, he says, "can be bought and sold".

So Dicaeopolis comes up with a personal solution. He will "make a treaty with the Spartans for me alone and my children and the missus" so his family can live in peace.

His efforts are a triumph. He successfully negotiates the treaty and lives freely, enjoying privileges other citizens cannot, like farming, trading with other states and drinking.

The play is not meant to be taken seriously- it is a comedy, after all, and no private individual would really be able to negotiate a treaty with another city. But its plot reveals something about the political frustration ordinary citizens can often feel.

So what can you do if you are fed up with politics?

Two thousand years later, the options haven't improved much. The ancient advice is clear: you can withdraw, endure, or laugh. Preferably the last option. It seems to have the best survival rate. *(The Conversation)*

[This article was written by Konstantine Panegyres Lecturer in Classics and Ancient History, The University of Western Australia]

'Star - Gazing'

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

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon square Venus on your solar return chart will give mixed results. Your expenses will rise and you will have to take loans from somewhere. Some sudden problems can aggrieve you. Your opponents will pose a problem or two and will keep an eye on you. Your carefree attitude can bring some losses, so you need to take care of that. You will do all your work with patience. You will also go on an outing or trip with family. You will also undertake responsibilities of your family well. You will also take care of your parents well. You will also have wonderful bonds with your parents. Your relationships at your in-laws' place will improve. This is the time to do hard work. Destiny and luck will smile on you.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) You will get victory in legal matters. You will even perform professionally well. You will have upper edge in official matters. You could be given an important position. You will also complete all held-up tasks. You will be flush with funds and will have no financial problems. You will also enjoy robust health. There is also yoga for getting married to a person of your own choice. You could get a promotion too suddenly. Senior officials will be supportive. You will also start a new work/business. You will also share good bonding with your mate and family members. Days will bring joy and wealth. You will also get success in every job. People associated with technical jobs will reap more benefits.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) It is a major gainsay week for you. Your worries will come to an end. Your confidence will be high. You will also contact new people. New job/business offers will come. With the help of your friends your messed up tasks will improve. You will have financial gains. Your romantic life is going to be wonderful. A chance encounter can lead to a rollicking affair. Those who are in a relationship for a long time will plan to get married. You can also go on a fun trip with family. You will be having lot of unforgettable moments with your friends and loved ones. You could get attracted to politics and social matters. You will also achieve success in your business. You will also see positive changes in yourself. Decisions taken after deep thought will help you earn money.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) The start of the week is going to be pleasant. You will be happy and cheerful. Some unforgettable moments will be spent in the company of your love mate/partner. There will be a family get together too. Old memories will be refreshed, and you will become nostalgic. These are also good days in terms of money. You will also hear pleasant or happy news from somewhere. You will get good job/business offers. Due to your strong will power you will start moving towards the path of success. Money and wealth will keep coming. Your enemies and opponents will not succeed in harming your interests. You will be empathetic. You will finish all work with seriousness. You will also be able to create harmony among the people around you.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is a very special week for you. You will do something new and will be under no tension. You will be easily able to complete your work with the assistance of your colleagues. You will also have financial gains. You will also have interest towards spiritualism and will perform noble deeds. You will have many wealthy and auspicious days. Your prestige will also increase. You will have new job/business offers. Your communication skills are going to be second to none. Those who are unmarried will get good marriage proposals. You would also like to go to a peaceful place amidst nature to seek some solace. You will be artistic and imaginative. You will also be traditional and fulfill your desires and will also enhance your knowledge.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) These are enlightened days. You will see life again with a lot of hope and interests. Your financial position is going to get better. You will also make progress in your work. You will have the desire to do something new for yourself, for which you will learn a lot of things. Your bosses will support you. The time will be favorable. You will have a wonderful romantic life. Your partner will support you a lot. The star of your destiny will become strong and help you move forward in your life. Business partnerships will be extremely favorable during this time. You will work full of energy on receiving a desired task. You will start doing good deeds. There are possibilities of you spending money on household items. Your opponents will get defeated.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) It is going to be a wonderful week. You will be happy and in a pleasant mood. You will be relaxed a lot. These are days to acquire lot of money. You will also be busy with your official matters. You will show your potential to everyone through your work. It is also a time to get recognized. You will share fun moments with your mate. Lovebirds will be having a wonderful bond. You will also fulfill your new plannings and hobbies. You will give importance to everything. It is going to be an important time from the point of view of worldly and spiritual perspective. New projects will take shape.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) It is going to be prestige enhancing week. The graph of your self-respect, dignity and popularity will go upward. You will also get lot of opportunities to rise in your business/work. You will reach the peak of your potential. Even your financial position will get better. Your bosses will support you fully. You will also fulfill all your potential and capabilities. You will also win trust in your closed ones. People will also appreciate your gentle and sober nature. In the latter part of the week, you will take a short business trip which will turn out to be beneficial. Some pleasant news will lift your spirit. It is likely that you can meet a seer or spiritual guru and receive the blessings.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) The favorable placement of planets will stabilize your monetary profits. You will feel a lot more secure now than even before. You will also attend a party or function. And you will be the center of attraction. You will attract people with your gentle nature. You will be worried about the career of your children. You would also like to spend some time in seclusion and like to meditate and read informative and adventurous books. Even Yoga, prayers, worship and religious acts will attract you. Your financial condition will get better, and you will pay attention to your work which will reward you. You will develop a dynamic personality and positive thoughts.

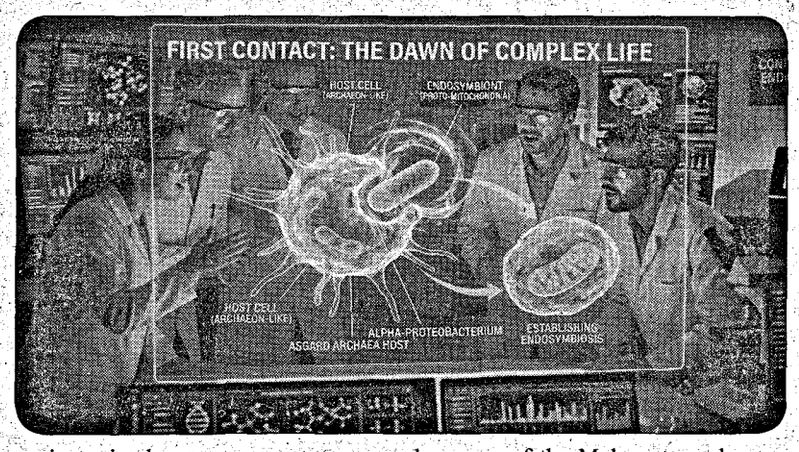
Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) It is now the appropriate time to decide about your plan. A change in job looks certain. You may also undertake expansion of business. Your bosses will be satisfied with your performance. This will make you happy. You will be interested in focusing on attention on studies, writing and exams. There can be some situations in your job where you will have to take quick decisions. You will also have the support of good friends. Your bonding with your partner/spouse will get better and both of you will be able to understand each other much better. You will also make new friends. Your hard work and efforts will be behind your sudden success. You could be elevated in your job. Your communication skills are going to be second to none. You will be more open-minded and will pay more attention to yourself than to others.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) You will be busy with your work and will fulfill your targets. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will also look for new job or business. A chance encounter with an unknown person can lead to romantic ties. You will give full time to your family. Enemies and opponents will be active but will be unable to harm your interests. Relations with relatives will be cordial and sweet. Your romantic life is going to be wonderful. Lovemates will have a wonderful time and understand each other's feelings better. You will also clinch a major financial deal. But read all documents well before signing them. You will develop interests in yoga, meditation and prayers. You will remain active in diversified work area. Your income will increase. Bosses and seniors will be satisfied with your work.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) You will be able to finish all the tasks that have been pending for a long time. You will make good progress in your job/business. Opportunities will bring peace and happiness in your life. You will also be able to achieve the targets you have set at your work. People will praise your intelligence, creativity, and potential. You will also meet an important personality. You will share good relations with your mate. You will suggest something vital to him/her. You will be busy with events, programs, seminars etc. You will make new contracts. Your responsibilities will also increase at your workplace. The communication among colleagues is going to be very good. Both will understand each other's feelings.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) You will get opportunities to move ahead in your career, and everyone will agree on your potential. Don't trust everyone in financial matters otherwise they can betray you. Your time will be spent reading an informational or adventurous book. Your mind will be happy after meeting an old friend after a long time. You will think about new plans. You will take care of even the small needs and desires of your children and family. There will be smoothness and easiness in the relationship between you and your partner. There is possibility of buying new things. There will be improvements in the health of your parents. Your journey will be favorable.

'First contact' that may have led to complex life on Earth finally witnessed by scientists



On the shores of the west coast of Australia lies a window to our past: the stromatolites and microbial mats of Gathaagudu (Shark Bay).

To the untrained eye they look like a collection of rocks and slime- but they are in fact teeming with microbial life.

And these stromatolites are living "relics" of ancient ecosystems that thrived on Earth billions of years ago.

If you wade past, it feels like you're walking back through time. In fact, the first bubbles of oxygen that filled the atmosphere on early Earth likely came from ancient stromatolites. You could say we owe our very existence to these piles of rocks.

So, what other secrets of our past could these ecosystems tell us?

Through decades of research, we know how early life has woven its path through these "living rocks".

But most recently our team embarked on the greatest genealogy search of them all: searching for our great microbial ancestors, the Asgard archaea.

And in a new paper, published today in the journal *Current Biology*, we report how this search led to the discovery of a key clue that could help explain how complex life evolved on Earth.

The cells that comprise complex life

Asgard archaea were originally named after Norse gods. This fascinating group of microbes sits on the cusp of one of the most significant events in the evolution of life: the origin of the complex cells that make up plants and animals, known as eukaryotes.

The cells that comprise complex life

Evidence suggests Asgard archaea are the closest relatives of eukaryotes. And that on an early Earth it was the "marriage" of an ancient Asgard archaeon and a bacterium that led to the first eukaryotes. They formed an ancient partnership. They shared resources and physically interacted, leading to the first complex cells.

Like a Romeo and Juliet tale of two distant families coming together, Asgard archaea and bacteria decided it was time to break from traditional family values. But we have never seen a model of how this may have occurred. Until now.

Holding up a mirror to the ancient past

Our team used the mats of Shark Bay as a "seed" to establish cultures of these ancient microbes.

We are one of only four groups worldwide to achieve this, through years of research with a dedicated team of graduate students nurturing the Asgards like offspring. But the Asgards were not alone. We found them together with a sulphate-loving bacterium.

Could this be a model of how complex life may have started on a primitive Earth?

We began by sequencing the Asgards' DNA to decipher exactly how these microbes tick at the genetic level.

We also used artificial intelligence to model how proteins could have behaved in a world before eukaryotes.

Evidence suggested these two microbes were sharing nutrients. In other words, they were cooperating.But we wanted to delve deeper.

What do our great microbial ancestors look like?

Here we turned to electron cryotomography, a high-resolution imaging approach that allowed us to observe cells and structures at a nanometre scale.

And here we showed- for the first time- an Asgard archaeon and a bacterium directly interacting.

Tiny nanotubes were connecting the two organisms- perhaps reflecting what their great-ancestors did on an early Earth that ultimately led to the explosion of complex life as we know it.

Weaving western science with Indigenous knowledge

This was a major discovery- one that originated in Gathaagudu, a World Heritage Site with significant environmental and cultural values.

Aboriginal people first inhabited Gathaagudu over 30,000 years ago. We wanted to recognise and celebrate the language of the Malgana people, one of the traditional language groups of Gathaagudu.

We also wanted to connect western science with Indigenous Knowledge in a meaningful way. To this end and working closely with the world's foremost Malgana language expert, Kymberley Oakley, and Aboriginal elders, a name was granted for our novel Asgard archaeon from the language of the Malgana people: Nerearchaeum marumarumayae.

The species name- marumarumayae- is derived from the Aboriginal language of the Malgana people, meaning "ancient home", a reference to stromatolites being of ancient origin in Earth's history.

Weaving Aboriginal language into the naming of our new microbe represents a fitting connection between unique Aboriginal culture in Australia and the ancient microbe discovered that calls the mats of Gathaagudu "home".

Gathaagudu is under threat from global change, from increased heatwaves, cyclonic events and human activity.

And among the values to preserve and conserve are the significant Aboriginal connections as well as the trails of life going back through evolutionary time.

With our study we have peered into our past. And maybe like the Montagues and Capulets of Shakespeare, we see distant families of microbes coming together to bridge the divide and ultimately form the early eukaryotes that eventually led to us: a fragile branch on the evolutionary tree of life. *(The Conversation)*

[By Brendan Paul Burns, Associate Professor, School of Biotech & Biomolecular Science, UNSW Sydney and Kymberley

"If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

—John Wooden

The Shillong Times

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Women's reservation bill, consensus

RESERVATION for women in elected bodies has been a work in progress for the past several years. The issue was, as is usual with any major legislation, clouded by controversies with special population segments seeking a reservation within this reservation too. In a decisive push, the NDA government is now keen on introducing a legislation that would guarantee reservations for women in Parliament and state assemblies. As the issue could not be taken up during the Budget session, which had to be ended in haste due to the assembly election campaign in five provinces, the government is calling a three-day Parliament session from April 16 to take up the Women Reservation (Amendment) Bill, with special reference to timelines for its implementation etc. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has written to leaders of all parties stressing the need to speed up the legislation. However, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge has sought an all-party meet by the PM for pre-legislation consultations. He has also questioned the timing of the present exercise in the midst of the assembly polls, his suspicion being that this is done to help the BJP take advantage and grab more women votes. Notably, the government is seeking to delink the legislation from the ongoing constituency delimitation process.

Significantly, the present legislation is a step forward to the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023. As the PM stated, the aim is to ensure 33 per cent reservations for women by the time the next parliament and assembly elections are held three years hence. The opposition is piqued that the government has not shared matters related to the delimitation and its connection to the women bill. An argument is also that the SC-ST-BC reservations should be incorporated into the women legislation and linked to the constituency delimitation exercise. In other words, consensus would elude the women quota legislation unless the government, at this late hour, takes the opposition into confidence. This being a legislation of high national importance, a consensus will be highly appreciated and should be the way forward. Appreciably, most state governments have implemented the provisions for quota for women in local body polls; some states to the extent of 50 per cent. Since women form half the population, this is justified.

Based on the 2024 polls, the Lok Sabha has 74 elected women MPs, forming nearly 14 per cent of its total strength, while the Rajya Sabha too has 14 per cent women representation. While the bill seeks to raise these, as also their strength in state assemblies, to 33 per cent, the global average for women parliamentarians is 26 per cent. Elected women leaders acquitted themselves well in the performance of their responsibilities across the world, with notable instances in the subcontinent itself. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka had women leaders running their nations for various periods in the past, with the strong-willed Indira Gandhi being a trend-setter. India boasted of women presidents in the form of Pratibha Patil and incumbent Droupadi Murmu. They would remain as guiding lights for future women leaders.

Children Of A Lesser God

By H.H. Mohrmen

At the fag end of last year, the government observed two very important days, Disability Day and World AIDS Day. But as with many things the government celebrates, the momentum dies almost immediately after the occasion. No sooner had the programmes ended than the interest surrounding the causes settled like dust on the ground.

A few days before Christmas last year, the CMO shared a video on its social media platforms in which the Chief Minister was seen visiting a market in Tura. On noticing a visually impaired woman begging, he immediately went to buy her clothes and shoes. The benevolent act of kindness of the Chief Minister was indeed praiseworthy and befitting of the spirit of the season. Yet the question that must be asked is what happens after that moment of kindness. Does such an act translate into long term support, or does it remain an isolated gesture that briefly warms the heart before being forgotten.

MGMP platform for the visually impaired

My engagement with differently-abled people has taught me a very valuable lesson. They do not need charity, but support that enables them to become independent. As a friend of many visually impaired persons, and from years of engagement with them, one important truth stands out. They want to be treated with dignity. They do not wish to be pitied or reduced to objects of sympathy. If we can provide them with opportunities to live a dignified life, that is all they ask of us. From my interactions, I have also realised that they are constantly exploring ways to stand on their own feet, or at least to make ends meet through their own efforts.

During a recent visit to Iawpynsiñ market with Mike Sangma to take shots for a documentary, I noticed a familiar face singing in the market. There is now a growing group of visually impaired persons who travel to different weekly markets in the Khasi and Jaiñtia regions to perform with the intention of earning a livelihood. They sing not merely for entertainment, but as a means of survival, turning their talent into an economic opportunity. This is precisely where the government can step in, not only to support visually impaired persons, but also many others with talents in the performing arts who lack access to formal platforms.

Fortunately, the government already has a programme for street performances known as the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Programme. This initiative has helped many young artists showcase their talents and earn an income, while the public enjoys their music. If the government could consciously link visually impaired singers and performers with this programme, it would provide them with a dignified platform and a more stable source of livelihood. People may still choose to donate, but at least the performers would earn through their skills rather than depend solely on charity. Such an initiative could also be extended to persons with other disabilities, thereby promoting inclusivity in a practical and meaningful way.

Provide them training

The differently-abled section of the population has long been neglected. Not only is there limited reservation in government employment, but there are also very few structured efforts to create sustainable livelihood opportunities for them.

Society for Urban & Rural Employment (SURE) was perhaps one of the first training providers under the Meghalaya State Skill Programme to offer specialised training exclusively for visually impaired persons at Moosakhia. A second training programme on broom making for another group of visually impaired persons was supported by the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Meghalaya, and conducted at Wahiajer in West Jaiñtia Hills. These initiatives demonstrate that, with the right support, differently-abled individuals can acquire skills and contribute productively to society.

The government can further explore and fund similar training initiatives for the differently-abled adult population across the state. Expanding such programmes to include a wider range of skills such as handicrafts, music production, and small scale entrepreneurship would go a long way in enabling them to earn a livelihood and live with dignity. True empowerment lies not in handouts, but in creating systems that allow people to support themselves.

HIV AIDS has reached an alarming stage

In the meantime, another issue continues to demand urgent attention and that is the high prevalence of HIV AIDS in the districts of East and West Jaiñtia. The government recognises that combating the spread of this disease is a herculean task requiring sustained effort and coordination. The Meghalaya AIDS Control Society has recently launched a special initiative called AIDS Suraksha, to be implemented in East and West Jaiñtia Hills, East Khasi Hills, and Ri Bhoi districts. While this is a welcome step, much more needs to be done to strengthen its impact.

Linking patients to services

Drawing from my experience with the Link Worker Scheme supported by MACS, I would like to share a few observations that require immediate government attention. The objective of the programme is to link patients with available services, beginning with confirmation of their HIV status. This step is crucial, as services cannot be provided without confirmation, and early intervention can significantly improve outcomes.

One recurring challenge during Community Based Screening is that when a test result is reactive, staff must accompany the client to an Integrated Counselling and Testing Centre for confirmation. In many cases, clients are unable to travel due to financial constraints. Unfortunately, neither the Meghalaya AIDS Control Society nor NACO currently has adequate provisions to address this issue.

This is a serious concern, as failure to confirm HIV status not only increases the risk of further transmission, but also deprives individuals of timely access to treatment and care. The state government could consider introducing a support system similar to that provided under tuberculosis eradication programmes, where patients receive financial assistance to complete diagnosis and treatment.

At present, for people living with HIV who are unable to collect their ART medication, Cluster Link Workers collect the medicines from ART centres and deliver them to patients. This arrangement reduces the burden of travel. Many patients prefer not to visit ART centres or ICTCs unless absolutely necessary, to avoid exposure to public scrutiny and discrimination. Another reason for this system is the stigma that still persists.

Stigma reduction

Another pressing issue is the need to sensitise all stakeholders, particularly ANMs and village headmen, on maintaining strict confidentiality regarding HIV status. There are still instances where community leaders, teachers, and even church leaders lack adequate knowledge about patients' rights to privacy. This will only deepen stigma and discourage people from seeking help. Creating awareness at the community level remains a major challenge and demands urgent government intervention.

AIDS is not the end of the story

There was once a widespread misconception that HIV AIDS marked the end of life. This perception persists largely due to lack of awareness and misinformation. However, those who have accessed treatment know otherwise. Many people living with HIV today lead healthy and productive lives.

With regular ART medication, the viral load can be suppressed to a level where it becomes undetectable. At this stage, known as U equals U, undetectable equals non-transmissible, the virus cannot be passed on to others. The encouraging news is from people living with HIV themselves, who started support groups to support themselves.

Testing HRGs

It is crucial for individuals engaging in high risk behaviours to get tested regularly. Early testing helps prevent further transmission and ensures timely access to care. Testing facilities are available at ICTCs located in civil hospitals across district headquarters in East and West Jaiñtia Hills, yet many still hesitate due to stigma and lack of awareness.

Condom distribution must also be intensified and made more accessible at the community level. Sadly, even today, the mere mention of condoms remains taboo in many places, despite their proven role in preventing HIV transmission and unintended pregnancies.

Hope to live

Providing livelihood training and support for people living with HIV is equally important. Targeted outreach to female sex workers, spouses of affected individuals, and other vulnerable groups must be strengthened. Linking the programmes implemented by MACS with the Meghalaya State Skill Programme is another approach that needs to be explored more seriously. While programmes for injecting drug users are already being implemented by MACS, exploring new approaches to reach out to this population remains essential.

The government should also ensure that the Sponsorship and Foster Approval Committee schemes are accessible to children of people living with HIV so that they can benefit from educational support. Every district has such a committee to support these children in continuing their education, yet awareness and access remain limited.

Only when policy translates into sustained action, and when compassion is matched with commitment, can we truly say that we have not forgotten the children of the lesser god.

Who will benefit from the high voter turnout in Kerala?

Rival fronts on the ticklish job of reading the political leaves

By P. Sreekumaran

Who will benefit from the high voter turnout in the Kerala Assembly election? That is the question uppermost in the minds of voters of Keralam.

Both the fronts - the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Opposition United Democratic Front (UDF) - are on the job of reading the political leaves in an effort to understand the electoral swing that will make or mar their winning prospects.

The guessing game is on in right earnest. The Congress claims that the UDF is set to romp home the winner. The party is basing its optimism on the high turn out of voters, especially of women, and the 'visible' anti-incumbency factor. Conversely, the LDF's confidence stems from the Government's stellar performance during the last decade. The Front firmly believes the anti-incumbency factor is not present at all. The main factor that will help them emerge as the winner is the raft of welfare measures and the unprecedented development witnessed during the last 10 years. Significantly, LDF convener T. P. Ramakrishnan does not think there has been a consolidation of Muslim votes against the Government, as the UDF and the BJP claim. The high turnout, he believes, shows the electorate's earnest desire for continuity. People think that all the gains made during the decade of LDF tenure will be undone without continuity. The Opposition's spin that the high turnout would benefit the UDF is wishful thinking and divorced from reality. That is the burden of the LDF song.

On its part, the BJP believes the high turnout would accelerate its ascendancy in the State. The BJP's good showing in the Lok Sabha elections when it recorded 19 per cent votes, and managed to open its account to the Lok Sabha from Kerala, will be replicated in the Assembly polls too. That is the party's refrain. But past records do not support the BJP's theory. Also, both the LDF and the UDF say the five per cent decline the saffron camp suffered in the local bodies elections proves that the Assembly election is a different ball game altogether, if proof were needed. This being the ground reality, there is no way the BJP can improve its vote percentage.

The LDF also draws comfort from the Nair Service Society's refusal to hop on to the anti-LDF bandwagon. It is also relieved that the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam has openly favoured a third term for the LDF Government.

A close look at the heavy polling details is in order. Kerala recorded 78.27 per cent in the elections held on Thursday, April 9. According to the Election Commission of India's(ECI), 80.86 % of female voters, 75.01% of male voters and 57.04% of transgender voters cast their votes. Thursday's voter turnout was higher than that of the 2021 Assembly polls. The State recorded its highest polling percentage in an Assembly election in the 1960 polls, when it stood at 85.72%.

Meanwhile, All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary K. C. Venugopal and Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president Sunny Joseph have asked the Election Commission to take strict action on allegations of BJP workers handing over money to voters in the presence of its Palakkad candidate Sobha Surendran, a day before the polling day.

A video of the incident, showing alleged BJP workers slipping a wad of currency notes into the hands of a senior citizen at Kannadi in Palakkad, had gone viral earlier in the day. Sobha was later seen angrily arguing with those who were filming the video.

Venugopal said giving money to influence voters is a very serious violation of election rules. The BJP, he added, is used to giving money to sway the voters. The trend was seen in Alappuzha as well, he pointed out. This has happened regularly in what are categorized as BJP's 'A-class' constituencies. He averred.

Sunny Joseph said that the available footage was sufficient material for a prima facie case. The culture of cash for votes, which the BJP is practising in north India is being implemented in Kerala, too, he complained. The source of BJP's money should be probed. The party, Joseph alleged, is trying to purchase democracy with its money power. The BJP candidate also threatened to break the arms of those who captured the footage of the BJP workers paying money to influence voters, he added.

In a later development, the Election Commission has recorded the statements of Sobha Surendran and the complainant C. V. Balan of the Congress. The Revenue Divisional Officer, who is the returning officer of the Palakkad constituency will submit his report to the District Collector. And the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) will take a decision on the basis of the report. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Inequality in School Uniform Policies

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to highlight an issue that many young girls experience within our education system—the lack of true equality reflected in school uniform policies.

As a student, I am often questioned why uniforms for boys and girls differ so significantly, when the very purpose of a uniform is to promote a sense of equality and unity. Many girls, including myself, were required to wear skirts with straps, which were later modified on the grounds that they were "awkward" or might attract unwanted attention. As we grew older, the uniform changed again to salwar kameez. Meanwhile, boys continued to wear the same practical attire—trousers and shirts—throughout their schooling.

While cultural and social considerations may influence dress codes, such visible differences within educational institutions can subtly shape young minds. Girls are often made to feel responsible for how they dress, how they behave, and how they are perceived. This can unintentionally reinforce the harmful notion that they must constantly guard against attracting attention, rather than addressing the root causes of inappropriate behaviour.

If uniforms are meant to symbolise equality, then it is important to question why such disparities persist. In many cases, these differences reflect long-standing societal norms that continue to define gender roles in limiting ways. Moreover, from a practical standpoint, it is worth considering how comfortable and functional these uniforms are. Attire such as skirts or salwar kameez can restrict movement, making it more difficult for girls to participate freely in sports and other activities.

Encouragingly, some educational institutions have already adopted more practical and inclusive options, such as trousers for all students, prioritising comfort, mobility, and dignity over outdated notions of gender.

Educational institutions should be spaces that nurture equality, confidence, and freedom. Uniform policies, therefore, must reflect these values by ensuring fairness and practicality for all students, irrespective of gender.

I hope this letter encourages meaningful reflection and dialogue on the need for more equitable practices in our schools.

Yours etc.,
Antika Rai
Shillong

The Living Architecture of Bamboo: A Lesson in Resilience

Editor,

For generations, bamboo has been the heartbeat of travel and connectivity in our region. Far more than mere architectural curiosities, our bamboo bridges are the physical threads that bind our villages together.

A quintessential example is the Mawryngkhang Trek in Meghalaya. Starting from Wahkhen village, local residents have engineered bamboo bridges and walkways along sheer cliffs and across rushing rivers using only bamboo and cane ropes. These structures, built without government aid and maintained solely by the community, represent a monumental feat of grassroots engineering. What outsiders view as a thrilling "adventure trek" is in reality, a masterclass in how bamboo serves as a daily lifeline.

While modern urban centers rely on steel and concrete, we depend on nature's most versatile resource. Bamboo possesses a tensile strength that rivals mild steel, yet it is significantly easier to transport across rugged terrain. Its true brilliance, however, lies in its flexibility. When monsoon rains swell our rivers, rigid concrete structures often crack or succumb to the hydraulic pressure. In contrast, a bamboo bridge sways and yields to the current, surviving floods that would claim modern infrastructure.

The impact of these bridges is measured in more than just distance; it is measured in livelihoods. Before these crossings existed, moving crops to the neighbouring village often required an arduous three-hour trek through the valley. Today, that same journey takes ten minutes.

Furthermore, in an era where "sustainability" has become a global buzzword, our communities have been practicing it for centuries. A bamboo bridge is a zero-waste miracle. When it finally reaches the end of its life, it leaves behind no rusty rebar or crumbling debris. It simply returns to the earth, making room for the next generation of growth.

As the world prioritizes eco-friendly development, these community-driven solutions deserve formal recognition. Authorities should acknowledge these indigenous engineering feats and work alongside local communities to preserve this heritage. To an outsider, it may look like a path made of sticks. To us, it is a symbol of unity and resilience—a reminder that we do not need expensive, imported materials to stay connected. We only need the gifts of nature and a community willing to work together.

Yours etc.,
Philakyntiew Kurbah,
Via email

Of irresponsible parking: Authorities please enforce the law!

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the growing problem of improper parking, which is making our roads increasingly unsafe and inconvenient for pedestrians.

In many localities, vehicles are parked haphazardly on both sides of the streets, often encroaching upon footpaths meant for public use. Consequently, pedestrians are forced onto the main carriageway, exposing them to constant traffic hazards. This situation is particularly alarming for children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, for whom safe mobility is essential.

The problem is further aggravated by the lack of strict enforcement of parking regulations. Narrow roads become severely congested, leading to frequent traffic jams and heightened commuter frustration. More critically, such obstructions hinder the smooth movement of emergency services like ambulances and fire engines, potentially endangering lives.

In light of these concerns, I earnestly urge the authorities to take immediate and effective measures. These should include stricter enforcement of parking rules, imposition of penalties on violators, and ensuring that footpaths remain clear and accessible. The creation of designated parking zones, along with sustained public awareness campaigns, would also go a long way in addressing this issue.

I sincerely hope that this matter will receive due attention and prompt action, in the interest of ensuring safer and more accessible roads for all.

Yours etc.,
Priyakshi Lahkar
Shillong

The Untapped Potential of Floriculture in Meghalaya

Editor,

Meghalaya is a land of unparalleled botanical heritage. From our famous endemic pitcher plants (Nepenthes khasiana) to the vibrant rhododendrons trails that paint our highlands, flowers are woven into the very fabric of our culture. For most citizens in Meghalaya, gardening is more than a hobby; it is a way to create a serene, lively, and "homely" atmosphere that fosters a unique bond between the planter and nature.

However, there is a stark contrast between our love for flowers and the commercial reality of floriculture in the state. Despite our favourable climate, floriculture has yet to become a booming industry. Local cultivators are currently stifled by several critical "bottlenecks":

• Prohibitive Costs: The high initial investment required for modern polyhouses is a stumbling block. In the past the government encouraged greenhouse technology which is now out of reach for the average grower.

• Knowledge Gaps: There is a significant lack of technical expertise regarding modern hybrid cultivation and pest management.

• Infrastructure Deficits: Without adequate post-harvest facilities, such as cold storage and efficient transport chains, our delicate blooms perish before they can reach lucrative markets.

To bridge this gap, the government must look beyond traditional fresh-cut flowers. By introducing and subsidizing training in Bonsai culture and Dry Flower technology, the state can open new doors for our youth. Dry flowers, in particular, offer a solution to our lack of cold-chain infrastructure, as they have a long shelf life and high export value in the home decor market.

Transforming floriculture from a backyard hobby into a robust economic pillar will not only beautify our state but also provide sustainable livelihoods for thousands. It is time we turn our passion for petals into a profession.

Yours etc.,
Baiahunlang Kharsahnoh
Shillong

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C M K

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

— Nelson Mandela

The Shillong Times

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Sex Work & The Law

MUCH has been said in the last few days about women soliciting sex work around the city centre and near places of worship. There are those who take offence to sex workers hanging around such sanctum sanctorum and also around the homes of 'respectable' folks in and around that area. The police have got on the job and arrested the sex workers and pimps who connect sex workers to customers. But what happens thereafter? Will commercial sex stop and things get back to normal? Last year the Department of Sociology, KL Bajoria College in a bold and groundbreaking move organised the firsts ever panel discussion on the theme – Prostitution in India: A Perspective. The event drew eminent speakers from across the country who looked at the issue from the lenses of human rights, law, academia, media and social activism. The panellists discussed human rights and sex workers agency, the right to health of sex workers and their safety. Throughout the session, a recurring message resonated: the need to shift from moralistic judgments to a human rights-based approach. Speakers called for laws and policies that listen to the lived experiences of sex workers, dismantle stigma, and prioritize dignity and safety over punitive measures.

True the problem of trafficking is real and every now and again there are reports of young, unsuspecting girls being trafficked for sex work after being lured with the promise of a job. These are issues that ought to be discussed by the State Social Welfare Department. At the end of the day if sex work is fetching some people a livelihood then weaning the sex workers away from that 'work' also means providing them alternative sources of livelihoods. Unfortunately, this society has learned to demonise sex workers, drug users and even people with mental health problems. Society is quicker to condemn than to offer an empathetic ear to the problems faced by the so-called 'dregs' of society. When the complainants against sex workers happen to be people with political capital the law takes the complaints seriously and carry out raids. If only the law enforcers showed the same alacrity in tackling other high profile law breakers such as those involved in the raising of the dome atop the new Assembly building, which then came tumbling down due to shoddy work, they might receive more public adulation.

Law enforcement vis a vis sex workers is still a grey area. Hiring a prostitute in private between consenting adults is not an offense under Indian law. But hiring a prostitute for public solicitation, involving minors, or in exploitative situations is illegal and punishable. There are numerous judgments passed by the Supreme Court of India repeatedly affirming that sex workers are citizens and must receive the same fundamental rights under Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution of India. The courts have protected them from harassment, illegal detention, and stigmatization, clarifying that being a sex worker itself is not a crime, provided there is no trafficking or exploitation involved. Important steps ordered include establishing safe areas and welfare schemes for sex workers and their children. The need for a database for the number of people involved in prostitution is important if government is to wean them from this trade, since stark poverty is the main cause driving women, men and transgenders into prostitution. It's time to rethink long-held assumptions and reimagine a more just and compassionate future for sex workers.

The Ceasefire that wasn't; the Mediator that couldn't, and what India must do before April 21

By K C Monnappa

When JD Vance boarded Air Force Two in Islamabad on April 12 and told reporters that "the bad news is that we have not reached an agreement," he was doing more than announcing a diplomatic failure. He was signalling something far more dangerous: that the world's most consequential conflict since Ukraine has no clear off-ramp, and that 21 hours of talks had not produced even a framework for the next round.

The choice of venue was itself revealing. Washington needed a location Tehran would accept, a government it could deploy as a post-box, and a military establishment sufficiently dependent on American patronage to ensure the choreography went smoothly. Islamabad fit those requirements. It was not so much chosen as assigned its role, and it performed that role dutifully, mobilising fighter escorts for the Iranian delegation's aircraft, arranging hotel logistics, and ensuring the optics of sovereign mediation while the actual terms of engagement were dictated from elsewhere. The talks, the first direct, face-to-face engagement between Washington and Tehran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, still ended in failure. A borrowed stage, it turns out, cannot substitute for genuine diplomatic architecture.

The Anatomy of the Breakdown

The war began on February 28 when the US and Israel launched coordinated strikes against Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Tehran's response was swift and strategically brutal: it placed the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 20 percent of global oil flows, under a de facto blockade. Brent crude surged 60 percent to cross $120 per barrel. Dubai crude briefly touched $166. For countries like India, this was not an abstract crisis. It was a fuel shortage emergency.

Washington needed a ceasefire and needed it quickly. The arrangement that emerged, a two-week pause, announced through a government that has historically served as a conduit for American strategic messaging in the region, gave both sides breathing room without either having to formally ask the other for it. Islamabad's Prime Minister announced the ceasefire; Washington and Tehran acknowledged it through their own channels. The useful fiction of independent mediation was maintained. The talks that followed were meant to convert that pause into something durable. They did not.

The US delegation, Vance, envoy Steve Witkoff, and Jared Kushner, arrived with a narrow mandate. Trump had framed it publicly: "No nuclear weapon. That's 99 percent of it." Washington also wanted the Strait unconditionally reopened and an end to Iranian support for armed proxies.

Iran came with a far broader agenda: the right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes, release of $6 billion in frozen assets, lifting of all sanctions, war reparations, continued influence over Strait transit, including the right to impose fees on commercial shipping, and guarantees for Hezbollah's protection from Israeli strikes in Lebanon. That last demand confounded Washington most. Israel, which struck over 200 targets in Lebanon while the ceasefire nominally held, had no intention of stopping. Netanyahu said so publicly, even as the talks were underway.

The structural problem was plain: the US could not speak for Israel. Tehran knew this and used the gap strategically. As former State Department negotiator Aaron David Miller told CNN, the Iranians "hold more cards than the Americans" and "are clearly in no hurry to make concessions." Twenty-one hours of talks, and the two sides left without even scheduling a second round. The host government, its utility spent, was left to absorb the embarrassment of a collapse on its own soil, a useful reminder that countries which serve as instruments of others' diplomacy rarely shape its outcomes.

What It Means for India

India has paid a steep price for this conflict, economically and diplomatically. The Indian crude basket jumped from $69 per barrel in February to $113 in March. The rupee hit a record low of 94.78 per dollar. LPG, the primary cooking fuel for hundreds of millions of households, became a crisis commodity, with black market prices touching Rs 4,000 per cylinder. The government invoked the Essential Commodities Act and watched restaurants shift to firewood.

The diplomatic cost has been equally painful, and largely self-inflicted. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel just before the war broke out left India appearing to have pre-committed to one side at the precise moment its doctrine demanded equidistance. The space for manoeuvre shrank. While New Delhi conducted quiet energy diplomacy, resuming Iranian oil purchases for the first time since 2019, negotiating bilaterally for safe tanker passage, it ceded the visible ground. Washington's chosen conduit (Pakistan) got the photographs, the press conferences, and the international attention. India, a country with deeper and more genuinely independent relationships on all sides, watched from the margins.

This matters beyond optics. India imports nearly 85 percent of its crude, with half transiting Hormuz. About 90 percent of its LPG arrives through the same corridor. Ten million Indians in the Gulf send home over $40 billion annually. The structural exposure is enormous, and quiet bilateralism is insufficient for the scale of what is unfolding.

The Vishwaguru Opening, and How to Seize It

India has spoken often about its aspiration to be a Vishwaguru, a civilisational guide in times of global turbulence. The Islamabad collapse offers precisely such an opening, but one that demands strategic boldness alongside careful navigation. The core challenge: India must move from the margins to the centre of this process without alienating Washington, antagonising Tehran, or endorsing any arrangement that undermines the freedom of navigation it itself depends upon.

What both Washington and Tehran privately want is a structured de-escalation that lets each claim some form of victory. What neither can offer the other directly, because of domestic political constraints, accumulated rhetoric, and the very public nature of their postures, is a face-saving formula. India is uniquely positioned to provide exactly that. New Delhi has credible, independent relationships with both sides, genuine economic stakes that give it legitimate standing, and no history of serving as anyone's instrument, which is precisely the quality that makes it credible where others are not. A country that is known to speak for itself is trusted by all sides in a way that a country known to speak for someone else never can be.

Concretely: External Affairs Minister Jaishankar should make immediate high-profile visits to both Tehran and Washington, not as a supplicant seeking energy assurances but as a facilitator offering a framework. To Washington: India shares your concern about nuclear proliferation and freedom of navigation, and can bring Iran to a table that produces binding commitments, but only if the US gives us the space to work as an equal partner, not a messenger. To Tehran: India understands Iran's legitimate security concerns, has demonstrated this through resumed energy purchases under pressure, and can offer a process that addresses your dignity and economic needs, but only if Iran steps back from positions that make settlement impossible.

On the Strait, India should work with Gulf states, particularly the UAE, to propose a maritime framework that gives Iran some acknowledged role in strait management while preserving unimpeded commercial navigation. The idea of Iran charging "transit fees" is a red line for Washington, but a formula built around "maritime safety coordination" could serve Tehran's economic interest without triggering American political objections. This is the ordinary work of serious diplomacy: finding the form of words that allows all parties to walk away claiming something.

On the nuclear question, India should advocate for a return to a JCPOA-style structure: verifiable enrichment caps in exchange for sanctions relief, but with ironclad guarantees against unilateral American withdrawal, the move that unravelled the 2015 deal and made Tehran permanently sceptical of Washington's word. India supported the original agreement. It has credibility here that few others possess.

Finally, India must use this crisis as the catalyst it has long needed to accelerate domestic energy infrastructure, expanding strategic petroleum reserves, moving faster on renewable capacity, diversifying LPG sourcing. No diplomatic initiative will insulate the country from future Hormuz disruptions if the underlying structural vulnerability remains unaddressed.

The Clock

The ceasefire runs until approximately April 21. Trump has already threatened a "full naval blockade" of Iran following the Islamabad failure. The window for diplomacy is narrowing fast.

India has been a cautious observer of this crisis when it needed to be a proactive participant. The country that aspires to a permanent UN Security Council seat, that positions itself as the voice of the Global South, that hosted the G20 Presidency and used it to speak for vulnerable economies, that country has a responsibility that goes beyond quiet bilateral energy deals. The difference between India and the venue that hosted this week's failed talks is precisely this: India brings its own standing to the table. It does not rent someone else's.

The world does not need another country telling it who is right and who is wrong in this conflict. It needs a country with genuinely independent relationships on all sides, real economic stakes, and the sophistication to construct a framework that allows the shooting to stop. India can be that country. Whether it chooses to be is the question the next ten days will begin to answer.

Fiscal injustice may foster hostility

By George B. Lyngdoh

As I was scrolling through updates on X, I came across a post by Chief Minister, Conrad K. Sangma regarding his meeting with the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The Chief Minister expressed gratitude for a commitment of Rs 2070 crore under SASCI 2.0 for infrastructure development (capex) and other liabilities. However, this support comes after a reduced annual devolution of nearly Rs 2000 crore under the 16th Finance Commission recommendations.

Does one-size fit all?

The 16th Finance Commission's framework shows that the five-year devolution is broadly guided by four key criteria:

1. **Income Distance (45%)** – measuring how far a state's per capita income is from the highest-performing state
2. **Population (15%)** – based largely on the 2011 Census
3. **Area (15%)** – rewarding larger geographical spread
4. **Forest & Ecology (10%)** – recognizing ecological services
5. **Demographic Performance (12.5%) & Tax Effort (2.5%)** – performance-linked incentives

This approach has again revealed a structural imbalance when applied uniformly across different states. Performance-linked criteria such as demographic strength, geographic spread and contribution to national GDP offer very limited scope for states like Meghalaya. Major constraints like high production costs arising from landlocked geography, limited market access, relatively low purchasing power, high labour costs, and the dominance of an informal economy are factors that hold Meghalaya back.

Meghalaya's population is comparable to that of a mid-sized Indian city, making its weight in national scale negligible. A "one-size-fits-all" approach, therefore, disadvantages smaller states.

Are we being forced to adopt Panchayati Raj?

What is observed is the continued emphasis of the 14th to 16th Finance Commissions on rural and urban governance systems. What is more boggling is that this criteria aligns only with the Panchayati Raj framework as a basis for increased devolution. When Panchayati Raj Institutions were introduced, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram were exempted by the Government of India, in recognition of their unique governance systems under the Sixth Schedule. However, successive Finance Commissions have largely ignored this constitutional reality, extending only token support to the governance systems through Autonomous District Councils and municipalities.

This reflects not only non-recognition but also an implicit pressure to adopt Panchayati Raj structures, despite the existence of deeply rooted traditional institutions such as Headmen, Nokmas, Sordars, Waheh Shnong, and their village communities that continue to play a vital role in governance and public service delivery. Their contributions span village mobilization, implementation support for programs like MGNREGA, NRLM, Social Audit, Public Heath, natural resource management, disaster response, elections, village defence, forest governance, among many others. These institutions provide the critical last-mile connection between the state and the people.

Yet, their efforts remain largely ignored by national frameworks because they are informal, undocumented, and not captured in standardized data systems. Perhaps, even seen as outdated! This creates a serious bias: what is not recorded is not recognized, and what is not recognized is not funded! Despite being constitutionally acknowledged under the Sixth Schedule, these traditional systems are effectively sidelined in fiscal support, which is both disheartening and unjust. Moreover, what is the reason for the continued delay in adopting the proposed amendment to the 6th Schedule?

Has policy overshadowed Constitutional safeguards?

The foundations of India's federal structure were carefully laid by leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and others, who accommodated diversity through Constitutional arrangements. The current emphasis on rigid, standardized criteria undermine this vision and are eroding trust in national institutions. Decisions that have far-reaching consequences for small and geo-politically fragile states often appear to be based on bureaucratic engagement, desperately reducing complex realities into simplified presentations and on a single-formula-driven outcomes. Do policy makers have the mandate to ignore Constitutional safeguards? Is the Finance Commission above the Constitution?

Give and take away

There is a fiscal contradiction. While states like Meghalaya face reduced financial devolution, the Union Government continues with Centrally Sponsored Schemes that mandate 10% State share. For small states with limited fiscal capacity, this creates a heavy financial burden. Existing liabilities from past central schemes continue to accumulate, while new schemes are added, further straining already constrained state finances. For the recent Rs 900 Crore Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) liability, Rs 90 Crore has to be paid by the State while the success rate is hardly 50%! Who wanted this ill designed Scheme in the first place? I feel that this situation is like a modest-income household being repeatedly compelled to dine at an expensive hotel —regardless of affordability—while also being required to pay a fixed share of the bill. Such forced arrangements place smaller states in an increasingly unsustainable position, while ignoring increasing amounts of committed expenditures.

Policy hypocrisy?

The introduction of SASCI 2.0, which is a loan, further complicates matters. Instead of compensating for reduced devolution through grants, states are being encouraged to take on additional debt for infrastructure development.

For ecologically fragile hill states, this raises serious concerns. While the Finance Commission assigns 10% weightage to forest and ecology, the parallel push for infrastructure expansion through loans is a policy contradiction. It increases debt burdens while threatening environmental sustainability and disregarding the role of traditional institutions in managing these ecosystems. The nation's so called 'think-tanks' have totally lost it!

We need a new approach

Policy actors residing in remote Delhi should not take our traditional institutions and communities' voluntary support for granted. The unpaid, unrecorded, and unrecognised contributions of headmen, Nokmas, Sordars, and village communities are foundational strengths. Without them, governance in Meghalaya would collapse at the last mile.

Moreover, launching central schemes by forcing 10% State share are political rhetorics at the cost of tribal communities. This fiscal injustice must stop. If the Union Government is genuinely committed to supporting small and hill states, certain corrective measures should be considered.

- The mandatory state contributions under centrally sponsored schemes for small states should reduced to 0%. This could free up significant funds —potentially in the range of Rs 1500–2000 crores.
- Additionally, there is a need for a different devolution framework that recognises Sixth Schedule governance systems rather than forcing indirect conformity to Panchayati Raj models.
- Further, if there are concerns regarding the efficiency or accountability of State governments or district councils, additional funds could be routed directly to community-level structures through targeted schemes such as livelihood or rural development programs. This would ensure that resources reach the grassroots without being constrained by rigid and often exclusionary evaluation criteria.

Can policy neglect geopolitics?

What is at stake is not merely financial allocation, but the recognition of governance systems, cultural institutions, and lived realities that do not conform to standardized metrics. Continued neglect and misalignment in policy frameworks risk fostering frustration and alienation.

At a time when our North East is surrounded by hostile geopolitics, it is essential that fiscal policies bring trust, respect diversity, and strengthen the bond between the Union and its states and communities, else the remote & disconnected policy actors are only putting the region at great risk.

A more inclusive, and context-sensitive fiscal approach is an immediate demand.

(The writer is a former legislator of Meghalaya Legislative Assembly and can be reached at georgeblyngdoh@outlook.com)

Letters to the Editor

The Derogation of Indigenous faiths

Editor,

I appreciated the letter by O. Lyngdoh, titled, "The Sacred Cannot Be Secularized" which appeared in the Shillong Times on April 9, 2026. The letter ended with an affirmation of the Seng Khasi and the Seiñ Raij for preserving our culture and faith, and good wishes for the Chad Sukra Festival and Shad Suk Mynsiem.

A rebuttal to this letter written by Kuparmeri Shylla, was published on April 11, 2026. While I do not claim to be an authority to the issues in this letter, one passage caught my attention. It said, "The allegation that Christians historically regarded indigenous faiths as "savage" or "barbaric," presented without credible evidence, reads less like historical analysis and more like provocation. Such language does little to illuminate the past and much to inflame present sensitivities."

Any historian will tell us that during the colonial period in northeast India, Christian missionaries and colonial administrators frequently used derogatory labels such as "heathen," "pagan," "savage," "primitive," and "superstitious" to describe the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo communities and their indigenous religious practices. Even a casual browsing of the internet will yield these records.

These terms reflected a deeply Eurocentric view of the world and the othering of indigenous worldviews. Missionaries regarded tribal faiths as inferior to Christianity, and often described ancestor worship, nature reverence, and indigenous rituals as "superstitions" rather than respecting and regarding these religions within their cultural and philosophical contexts.

Along with the missionaries, the British bureaucracy viewed their colonial intervention for the purpose of "civilizing" the tribals. Such language devalued indigenous knowledge systems, social structures, and spiritual traditions, and contributed to cultural stigmatization.

The book, "A Garo Jungle Book: Or the Mission to the Garos of Assam" by William Carey has numerous derogatory terms and phrases. The book "Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in North-East India" by Andrew May, provides extensive examples from church records, missionary correspondence and other documents about the negative attitudes and language of the missionary endeavour. Andrew May is a professor of history at the University of Melbourne and is a descendent of Thomas Jones. His book was released in Shillong in 2012.

May's work shows that missionary writings were embedded in racialised and imperial frameworks and that indigenous beliefs were interpreted through a British colonial and religious mindset. This attitude classified indigenous religions as "animism" or "heathenism" and associated them with superstition, backwardness, and moral inferiority. These same derogatory practices were used in other colonies in Africa and Australia. (References can be provided on request.)

Yours etc.,
Glenn C Kharkongor,
Via email

Culture and Religion

Editor,

Before the coming of the Semitic religions like Christianity and Islam, culture and religion in our hills worked in perfect harmony. Culture includes indigenous religious beliefs, rituals, customs, traditions, political system and many indigenous ways of life. Today people say that religion and culture are two separate subjects. We have Khasi converts who had dumped down indigenous beliefs in favour of their new religious ideologies. We also have Khasi converts who assimilate Khasi rituals like Tang jait , Mait Tyr-ut into their liturgy and developed new innovations like the Easter dance.

They misinterpreted the verse in Matthew 5:17 "Think not that I have come to abolish the Torah (Mitzvot) or the Nevi'im (Prophets)" out of Jewish context, to fit into their liturgy. During the British period, Khasis were encouraged to denigrate their own indigenous religion. It was said that Rabon Singh Kharsuka, a Khasi convert, could not tolerate the unflattering remarks by the British on the Khasi religion. Restrictions were imposed on Khasi converts to participate in any indigenous Khasi festivals, customs, rituals, and practices. With the passage of time, religious exclusivism, that is, the belief that only a particular religion is true and other religions are false became the central theme for converting people to Christianity. Now, the Government of India, recognizes all Khasis as Scheduled Tribes. The Government also recognizes Muslims and Christians as minority communities, whereas a micro indigenous Khasi faith community are not recognized as minority. Why this glaring disparity?

Yours...
D. Diengdoh
Via email

Green Tech Foundation; A Promising Dynamic Organisation

Editor,

The United Nation has declared the decade of 2021-2030 as the decade of Eco-Restoration, which aims to stop and reverse the degradation of ecosystems but it seems that in our State, this does not tune in with the policy of development initiatives. Our approach to development is faulty. External consultants see things as problems to be fixed, provided solutions for but they have no rooted understanding nor the experiential in-depth knowledge. Their approach is mechanical. Theory converted into praxis; imposition rather than organic, top-down approach. This rat-race for economic growth drains the State and its ability to sustain for a long-term.

Development is a process, a recurring phenomenon that requires the constant engagement of stake holders as they gain expertise. The stakeholders require only capacity building rather than direct corporate interventions. True Development happens when people have a stake in decision making, let the people be the caretakers and drivers of development, because development is again, a 'process'.

In this context, we have all seen, read and heard what the Green Tech Foundation through various campaigns and grassroots based interventions have tried their best to lead the State and its citizens in the right path. But it is also distressing to see that the leaders of Green Tech Foundation comprising of a younger generation with a dedication for conservation and balance development initiatives having to take the extreme steps of undertaking a hunger-strike sacrificing their lives for the future of our State. Those at the helm of affairs and governance must hang their heads in shame when the youth have to take the responsibility to direct the State in the right direction of either politics, governance or development trajectory.

To undertake such means of protests without surrendering to the undemocratic, unconstitutional dictates of the government, Green Tech Foundation have chosen the path to unraveling and exposing the Truth. They must have access to credible information/ documents regarding the Taj project that the government, it seems, wishes to suppress.

The stand taken by GTF is not politics, it is the well directed motivation and courage to stand against the powers that have the ability and capacity to create 'illusions' of a blissful nature. The sad part is that many of our so called respected, educated elders of our society, fall trap to this 'manipulative devious oracle' we now associate with the 'Eloquent Diplomacy' perpetrated through short clip social media. We must know, that the Truth does not require Language but Facts and Evidences. Language, especially Political, is polluted and requires filtering and deconstruction.

To settle the issue, it is advisable that the Government makes public all the facts and evidences of the Taj Project; beneficiaries, MOUs, stakeholders etc., so that the public who are the ultimate custodians of Democracy and 'Government' will know and take an informed decision.

My amateurish understanding is; if the Government is wise enough it must simply scrap the project and not engage in further complications. I know it's painful to do so, but at the moment, it is the best antidote, for the truth has its own autonomous way of sneaking.

Yours etc.,
Uba D Tmar
Shillong-6

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"Reality leaves a lot to the imagination."
— John Lennon

The Shillong Times
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War takes new turn

THE Iran war is taking a dramatic turn. Talks in Islamabad last Saturday having failed, the US is reorienting its strategies with a view to economically bleed Iran into submission. Americans have announced a blockade – first saying all ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz would be blocked by the US naval ships, and then making amends. The US aim is to stop Iran from allowing ships through selectively, benefiting its friendly nations and yet charging a hefty fee, to also compensate for the loss the Islamic nation suffered in the war. The US says it would effect a blockade on Iran ports, that would halt Tehran's sale of oil. The perceived loss to Iran as a result of the reverse blockade by the US is of the order of $435 million per day.

Notably, since the start of the war by February end, Iran was in control of the Strait of Hormuz, the only waterway out of the Gulf through which a quarter of the world's oil and gas supplies passed. Iran has earned heavily by way of selective nod for passage of ships since March. With the US intervening and blocking this passage and the Iranian ports, it's not just Iran but much of the world that is waiting to receive the oil from the region that would suffer. Last month India had the advantage of seeing its loads through as a result of being among Iran's friendly countries. Across the world, including in India, prices are spiralling across all sectors, affecting trade, business and other walks of life. Commercial cylinder refills are hard to get and many hotels are bearing the brunt. They are raising the rates for the dishes, passing the burden on to the people. The aviation sector is hard-hit and the scenario could turn worse if no peace deal is arrived at. Though the talks in Islamabad failed as Iran refused to budge to the US demand to stop its nuclear programme, another round of talks is likely soon. Hopes are pinned on this.

Americans have a problem with the war. They are hesitant to take it to the next level. Trump claims he has destroyed the Iranian navy and air force, as also the radars in Iran, apart from decimating several top-level governmental and military leaders. The natural next step should have been the landing of the US ground forces to fight and uproot the regime and install a puppet. Iran has warned of hell. So did Trump. Iran hopes it can handle the American soldiers on the ground. The US is not very sure of the same success it achieved in Iraq when it ousted the Saddam Hussein regime there in 2003. Hence, Trump's strategy to hit Iran and block its sources of finance. As the saying goes, all's well that ends well. The problem however is the suffering the world faces as a result. Fuel prices have risen even in the US. China, with its huge production lines, is caught in a crisis due to the Strait blockade. Every individual in every nation is paying through the nose in order to cope up with spiralling prices even as essential items are in short supply. The war has to end, but how?

Love, Care and Fear: Ritual and Emotion among the Niamtre Pnar

By Anna Notsu

Rituals do not take place without reason among the Niamtre Pnar. For each 'kñia' (sacrificial rite), one attempts to fulfil moral and spiritual obligations within a sacred sphere. They do this not to appease God with sacrificial animals and offerings, but because they seek a connection beyond the human through prayer and sacrificial acts for what they need and desire. At the same time, 'kñia' is not solely about their relationship with the divine—crucially, it also evokes love and care for those who deserve such a ritual. It is both divine and earthly, an act that binds the spiritual and the social, bringing into one moment relationships between the living, the dead and the divine.

When someone requires a kñia, someone else, usually from the same clan, will perform it. Whether for individual purposes or for loved ones, the involvement of others makes it a deeply relational and loving act. In a house compound, relatives from other parts of the hills and district gather, alongside familiar friends and neighbours. The house instantly fills with those who arrive to help prepare tea, betel nuts, food, and the dishes to be consumed while waiting for 'doh kñia' (sacrificial meat). Women sit in circles, their hands and voices busy, focused yet cheerful, gently anticipating a later celebration. Conversations flow easily between the rhythm of pocket knives curving areca nuts, vegetables being sliced and water boiling in the background. As soon as I walk into the house, they immediately shout, "Chong! (Sit!)" Without my asking, one passes me a 'mura' (stool), while another hands me a cup of sweet tea. Here, instinctive hospitality seems like an extension of the collective care that surrounds the ritual itself.

But for all the love and care present, the organisation of kñia can be a stressful one for the family, not least because of the expenditure involved. Animals must be bought, food prepared, relatives invited and ritual participants consulted. Would it be a success? What if something goes wrong? Such worries necessarily accompany the anticipation of the day. Besides, first and foremost, the house—in the sense of both a physical building and the web of (clan) family relationships—must be "clean"; physically, spiritually and cognitively. No conflicts or negative thoughts should enter the compound where kñia takes place. People are attentive to their words and behaviours, especially in the days leading up to the ritual.

For this reason, there will often be additional kñia to clear bad omens before the main sacrificial ritual occurs. Some of these take place by the riverside or outside the Elaka boundary, ensuring that negativity washes away and does not enter their territory. These preliminary yet necessary acts reflect the careful moral preparation required before approaching the sacred. Ritual, in this sense, is not a single moment but a process that unfolds through preparation, consultation and emotional readiness.

Death, too, should not mingle with the day of such kñia. "How could we chant and pray to God from our heart when our neighbour is in mourning?" said my companion once, when his family decided to reschedule their long-awaited kñia at the last minute due to a neighbour's passing. Even after months of organisation, with many guests invited from afar, unexpected instances such as this can alter the entire process. Respect for another household's grief outweighs ritual scheduling.

Since this kind of domestic ritual cannot take place on just any day, rescheduling itself is not an easy task. It necessitates prior consultation with a 'Chwar' (a communicator with the divine), who advises on the proper procedure and determines the most appropriate date. Especially in Shangpung, each clan has its own sacred day; its market day (Muchai) and resting day (Khyllaw) must also be avoided. The month of March is particularly busy with ritual activities. At the onset of the coming sowing season, Shangpung also has many public rituals scheduled. Moreover, when someone passes away, 'Chwar' will not be available to conduct consultations. The unpredictable pattern of human life can easily interfere with the timing of these rituals. Out of love for those who require them, worries pass through the family's mind when planning one.

Throughout my stay in Shangpung Pohshnong, I observed countless sacrificial rites, each with different purposes. 'Tyngkhaiñ Rta' was one of them. Unlike many others, this ritual is rare to encounter, performed exclusively for women – it is considered a once-in-a-lifetime ritual. "Every woman must do this kñia," my companion explained. Those who reach around the age of 65 or older perform it as an expression of appreciation and gratitude for the healthy life they have lived.

As his elder sister had now reached the stage where she needed to perform this ritual, it first had to be conducted for his late grandmother, late mother and aunt, whose Tyngkhaiñ Rta had not taken place during their lifetimes. Ritual responsibility, in this sense, can be passed down. For my companion's family in Shangpung, an unfulfilled ritual obligation in the previous generation became the responsibility of the following generation.

According to customary understanding, all women must undergo this ritual process, yet not everyone manages to fulfil the obligation in their lifetime. To perform one's own ritual, the previous generation should ideally have already completed it. My companion's elder sister therefore found herself responsible for performing Tyngkhaiñ Rta for three women of her family. Given this immense responsibility, she said to me quietly, "I will complete mine in my time, so that my daughter will not have to be worried." In this simple statement, the generational care embedded within the ritual became clear. Here again, love and care enabled the continuity of religious practice across generations.

The story became even more complicated when she was told by the 'Chwar' that two additional cocks were to be sacrificed in the name of her mother's two sons who had already been converted to Christianity. During one consultation, the 'Chwar' spoke on behalf of her late mother, expressing her motherly wish to include her two sons even though they no longer followed the Niamtre faith. Despite the difference in faith, which usually produces tension within families, this Tyngkhaiñ Rta instead strengthened familial unity. The desire of her mother to include her sons transcended religious boundaries. Given the gravity of this kñia, the elder sister travelled repeatedly between her residence in Shillong and her natal home in Shangpung for numerous consultations with the Chwar. This dedication itself spoke volumes.

On the day of the main sacrificial rite, she, rather nervously, stood beside the three bamboo altars dedicated respectively to her late grandmother, her late mother and her aunt. Three maternal uncles simultaneously led the chanting. And one by one, following generational order, three black female goats were sacrificed, followed by five cocks, including the two additional offerings for the Christian brothers.

All of the cocks showed good signs. As the—now sacred—concrete floor of the compound gradually turned red, the bright blood of the sacrificial animals seeping across the floor seemed almost to echo the release of relief visible on the elder sister's face, who, perhaps out of concern, did not move an inch throughout the whole ritual, watching attentively—as if she herself were undergoing the rite. The atmosphere shifted slowly from tension to calm.

While sacrificial rituals may appear routine to those who practise them, each carries generational and familial significance. What I witnessed was not simply a killing of animals but the ways in which emotions, relationships and obligations constitute, and sustain, a crucial element of the Niamtre faith.

Across much of the world, sacrificial rituals such as this are quickly categorised as markers of indigeneity, often accompanied by assumptions of primitiveness or cruelty. Seen from afar, the act of taking an animal's life becomes the most visible and therefore the most easily judged element of the ritual. Yet when viewed from within, and through the emotional worlds that surround these rituals, they are no longer merely acts of sacrifice. They are composed of love, care and sometimes fear, the fear of failing obligations, of misfortune or of leaving something incomplete for those who come after.

What, then, is so uniquely 'indigenous' and 'primitive' or 'cruel' about adoring loved ones beyond religious differences and generational boundaries? To reduce kñia to the killing of animals is to overlook the relational labour that sustains it. It is through emotional and social relations that the ritual acquires its meaning. Seen in this light, kñia draws attention to the forms of care, responsibility and belonging that become visible through it. What appears from the outside as a moment of violence may, from within, be an expression of love.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

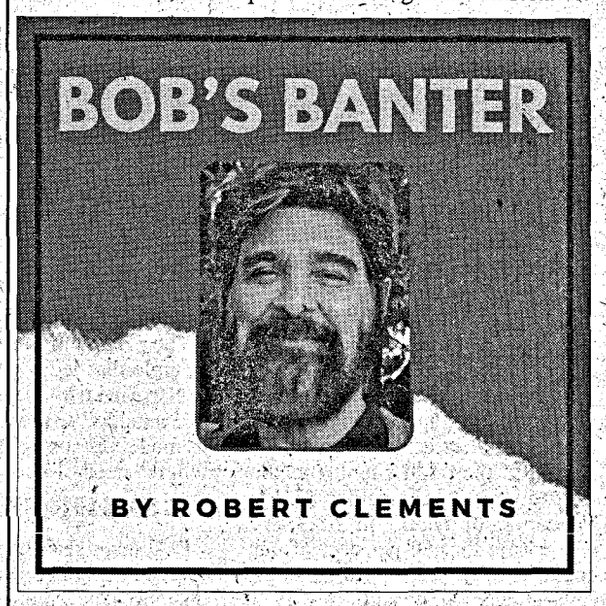
Woman's Reservation: A Step Backwards..!

The other day I watched a group of women before a meeting, planning the events. It was strategic. It was, if you ask me, better organised and dramatically executed than most cabinet meetings, with timelines that actually meant something, responsibilities that were clearly assigned, and follow ups that did not vanish into thin air like election promises.

And as I stood there, pretending to check my phone while actually listening with great national interest and mild personal fear, I wondered why on earth we think women need "reservation" to prove their worth.

Now before you raise your eyebrows, close this page, and declare me unfit for polite society, hear me out.

Reservation, in its purest form, is meant to uplift those who have been denied opportunity. It is meant to level a tilted playing field. It is a crutch given to someone who has been forced to limp for too long. But when you offer that same crutch to someone who has the ability to run faster, think sharper, and manage three crises at once while we men are still locating the crisis, it begins to look less like support and more like a very polite insult wrapped in legislative paper.



It is like telling a marathon runner, who has already finished two laps and is asking where the finish line is, "Here, take this walking stick, you might need it." She looks at you, then at the stick, and then wonders if you have been watching the same race.

Women today are not waiting at the starting line adjusting their shoelaces. They are already halfway down the track, dragging along families, careers, aging parents, school projects, social obligations, and sometimes husbands who are still wandering around the house asking, "Have you seen my socks?"

In my own home, I have noticed something rather interesting, and slightly terrifying if you look at it closely. When something goes wrong, we men call it a problem, discuss it, analyse it, maybe even form a small committee around it, and then feel satisfied that we have done something constructive. When my wife handles it, it quietly becomes part of a new system that ensures it never happens again.

Electricity bill unpaid. She has a system. Guests arriving unannounced. She has a system.

The maid deciding that attendance is optional. She has a system. Me forgetting her birthday or our wedding anniversary. Well, for that she has something far more powerful than a system, something that does not require electricity, internet, or parliamentary approval.

And yet, here we are as a nation, standing up in Parliament and declaring with great seriousness, "Let us reserve seats for women."

This, when I have seen better speeches from lady members than the jeers, sneers, interruptions, and table thumping that some of the men specialise in, as though Parliament were not a place of governance but a wrestling ring where the loudest shout wins the match.

Hey Parliamentarians, may I make a small suggestion from the safety of my living room where the only opposition I face is far more intelligent and far less forgiving. Instead of reserving seats, why not remove the invisible barriers that you have quietly built over decades which stop capable women from entering politics in the first place.

Why not ensure safety so that stepping out into public life is not an act of courage but a normal decision. Why not ensure equal opportunity so that talent is not filtered through bias. Why not create systems where merit is recognised without attaching a label that quietly whispers, "You got in because we made space for you."

Because let us be honest with ourselves, and this is where it gets uncomfortable. The moment you reserve a seat you also plant a seat of doubt. Was she chosen because she is capable, or because she fits the category that fills the quota. That question may not be asked loudly, but it lingers in corridors, it floats in drawing room conversations, and worst of all, it sometimes settles in the minds of the very women we claim to empower.

And doubt, my dear friends, is a far heavier burden than discrimination, because discrimination can be fought, but doubt seeps in quietly and begins to fight from within.

I have seen women lead schools with discipline, companies with vision, hospitals with compassion, and homes with an efficiency that would put most corporate management systems to shame. I have seen women handle crises with calmness, take decisions with clarity, and move forward without needing applause or approval.

They do not need a reserved chair. They need the chair to stop being quietly kept aside for the wrong people. True empowerment is not about giving space in a room. It is about removing the walls that stop someone from entering that room in the first place. It is about ensuring that when a woman walks in, nobody asks why she is there, but instead listens to what she has to say.

If a woman walks into Parliament, let it be because she walked in with ability, determination, and perhaps a well-deserved impatience with nonsense, not because someone politely held the door open and said, "Please come, we have kept a seat for you."

Because the day we stop reserving seats for women, whether in Parliament, in buses, or in our own thinking, will be the day we finally stop treating them as exceptions and start recognising them as equals.

And knowing the women I have seen planning meetings, running homes, and quietly fixing the world one system at a time, I have a feeling that when that day comes, they will not ask for a seat at the table.

They will simply rearrange the table, improve it, and ask the rest of us why it took us so long to catch up...!

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

Letters to the Editor

The Case for Bhutan-Shillong Student Exchanges

Editor,

In an era where education is increasingly measured by digital metrics, there is a profound need to return to a more holistic, human-centric approach. Through this letter I wish to advocate for a formal student exchange framework between Bhutan and Shillong—two regions that, despite being separated by borders, are deeply united by their "highland soul" and commitment to sustainable living.

Shillong, with its storied history as an educational hub and its unique matrilineal social fabric, offers a special atmosphere that mirrors Bhutan's own values. By grounding these exchanges in the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH), we can move beyond mere academic credits and focus on "heart-to-heart" learning.

The potential for mutual growth is immense:

Cultural Resonances: Students from Bhutan would find a home away from home in Meghalaya's verdant hills and misty landscapes, fostering a unique "hill-station diplomacy" that thrives on shared traditions and environmental stewardship.

The GNH Philosophy in Practice: Shillong's students could learn the mechanics of prioritizing collective well-being over GDP from their Bhutanese peers, while Bhutanese students could explore Meghalaya's vibrant grassroots democracy and indigenous knowledge systems.

Ecological Brotherhood: Both regions face similar climate challenges. Joint field studies on sacred groves, living root bridges, and organic farming would provide a living laboratory for sustainable development.

This is more than an educational initiative; it is an investment in regional peace and happiness. By encouraging our youth to traverse the path between the Land of the Thunder Dragon and the Abode of the Clouds, we nurture a generation of leaders who value community and nature as much as progress.

I urge the authorities of both the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and the Bhutanese Ministry of Education to explore a Memorandum of Understanding that formalizes this bond. Let us allow our students to breathe the shared air of these highlands and build a future where happiness is our common currency.

Yours etc.,
Jigyel Gyeltshen,
Shillong

Enhancing Road Safety through High-Visibility Gear for Traffic Personnel

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw urgent attention to the safety of our Traffic Police Personnel, who tirelessly manage our roads under increasingly hazardous conditions.

While these officers perform a vital role in maintaining order, it is frequently observed that many manage traffic without adequate safety gear. The absence of reflective jackets and LED signaling lights makes them nearly invisible to motorists during the night, or early morning hours, or in heavy fog and rain. This lack of visibility not only puts the officers' lives at risk but also creates confusion for drivers, who may fail to see hand signals until they are too close to react safely.

Providing our personnel with high-visibility reflective vests and handled LED batons would be a significant step forward. These tools ensure that an officer can be spotted from a distance, allowing drivers to adjust their speed and respond to signals effectively.

In the interest of both public safety and the well-being of our police force, I urge the concerned authorities to prioritize the distribution of this essential equipment.

Yours etc.,
Aibankitbok Marwein,
Shillong

Rising Cost of Living

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw attention to the rising cost of living, which is placing an increasing burden on residents.

The steady increase in the prices of essential goods and services has made it difficult for many people to manage their daily expenses. For several households, keeping up with rent, food, and basic necessities has become a constant struggle. While economic changes may be inevitable, their impact on ordinary citizens cannot be overlooked.

There is a need for meaningful interventions to ease this pressure. Local authorities could consider measures to monitor and regulate essential commodity prices, while encouraging local businesses to offer more affordable options for residents. Community-based initiatives and support systems may also help those who are finding it hardest to cope.

This issue is not merely about numbers or statistics—it is about people striving to stay afloat in a city they deeply care about. It is therefore important to initiate wider discussions and take timely action to address these challenges.

I hope this matter will receive the attention it deserves.

Yours etc.,
Neha K Roy
Shillong

A Staunch Advocate for Women's Rights

Editor,

In the 67th year of independent India, the enactment of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Act) in 2023 marks a historic milestone in the journey towards gender equality. Although the first attempt to introduce such legislation dates back to 1996, it failed to materialise due to political challenges. The current Act provides for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, representing a significant step toward inclusive governance.

The demand for women's dignity, rights, and equal opportunities is not new. India's first Law Minister and a Bharat Ratna, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was one of the earliest and strongest advocates of women's rights in India. Through his pivotal role in drafting the Indian Constitution, he ensured provisions that guaranteed women the right to vote, equality before the law, property rights, and access to education and dignified employment.

Dr. Ambedkar possessed a visionary outlook on women's empowerment. He consistently emphasised the need for women to be treated on par with men and encouraged them to "educate, organise, and agitate" for their rights. Despite facing entrenched patriarchal norms, he remained unwavering in his commitment to gender justice. He also actively opposed social evils such as caste discrimination and untouchability, recognising their intersection with the oppression of women. Gender inequality continues to hinder India's development, but the constitutional framework laid down by Dr. Ambedkar firmly rejects discrimination based on gender. It upholds equality and does not support protectionism that limits women's freedoms under the guise of safety.In contemporary India, women are breaking barriers across diverse sectors, including the armed forces, where they are now granted Permanent Commissions. Legislative reforms such as the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, addressing the issue of triple talaq, and the Hindu Succession Act, ensuring equal inheritance rights, have further strengthened women's position in society.

Additionally, the labor codes introduced in 2019 and 2020 include provisions for maternity benefits and safeguards against workplace harassment, contributing to a safer and more inclusive work environment. These measures collectively reflect ongoing efforts to build a more equitable society. Dr. Ambedkar famously stated, "I measure the progress of any society by the progress of women within that society." His resignation as Law Minister over the stalling of the Hindu Code Bill underscores his unwavering commitment to women's rights and social reform. His legacy continues to inspire India's ongoing journey toward gender equality and justice.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Munshi Ram,
Via email

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"There's no present. There's only the immediate future and the recent past."

—George Carlin

The Shillong Times

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When Tradition Excludes Ecology

THERE are many guardians of tradition in Meghalaya but few if any care about the ecology. Now the state even wants to fund studies on tracing the roots of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities as if this is a question of life and death for the tribes. If the idea for the research is mainly to keep scholars and researchers busy because they are not gainfully employed then we can see the reason for the project. Else every study becomes another addition to the state's list of funded projects that are stashed in the library and are hardly read. Instead of studies into the past the Government would do well to invest in issues affecting the present. Meghalaya is a data-starved state. It is well known that there is a huge number of school drop-outs in the state but there is no statewide data on the numbers. Without data how can any intervention take place? Now drop-outs at the college level are rising. Students tend to stop their studies after Class 12 because they see no point in having a certificate that does not fetch them a job. What's the way forward for such drop-outs? Does Government have an action plan?

That's one part of the problem. The state actually needs robust data on the state of its rivers and also explain to the public why the river Lukha in East Jaintia Hills has not been detoxified using scientific methods so that it is cleansed of the acid mine drainage and other toxins that render it a dead river. The rivers in the rest of the state too, particularly those flowing through the city and district headquarters are all loaded with garbage which is a sign of a failed garbage collection system; the failure of the Dorbar Shnong to restrict their residents from dumping garbage into the rivers and the complete dereliction of duty of the Autonomous District Councils which claim custodianship of the rivers, to actually be the conscientious gate-keepers that would prevent the horrific pollution of rivers as they are seen today. The Government should be in a position to inform the public about the condition of each of the 250 plus rivers in Meghalaya – how many are still alive and how many are dead rivers.

Interestingly there are guardians of tradition who wax eloquent on social media about the sanctity of tradition and customary practices. Were rivers never an important part of tradition that they are now left to be treated as drains? Is there nothing sacred about rivers in the tradition of the three tribes? No wonder forests are brought down at breakneck speed because those who get permission to cut those forests have perhaps never been told that forests are catchments that retain rain water and on which rivers rely on for their constant flow. In Meghalaya, tradition has drifted away from ecological responsibility. Hence rivers are now being leased out for sand mining by the very custodians of tradition – the Syiems, Myntris and Rangbah Shnong. And all in the name of livelihoods. This even while the same authorities cannot even prevent forest fires. Today in Meghalaya, symbolism has replaced stewardship. Even the sacred groves are now over-exploited by curious tourists who do not understand that sacredness resides in silence. At this rate there will be nothing sacred to protect anymore and culture and tradition will be reduced to festivals, songs and dances.

Shillong Bypoll 2026: Sympathy, Strategy, and Sanbor Shullai

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Over the last couple of weeks, there have been speculations that Sanbor Shullai, BJP MLA from South Shillong, is being projected as the common candidate of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA), Government for the upcoming Lok Sabha by-poll from Shillong. The untimely demise of Ricky Syngkon, who had won the Shillong seat from the Voice of the People Party (VPP), has necessitated a by-poll that promises to become a highly intriguing affair. The VPP has already announced Batskhem Myrboh, the party's chief spokesperson and an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), as its candidate. The party is hoping that Batskhem would gain from the sympathy factor, which will allow them to win the seat again. If that happens, this will be a big achievement for a party that rode on the high of 'jaidbynriew politics' to not just win the Shillong MP seat but also the KHADC for the first time. But the loss in JHADC also highlights the limits of 'jaidbynriew politics', which has to produce results beyond slogans.

VPP has already backtracked from its original position of amending the Reservation Policy based on population to demand that only the Khasi share should be increased without disturbing the existing 40% available to the Garo. But that would violate the principle of proportionality on which they started the agitation on the issue. It is quite confusing as to what the original argument was for starting the agitation. Nevertheless, the admission that they do not want to disturb the Garo share is a signal that the fight over changing the reservation policy is over. This might change if Batskhem were to raise the issue in the Lok Sabha if he were to win the by-poll. So, it will be interesting to listen to him during the campaign as to the issues that he promises to raise in Parliament. If amending the reservation policy is not mentioned, it is a clear signal that the issue is over for the party and they are sending a message to their supporters that they need to move on to other issues, most probably ILP.

As for the MDA, they would like to believe that the emotional surge that propelled VPP to their first-ever MP seat has died down and people will become more discerning about their vote. They would want someone who can work with the Union Government in bringing much-needed financial resources to the state that can be used for funding development initiatives. Pragmatism is what the MDA is hoping for from the electorate. At the same time, they will have to learn from the previous election so as not to suffer a repeat. In 2024, NPP and UDP (in alliance with HSPDP) decided to contest the election on their own, and it ended in embarrassing defeats for both. Ampareen Lyngdoh was the NPP candidate, and she got 18% of the vote, while Robertjune Kharjahrin from UDP got only 4% of the vote. A common candidate, therefore, seems like a better option.

The Congress will also need to consider the candidate very carefully. Vincent Pala got less than 20% of the vote, and it might be time to give an opportunity to fresh faces. Manuel Badwar, Meghalaya Pradesh Congress Committee Secretary, could be an option. But he has never won an election and therefore might not be ready for the MP election yet. A surprising option could be the reinstatement of George Lyngdoh into the party and projecting him as the party's candidate. Despite his losses in the previous MLA and MDC elections, he has been a member of the Meghalaya Assembly and would have no issue transitioning into a similar role in the Lok Sabha. Not being party to any controversy to date or having been accused of corruption, he could be a safe candidate as the party looks to rejuvenate itself for the future. It would be a desperate move to call someone back who left on their own volition, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Now coming to Sanbor Shullai, if indeed he gets the nod as the common candidate for the MDA, it creates a different challenge for the other contenders. A three-time MLA from South Shillong, he also held the post of the Deputy Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Representing an ethnically diverse constituency, he has learned the art of balancing the interests of different groups. Though belonging to the BJP, he has at times taken a stand that goes against party policy. While Himanta Biswa Sarma recently went berserk threatening action against the parents of Kunki Chowdhury over allegations that they consumed beef, not long ago Sanbor was encouraging people in the state to eat more beef along with other meat. In the letter addressed to the Assam Chief Minister, however, he was more diplomatic and praised Himanta Biswa Sarma while still opposing any attempt to ban beef consumption. This tact is also seen in his dealings with the local 'pro-jaidbynriew' groups that accuse him of sheltering and supporting the non-indigenous community.

In a public meeting, he informed the audience that South Shillong is a general seat, which means that anyone can contest an election from it. Before he became the MLA, it was Manas Chaudhari who held the seat for two terms. Ever since he was able to wrest control of the seat by defeating Manas Chaudhuri, it has always remained with him, an indigenous Khasi. So, Sanbor is equally adept at playing the 'jaidbynriew' card when the occasion demands. And over time, his hold over the seat has only become stronger. In 2013, he won with only 34% of the vote share, which increased to more than 66% in 2023. In the last election, I campaigned for one of his opponents, and we were completely decimated. So, does this mean that he is a proponent of jaidbynriew politics?

Some people claim the non-indigenous support for Sanbor is due to their fear of losing protection if he loses. Except for a few stray incidents, his constituency has by and large been free of ethnic tension. So, it has to be acknowledged that he has been able to ensure the safety and security of his constituents, especially those belonging to the non-indigenous community. However, even if the argument of 'protection' were to be true, it does not fully capture the reasons for the strong support among the majority of the electorate.

One of the most memorable moments captured during the Pujas is the sight of Sanbor dancing in front of the procession. I have personally witnessed such a performance. He takes part equally in the celebrations of all communities, and there are numerous pictures and videos to attest to it. It is this inclusive attitude that has been his biggest strength. One of the Khasi voters from his constituency once told me that he does not discriminate between any community (indigenous or non-indigenous) or class (rich or poor). A friend of mine narrated an incident that captures what Sanbor means to many of his constituents. Some time ago, when one of his family members had passed away in the hospital, my friend called Sanbor for help in bringing the body home. It was quite late at night, and Sanbor assured him that he would send someone. Later, an ambulance pulled up in front of the house with the body. The family went out to receive the body and found Sanbor at the wheel, driving the ambulance himself.

Sanbor Shullai is a maverick who does things his own way. No one would name a road after themselves while still being alive. People chuckle about it, but I am sure he is not bothered by it. But this does not mean that he is a simpleton. He understands the art of balancing the aspirations of different groups, safety and security for the non-indigenous population, and catering to the existential angst of the indigenous community. His longevity in an ethnically diverse constituency is a testament to it. He is the only BJP candidate who might appeal to non-BJP voters. Therefore, he might very well be the best bet for a common candidate. Does this mean that he will win? I think it will be a big challenge. But whatever the outcome in the end, it will always be our choice, something that Sanbor will always stand up for. Of that I am confident, even if I may not vote for him.

(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 Life Composed in Chords, Soil, and Care: The Legacy of Dr J.L Sailo Ryntathiang

By Maitphang Syiem

Some people are known best not by their titles, but by what they did in the ordinary hours: the evenings after rounds, the mornings before the hospital woke up. Dr. John Lalremsiama Sailo Ryntathiang was that kind of person. Today, on the sixth anniversary of his passing, we remember him not only as Meghalaya's most beloved physician and founder of Bethany Hospital, but as a man whose life was made of things most obituaries miss a guitar kept within reach, a hillside farm in Ri-Bhoi, a pencil that never stopped sketching what could still be built. Those who knew him say he had a way of making the world feel more deliberate. He did not simply move through it. He paid attention to it.

To understand Dr. Sailo, one must begin before him in the bloodline he carried with quiet pride. His father, Captain Lalrinthanga Sailo, was the first Mizo to graduate from the Indian Military Academy, who walked the disputed edges of the McMahon Line and died in the frontier of NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh. His maternal grandfather was Dr. Lukira, the first Mizo doctor. His mother, Kong Dicky Sailo Ryntathiang, was a well-known educationist and social worker in Shillong. He came from a family of people who were first at things not through ambition, but through the willingness to step where others had not. Dr. Sailo carried this legacy quietly. He rarely spoke of it, according to those close to him. He simply got on with things which, in its own way, said everything.

There is a particular kind of intelligence that institutional education cannot fully contain. Dr. Sailo had that kind. He graduated from Assam Medical College in Dibrugarh, completed his postgraduation at AIIMS New Delhi, won the Gold Medal, and became a Fellow of the American College of Chest Physicians (FCCP, USA) placing him among the finest internists. By any measure, these were remarkable achievements for a young doctor from Shillong. But his colleagues will tell you that his credentials were the least interesting thing about him. The part of him that people speak of with the greatest warmth was the man who could not stop learning from the world itself. He had a deep curiosity about music, design, art, farming, and how a building could be made humane—how architecture could serve healing as much as medicine could. He drew, sketched, and leaned over blueprints with the same intensity he brought to a case file, always asking, "How can this be better?" The growth of Bethany Hospital from a modest clinic on Nongrim Hills Road in 1992 to a 175-bedded multi-specialty institution by 2011 was the work of a man who understood that care needs a worthy space. He funded students, represented Meghalaya in the Indian Medical Council, and travelled to conferences not to be seen, but to learn. He could not stop learning because he could not stop caring.

Those who visited Dr. Sailo at home remember a guitar always within arm's reach—not mounted on a wall or kept in a case, just there, the way a familiar tool stays close to the person who uses it regularly. His love for music was genuine and well-known among family, colleagues, and patients alike. The guitar was as much a part of his identity as his stethoscope. What struck people was not that a doctor played music, but how naturally the two sat together in him. He listened to his patients the way a musician listens to a composition: not just for what was being said, but for what was underneath it. The hesitation in a voice. The symptom mentioned last. He brought the same patience to both.

The same hands that examined patients and held a guitar also turned the soil. Dr. Sailo's farmhouse in Nongpoh, Ri-Bhoi District, was his sanctuary—the place where the physician became a man again. He farmed, planted, and watched the seasons do their slow, honest work. In a region where Khasi tradition recognises the earth not as a resource but as something owed respect, his farming was not a pastime. It was a practice.

He knew those Nongpoh roads well—had walked them, known the families along them, understood what it meant to fall ill far from a hospital. That familiarity is what drove him to build an outreach facility there. It was not a strategic decision. It was a personal one. His patients in that valley were not strangers to him. He had breathed the same air.

Dr. Sailo was a devout Christian quietly so, in the way that tends to be most lasting. His family described him as someone who actually lived by what he believed: a man of peace who did not raise his voice, who could find something to smile about even on difficult days, and who was, above all, genuinely compassionate. His faith showed up not in pronouncements but in decisions: returning to Shillong when a career in Delhi was well within reach; building clinics in places where the economics made little sense; paying for a student's education without making it a story.

In Khasi philosophical tradition, "Ka Hok" righteousness, the right way is not merely a moral code but a way of living in alignment with something larger than oneself. By that measure, Dr. Sailo belonged to a tradition much older than any institution that gave him a degree. Every choice he made—to come home, to build where others would not, to fund a stranger's education, to pick up the guitar at the end of a long day of rounds—reflected a man who understood what he was here for.

Dr. Sailo passed away on the morning of 15th April 2020, at 2:45 AM. He had been unwell due to COVID. Life, in its infinite mystery, does not always reveal its reasons to us. It reminds us once again that death, like the first breath, belongs to a design far greater than our own understanding. He did not leave because his work had ended. He left because some journeys simply cannot be extended by human will alone.

What he left behind is not easily catalogued. It lives in the patient from a Ri-Bhoi village whose diagnosis changed the course of their life. In the student whose fees he quietly covered. In the nurse who watched how he treated people and decided that was the standard she would hold herself to. In everyone who, at the end of a hard day, picks up a guitar and lets the music say what words cannot quite manage. He did not speak about legacy. He built one, steadily, without announcement, over the course of a life.

Six years on, those who knew Dr. John L. Sailo Ryntathiang still speak of him in the same way not as a towering figure, but as a good man. Thorough. Warm. Honest about what mattered. In Shillong, that tends to be the higher praise. Bethany still stands at Nongrim Hills. The fields of Ri-Bhoi still turn with the seasons. And the things he cared about—healing, learning, the soil, the music—go on, carried forward by people he shaped, many of whom never knew that was what he was doing. Dr. John L. Sailo Ryntathiang did not merely live a life. He composed one in chords and soil and stone and care, in the languages of the guitar and the stethoscope and the seed.

(Writer is a Nephew and a Geospatial Expert)

Letters to the Editor

Why is GreenTech Selective?

Editor,

I write to express my deep resentment at the ongoing selective hunger strike undertaken by the Chairman, Greentech Foundation, Meghalaya. While the cause of Lumpongdeng is understood, the selective nature of the protest raises serious questions about the credibility and consistency of the Foundation's activism.

Since its supposed inception in 2019, the Foundation has remained conspicuously silent on pressing environmental issues. It did not raise its voice against the rampant coal mining in Jaintia Hills, which has caused severe ecological degradation. It was equally silent when trees were uprooted for the ropeway project in Lawsohtun. Yet, the Foundation was vocal in opposing the coverage of a stretch at Wahthangsniang in Laitumkhrah for road widening, while remaining mute when Umshyrpi in Malki was covered to pave way for parking and shops. There is illegal felling of trees for charcoal burning that the foundation must have skipped for unknown reasons but it seems to be vocal only on projects that the govt is initiating or is in a nascent stage like the Umiam tourism project or the Nonghyllem eco-tourism project. Such selective interventions betray inconsistency and weaken the moral ground of the current hunger strike.

Moreover, the Government has already clarified that no permanent structure will be permitted at Lumpongdeng. In light of this assurance, the hunger strike appears to lack justification. The participation of a few political parties further politicizes the issue, and the labelling of spa tourism as "sex tourism" is both demeaning and misleading. Traditional massage equivalent to spa is a respected practice in Meghalaya, rooted in culture and wellness. To malign spa vis a vis massage with such terminology is uncalled for and I urge the President of the VPP to withdraw this remark and issue an apology at the earliest.

Environmental activism must be consistent, balanced, and rooted in genuine concern for nature and community. Selective protests and disparaging statements only erode public trust and diminish the credibility of those who claim to champion the environment.

Yours etc,
Suzzane K.
Shillong-2

Death Traps on Our Streets: The Crisis of Crumbling Roads

Editor,

Through this letter, I wish to highlight the appalling condition of the roads in our city, which have now reached a breaking point. What were once minor cracks have transformed into craters, turning our daily commutes into a dangerous obstacle course, almost at every lane and bye lane in the state capital.

The danger is amplified during the rains. These waterlogged potholes are "invisible" hazards that lead to vehicle damage, physical injuries, and endless traffic snarls. It is frustrating to see the public bear the cost of damaged suspensions and lost time due to the apparent negligence of the municipal or Public Work maintenance departments.

Good roads are the backbone of a functioning city. I request the authorities to take immediate, high-quality remedial action rather than applying "quick-fix" solutions that wash away with the next shower. The citizens deserve roads that facilitate movement, not hinder it.

Yours etc.,
Medual Nongrum,
Shillong

Ward's Lake- An Endangered Beauty Spot

Editor,

I would like to bring to your kind notice that the present situation of Wards Lake is pathetic. The structures coming up around the Lake and the Bridge remaining closed for several years gives a very poor impression to visitors. I fail to understand why Wards Lake is being used for purposes other than what it was created for, especially in the last few years. Needless to say the beauty of the Lake is marred by the structures nearby and one fails to understand why events should be held at the Lake. The Lake was created as a serene beauty spot of Shillong not a noisy platform for buying and selling and loud music. Is this Government intending to extend Police Bazar toward the Ward's Lake? From all indications it would appear that is the long term plan but we the people of Meghalaya have to stop this from happening and reclaim Wards' Lake so that it can provide us with the silence and calm that it used to in the past. Tourists don't come to Meghalaya only for songs and dances and for shopping. They come to get their moments of peace. The Tourism Department should understand the psychology of tourists who come here.

Yours etc.,
Paul Jyrwa,
Via email

Allegations of Favouritism in Posting & Transfer Under NPP-Led Government

Editor,

Through this letter, I wish to express serious concern and strong dissatisfaction over the growing instances of favouritism in the posting and transfer of government officials under the present government led by the National People's Party.

The process of posting and transfer is a critical pillar of governance, meant to ensure efficiency, neutrality, and optimal utilization of administrative talent. However, the current trend suggests that these decisions are no longer guided by merit, experience, or public interest, but rather by political loyalty and personal connections. This has created a system where a select few continue to enjoy favourable postings, while many competent and sincere officers are sidelined or repeatedly transferred without clear justification.

Such arbitrary and frequent transfers not only disrupt administrative continuity but also severely hamper the implementation of government schemes and development programmes. Officers who are constantly moved from one post to another are unable to deliver effectively, leading to delays, inefficiency, and poor public service delivery. In contrast, those who are perceived to be close to those in power are often placed in key or resourceful departments, raising serious questions about transparency and accountability.

This trend has far-reaching consequences. It demoralizes honest officers who strive to work with integrity, discourages professionalism within the system, and fosters an environment where political influence overrides institutional norms. In a state like Meghalaya, where administrative resources are limited and development challenges are significant, such practices can further widen the gap between policy and implementation.

It is deeply disappointing that the National People's Party-led government has allowed such a culture to persist. Governance must be based on fairness, rule of law, and equal opportunity—not on patronage and favoritism. If this continues, it will not only weaken the administrative machinery but also erode the faith of the public in the government.

I urge the concerned authorities to take immediate corrective measures by introducing a transparent and standardized transfer policy, ensuring minimum tenure for officials, and establishing an independent mechanism to oversee postings and transfers. Only through such reforms can the credibility of the system be restored and public trust regained.

I hope this issue receives the attention it deserves and prompts necessary action in the interest of good governance and the people of the state.

Yours etc.,
Manhi Passah
Jowai

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"Kites rise highest against the wind - not with it."

— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

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Women as leaders

THE long-awaited Women Reservation Bill has been introduced in the special session of Parliament on Thursday with an assertion from Prime Minister Narendra Modi that "Respect for our mothers and sisters is respect for the nation." The Bill seeks to ensure 33 percent reservation of seats for women in Parliament and state legislatures from the next general election in 2029 – and initially for a period of 15 years. After this, it could periodically be extended for more years. It is envisaged that the number of MPs in Lok Sabha would increase to 850 from the present 545. Alongside, the government plans to come up with the Constituency Delimitation Bill 2026, which would also be effective from the next general elections. Both are interlinked. However, the government is bringing up an amendment to the 2023 Act that linked women reservation to the next Census, by giving a linkage instead to the (last) 2011 Census, so as to speed up the matter. The present Census exercise ostensibly takes time for its completion.

The women reservation plan has been under discussion for years. While local bodies have been granted a reservation of 33 per cent-- or up to 50 per cent, across states, this is now being elevated to a higher level. The Modi government is keen on passing the women reservation bill right now also as it could likely benefit it in the present round of elections to the assemblies of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu etc, while the Assam and Kerala polls were over in one phase. Chances are that the bill will be passed in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha without much hassle this time and turn into law. A two-thirds majority is a must for its passage in both houses. A promise is also that the quota for women would not affect the existing general seats; and that this would be accommodated in the delimitation-related increase in the parliament seats. While the Opposition has raised issues like a sub-quota for BCs, alongside SCs and STs, it cannot afford to fight the present bill as this would create a negative image for the Congress and others, among the women voters. At the same time, elections are never fought on one issue, per se.

Women emancipation and empowerment are essential requirements for any advanced society. However, in India, these concepts are limited largely to the upper segments of the population. Women from ordinary families continue to suffer in multiple ways. They face discrimination at home and in public life. Legislations in the past have however improved their social conditions to an extent. With one-third reservations offered to women in top representative bodies like Parliament and assemblies, the time has come for them to hold the reins of governance in more significant ways. That will have a trickle-down effect, helping empower women across segments. Their sense of dignity and bargaining power would increase. Women are already performing well as people's representatives under the Panchayat Raj systems, which is reassurance that their heightened role in governance of states and the nation would be along the right lines.

Critical Thinking and Khasi Society: Hazards of Living in a Bubble & Glamourising the Past

By Patricia Mukhim

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly, question assumptions, and make well-reasoned judgments. Critical thinking also questions past narratives that are embedded in the present despite the fact that the present requires an ecosystem that relies on logic and reasoning to meet new challenges. However, not everything about the past was wrong or illogical. I believe our ancestors were invested in ecological balance. They had a reverence for nature and the British actually defined our indigenous faith to be animistic meaning that we found spiritual uplift and resonance with nature. Hence, we would not harm nature the way we do today where nature is commodified and measured by rupees (lakhs and crores). So wherever and whenever it suits us we talk about our Niam Tynrai (indigenous faith) as if we live in a pristine past even while our relationship with nature has changed irrevocably.

The extractive economy knows no religion or faith. It's not as if those who converted to Christianity are the only ones who exploit nature. In fact, that would mean that Christianity has no respect for the environment and that the church has failed to inculcate in its adherents a healthy respect for our forests, rivers, birds and beasts. Rivers and forests are the very basis of life yet the vengeance we have wreaked on our rivers is abominable. Yet the same people attend churches, temples and celebrate culture as if cultural symbols are reduced to songs, dances, dresses and ornaments. Normally church services and rituals of the indigenous faith should introspect on the interdependence between humans and nature. But that's far from happening. This is again because the critical thinking mind is switched off when one enters a church or a jingleh niam (rituals) of the indigenous faith. To question any of the elders and custodians of culture or religion would be disrespectful. That's what has been drilled into our not so common sense. So, no questions allowed. You follow what's told. That's how we lose touch with our critical thinking faculties.

In Khasi society we don't allow questioning at home. Elders believe they are the repositories of all wisdom and younger members are passive recipients of that received wisdom. How then do we expect these same individuals to express curiosity and ask questions on what they are being taught in the classroom? In most classrooms again, teachers 'teach' and don't allow questions, much less an animated debate on a range of issues which is what real education is supposed to mean. In fact, each time someone dares to raise questions on existential issues they are told to shut up. More so if the question/questions come from a woman. We are reminded not to overstep our limits because the ancestors have stated what many consider a gospel truth – that a woman who speaks out of turn and especially one who raises questions on politics is a "hen that crows" which is a sign of perdition. In Khasi the saying goes "Ka kynthei kaba krèn laplah, kaba bun ktien bad mushlia ia ka kam rangbah – ka kam sain pyrthei - ka dei ka iar kynthei kaba kyn-ih kum u iar ryngkuh.

This sort of societal gatekeeping has actually pushed women to the margins of politics because they are given that 'honorific' of being the keepers and progenitors of the clan. Hence women are raised to a pedestal but told in no uncertain terms to stick to their domain – give birth, look after domestic responsibilities and allow the men to think of issues outside the four walls. In this sort of societal mooring why do we expect women from the margins of society who experience poverty first hand to raise their voices and use that agency of VOICE to bring change to their miserable existence?

Make no mistake but the self appointed custodians of Khasi culture today belong to the upper crust of society. In a covert manner some of them have an under-stated affinity with the proponents of Hindutva which is clearly different from Hinduism. Hindutva is a weaponised version of Hinduism. So, are there any parallels between Ka Niam Tynrai (indigenous faith, not the Seng Khasi which is a later derivative and which sought to institutionalise the adherents of the indigenous faith as a buffer against Christianity) and Hinduism? Ka Niam Tynrai never set limits or rules or a list of commandments for its adherents as Christianity does. Its principle teachings were "Tip Briew, Tip Blei" an aphorism that conveys the meaning that respect for God must begin with respect for fellow humans. In short, the teaching boils down to one simple truth – only when you know your fellow humans would you know God..almost like saying that God resides in every human soul. Perhaps what the ancestors meant also was service to humanity so that no one is impoverished as to have to beg. It means sharing resources.

Perhaps this is why the British found the Khasi society to be egalitarian. But are we an egalitarian society today? The very fact that we have folklore of the "Thlen" is to caution us that those clans and individuals who rear this imaginary python because of greed for wealth were excommunicated from their villages. It was a Khasi way of driving out those with excessive greed and who wanted to hoard more then they needed – something that the Khasi society was averse to in its early days. Today Khasi society comprises a small number of land owning elite who cut across all faiths. We have land sharks but also a huge chunk of landless Khasis. This landless population too cuts across all faiths. But do we discuss these critical issues today? Of course not. Where is the platform to discuss landlessness and how to ensure that every Khasi owns at least a plot for a home and a kitchen garden?

Interestingly the issue of land and how it is to be distributed is not really documented in our customary laws. In 1975, Mr RT Rymbai headed the Meghalaya, Government, Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills and wrote a report. But the Report classified land into so many grades that it was more confusing than bringing clarity. How can a society be egalitarian when the very basis of equity in land ownership is missing? The claim is that a few clans own entire villages but over time that ownership passed over to the more powerful tribals. If we take the case of the New Shillong Township (NST), most of the landowners are from a few clans from whom the land was acquired to create the NST and for building roads etc. Large chunks of Khasi clans don't own land even in their own villages. Since there is no data on land ownership because of the absence of cadastral survey, there is public knowledge as to how much land has passed into the hands of the tribal elite. So who is against the cadastral survey? Should the Khasi people have gone against it if the idea is to bring about equitable distribution of land? Do the local villagers even know what a cadastral survey is? Late Mr Hopingstone Lyngdoh was against cadastral survey on the plea that people would have to pay revenue to the government for their land. That was a sham argument probably put into Lyngdoh's mind by land sharks. Hence while BB Lyngdoh as Chief Minister proposed the cadastral survey, his Home Minister Hopingstone Lyngdoh blocked the process. That's Meghalaya's sordid history. Now why do you think there's resistance to the cadastral survey project? Its because the few individuals of privileged clans who own entire villages fear that their extensive land ownership details might become public.

For crying out loud, our hypocrisy is all to visible and discernible to the eye of any social scientist. Late Dr Ricky Syngkon had shared his anxieties about the growing poverty in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

After all this, it is amusing to note that the Khasis still eulogise Khasi culture as being enlightened, democratic and equitable. It is none of these. Today resources are not shared by the community but are owned by a few individuals? Are coal mines a shared resource or individually owned? So too the limestone mines and the quarries. What do people get out of these environmentally degrading activities? Their rivers are degraded and some even poisoned but they don't have the platform to take up these issues except in rare cases.

Its time for the Khasi people to come out of this carefully curated bubble where everything is made to look hunky-dory. There's nothing romantic about the growing poverty that prevents parents from sending their kids to school and to feed them nutritious food. Think of a family of five that earns barely Rs 300-500 a day. Meat, especially beef today costs Rs 600-700 a kg. Dal is beyond reach. Fish and eggs are unaffordable. So, what does a family really consume to get enough proteins and vitamins? Its really time to do a reality check. Isn't this what universities and other academic institutions are meant to do? Is NEHU a public funded university doing research on these critical issues or is there more politics and mud-slinging than real scholarship?

As a people if we continue to shy away from interrogating into the decadent nature of our culture and how far we have moved from what our ancestors envisaged, we are heading towards an uncertain future. We no longer live in the pristine ecosystem we have deceived ourselves to be in. The Khasi value systems have long since eroded irrevocably. Let's hear the learned custodians of culture explain to us what "Kamai Ia Ka Hok (Earn righteousness or earn though honest means), actually implies.

Khasi society needs to reflect on these issues and step away from the mud-slinging partisan politics that we have grown used to. For a change let's hear what the VPP has to say on the landlessness in Khasi society. We are waiting and watching!

The Strait of Hormuz: Why Everyone's Losing Their Mind Over It

By Shivani Pde

The Strait of Hormuz has suddenly surged into global conversations, dominating news cycles and social media feeds alike. What was once a relatively obscure geographic passage is now being discussed in everyday conversations, from economic forums to Instagram reels. The reason is simple yet alarming: the rising geopolitical tensions in the Middle East have placed this narrow waterway at the center of a potential global crisis. Reports of military confrontations, threats of blockades, and disruptions to shipping routes have triggered widespread concern, leaving many to ask: How can a strip of water so small hold such immense power over the world? Even I wondered before researching.

To understand its importance, one must first look at its geography and history. The Strait of Hormuz lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, forming the only maritime gateway for the oil-rich nations of the Gulf to access international waters. At its narrowest point, it is just about 33 kilometers wide, yet it serves as a crucial artery for global trade. The northern coastline is controlled by Iran, while the southern side is shared by countries like Oman and the United Arab Emirates. This positioning has made it a longstanding geopolitical hotspot, where regional rivalries and global power dynamics intersect.

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Historically, the Strait of Hormuz has witnessed multiple phases of tension. During conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, it became a battleground in what was known as the "Tanker War," where oil shipments were directly targeted. Over the decades, repeated threats from Iran to block the strait—often in response to sanctions or military pressure—have kept global markets on edge. However, recent developments have escalated concerns to a new level, with real disruptions in shipping traffic and heightened military presence, making the threat no longer theoretical but immediate and tangible.

The global importance of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overstated. Nearly one-fifth of the world's total oil consumption passes through this single corridor every day. Major oil exporters such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and the UAE depend heavily on this route to transport their energy resources to international markets. On the receiving end, countries like India, China, and Japan rely on these imports to sustain their economies. For India in particular, a large portion of crude oil imports travels through this passage, directly linking its stability to national energy security and economic health.

Beyond crude oil, the strait is a vital transit route for a wide range of essential commodities. Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), which fuels power plants and industries, passes through these waters in massive quantities. Fertilizers such as urea, crucial for global agriculture, are also transported via this route, directly impacting food production. Additionally, petrochemicals, refined fuels, and industrial materials like aluminum move through the strait, feeding into supply chains that power manufacturing, transportation, and infrastructure worldwide. This makes the Strait of Hormuz not just an energy corridor, but a lifeline for multiple sectors that sustain modern civilization.

The real concern arises when one considers the consequences of a complete and prolonged disruption. If the Strait of Hormuz were to be cut off, even temporarily, the effects would be immediate and severe. Global oil prices would surge dramatically, leading to higher fuel costs, increased transportation expenses, and rising inflation across economies. Industries dependent on energy would face operational challenges, potentially slowing down production and economic growth. A prolonged closure could push the global economy toward recession or even stagflation which is a dangerous combination of stagnant growth and high inflation.

Food security would also come under threat. With disruptions in fertilizer supply, agricultural output could decline, leading to increased food prices and shortages in vulnerable regions. Supply chains, already strained in a post-pandemic world, would face further disruptions, affecting everything from consumer goods to industrial production. Nations would scramble to find alternative routes or sources of energy, but existing infrastructure is insufficient to fully replace the volume that passes through the strait.

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At the geopolitical level, the stakes would rise significantly. A permanent or long-term blockade could trigger military interventions by global powers determined to secure energy flows, potentially escalating into a broader conflict. The strait, in such a scenario, would transform from a trade route into a flashpoint for international confrontation.

In essence, the Strait of Hormuz is a reminder of how deeply interconnected the modern world is. A narrow channel of water, almost insignificant in size, holds the power to influence global markets, political stability, and everyday life. Its current prominence in global discussions is not only a reaction to events unfolding currently but also a reflection of its enduring importance. What happens in this small corridor does not stay there; it echoes across continents, economies, and societies, shaping the world in ways that few other places can.

Letters to the Editor

Hypocrisy Cannot Lead to Heaven

Editor,

The article titled 'Religion without Conscience Collapses into Disaster: Michael Syiem Affirms by Salil Gewali', is very enlightening. Firstly, my thanks go to our veteran social activist Michael Syiem for his inspiring musical play, which highlights the growing number of false god-men who mislead believers. The act of demolishing mosques, temples and churches springs from a tragic lack of true knowledge and reverence for God as emphasized by Gewali.

From personal observation, I cannot figure out what makes certain priests and pastors use every possible means to convert others, insisting that what we believe is not genuine religion and cannot lead us to heaven. Why does their faith allow them to look down on others? Those who are busy in conversion are often involved in corrupt practices, and how can they then ensure salvation for anyone? So many of our political leaders are corrupt, yet Bishops and Archbishops regularly visit them as if they were holy persons. Such hypocrisy is unacceptable in any religion.

I think we would do better to devote ourselves to humanitarian service, for that alone is more pleasing to Christ than following a religion that teaches its followers to treat other faiths as inferior. True Christianity calls us to love our neighbor, to serve the poor, and to walk humbly with God.

Yours etc.,
Robert Lyngdoh,
Via email

Compassionate reform, not forced invisibility solutions

Editor,

Responding to your editorial published on 14 April concerning the presence of sex workers in the city centre and near places of worship, I wish to state that the unease expressed by citizens is understandable. Yet, beyond this discomfort lies a more pressing moral question—are we genuinely trying to resolve this issue, or merely pushing it out of public view?

History has shown, time and again, that enforcement alone does not erase such practices. Raids and arrests may offer temporary relief and a sense of order, but they do little to address the conditions that give rise to the problem. Instead, they often drive it underground, where exploitation deepens and human suffering becomes less visible, but far more severe.

It is important to recognise an uncomfortable truth: for many involved, this is not a matter of choice, but of compulsion. Poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and social neglect leave individuals with few, if any, alternatives. In such circumstances, survival takes precedence over dignity. To condemn without understanding these realities is to overlook the very roots of the issue.

If the true intention is to bring an end to this practice, then our approach must move beyond punishment and towards transformation. We cannot expect individuals to abandon their only source of livelihood without offering them a viable and dignified alternative. Sustainable change lies in creating opportunities—through education, skill development, rehabilitation, and social support systems that allow people to rebuild their lives.

At the same time, there must be absolute and uncompromising action against trafficking and exploitation. Those who manipulate, coerce, and profit from the vulnerability of others—especially minors—must face the strictest consequences under the law. This is where the full strength of enforcement must be directed.

However, a society is ultimately judged not by how it treats the privileged, but by how it responds to those on its margins. If our response is driven only by discomfort and condemnation, we risk deepening the very problem we seek to eliminate.

The path forward requires both courage and compassion—the courage to rethink long-held assumptions, and the compassion to see individuals not as nuisances to be removed, but as lives to be restored.

If we truly seek change, let it not be one that merely cleanses our streets, but one that heals our society.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Unfortunate loss of SC status for Dalit Christians

Editor,

The Supreme Court judgment of March 24,2026 has declared that Scheduled Castes who have embraced Christianity and Muslim faiths will henceforth be deprived of Scheduled caste status lock stock and barrel! It may be pertinent to recall that the Apex court has expressively affirmed that individuals who convert to religions other than Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism will automatically stand to lose the Schedule Caste window of opportunities, thereby deprived of job-reservation and legal protection as envisaged under Articles 15,17 and 46 of the Constitution. Further, the converted Dalits will be deprived of the legacy of being protected from violence/discrimination against the SC and ST, as per an Act of1989 that was endorsed by our Parliament.

Incidentally, this franchise was at first instance exclusively accorded to Hindu followers, but subsequently the same was extended to the Sikhism in 1956 and to Buddhism in 1990 to the list of religions, whose Dalit members are eligible for SC status. Perhaps, it was believed that these three religious identities were the offshoot of the same tree of faith! It may be a point of note that Christians in India constitute a minuscule 2.3% of the national population. Furthermore, 21% of them are Scheduled Caste Dalits. It infers that millions of both these communities (Muslims and Christians) will have to forgo access to reservations and legal protection, especially the BPL categories. Henceforth with no more legal shield for them!

The pre-eminent arguments that Muslims and Christians are denied Schedule Caste social standing, is premised on the fact that these classes do not theologically recognize caste systems, but this is arguably unmaintainable as some experts have since contested that neither Buddhism nor Sikhism practise such categorization! Meaningfully, some critics have argued that this said denial of the privilege in question is unjustifiable as caste discrimination persists among Christians and Muslims. Markedly, YS Sharmila, a Congress Committee President of Andhra Pradesh and the daughter of former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Dr. Y.S Rajasekhara Reddy, has gone on record asserting that such societal deprivations to Scheduled Caste Dalits smack of BJP's conspiracy and furthering her argument, she has boldly doubted if PM Modi has taken control of the Apex Court as well. Her contention may be presupposed by the fact that she bemoaned the plight of the 80 lakhs Dalit Christians of Andhra Pradesh as unjust and impulsive thereby weakening the spirit of the Constitution!

The foregoing developments may have a domino effect of sorts on the Schedule Tribes of India in general and the North-East in particular given that Scheduled Tribes are by and large residing in the latter region. Incidentally, while brainstorming with some of my friends on the plight of the Dalit Christians following the outcome of the Supreme Court ruling, one of them commented that the instant Supreme Court judgment may be keenly observed by the indigenous religions of the land of Hynñewtrep, and they must be keeping a beady eye on the resultant Apex court ruling and its adverse fallout against their tribal brethren who are steadily but significantly converting to Christianity round the year!

Yours etc
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

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"Success is dependent on effort."

— Sophocles

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Artificial Intelligence: Boon or Bane

THESE days it is common to receive articles and letters that are near perfect and require little or no editing. In the past editors had to struggle to edit long form op-ed articles for grammar and syntax and even spellings. Now the article sent are well constructed and logically sequenced under sub-titles and single sentence paragraphs which usually do not happen in articles written strictly by humans using their own creative impulses, imagination and research when it comes to facts. The question then is what happens to the human mind when it stops thinking, reflecting, analysing, searching for answers and giving a personal touch to the writing produced. Studies have shown that AI can weaken thinking if people stop analysing, questioning and forming their own opinions on a host of issues. These days college and university teachers complain that entire paragraphs are lifted from AI prepared texts and when the student is questioned on the topic he/she understands very little of what was produced. The human brain is designed to be thinking, questioning and forming opinions after testing assumptions against evidence and only then arriving at facts.

What's important to know is that AI is not always correct. After all, it produces substance collated from the internet, not all of which is authentic. When young people especially look for easy answers using AI its is equivalent to outsourcing their thinking faculties to AI and thereby reducing their independent judgment. What will be the long term consequences if each decision has to come from AI? Will that not reduce independent judgment especially in matters involving personal choices. Besides the fact that young people are so reliant on AI makes them impatient and unable to deal with complex problems that require slow and critical thinking and weighing the pros and cons of a decision. However, everything is not bad about AI. These days journalists use AI to get shorter abstracts of lengthy court judgments which would have taken several days to deconstruct. Also AI does not stop with one answer. It pushes users to refine their questions which in a sense triggers critical thinking. AI is also capable of explaining difficult ideas including those which teachers often gloss through leaving students to struggle with the chapter or parts of it that they don't understand. However the questions asked to AI have to be well constructed in order to get the correct answers. The person's thinking cannot be chaotic for that would mean asking the wrong questions and getting equally complicated answers. To use AI meaningfully the person must be clear in his/her thinking and then ask AI for perspectives but only after having decided one's own position and not being swayed by AI responses and changing one's position accordingly. *AI is best used as a discussion partner and not a substitute* of the human mind.

In writing and exploring ideas on community, indigenous knowledge, culture, tradition much of the substance has to come from the person exploring these facets. AI can help only to an extent to understand the philosophies behind the traditional and customary practices after collating information from the internet. AI is good to the extent that it enhances the human capacity to think and if humans do not completely rely on machine learning to solve complex problems.

The Lumpongdeng Lease & a Government that Has Already Made Up Its Mind

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

After Lumpongdeng, Which Island, Which Forest, Which Valley Is Next?

There is a phrase from Nikos Kazantzakis that has been haunting me of late. In Zorba the Greek, the irrepressible Zorba looks at the futile gestures of men pleading with those in power and says simply: "You can knock on a deaf man's door forever." It is a line that cuts with surgical precision through the noise of public protest and government assurance and nowhere does it resonate with more bitter clarity than in the unfolding tragedy of Lumpongdeng Island in Umiam Lake, Meghalaya. The property has been signed away. The lease has been executed. The money is on the table and it is on the side of the government. Whatever you and I say from this point forward may very well be the knocking on a deaf man's door.

But we must knock anyway. That, too, is what Zorba understood.Let us be precise about what has happened, because precision is the first casualty in these affairs when the machinery of state public relations goes to work. The Government of Meghalaya has handed over 66 acres of Lumpongdeng Island — sitting at the ecological and spiritual heart of Umiam Lake — to the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), the hospitality arm of the Tata Group, for a 60-year lease. The proposed development is the Taj Umiam Resort and Spa, a project whose updated cost figure now stands at approximately around Rs 330 crore, with projected revenues from the lease estimated at a staggering Rs 1,981 crore. For our conscience , This is not a modest tourism initiative. This is a corporate land transaction of the highest order, dressed in the language of "development" and "monetisation."

Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma has since clarified — with some urgency, one suspects, given the scale of public outrage — that no permanent construction will be permitted on Lumpongdeng Island. One is grateful for the reassurance. Except that official documents associated with the project reportedly mention luxury villas, cafés, and restaurants. These two positions cannot coexist in the same universe without one of them being a falsehood. Which is it? The government has thus far not resolved this contradiction. It has merely restated its position, which is, as Chomsky once noted about official power, the preferred method of burying a lie — not retracting it, but repeating the truth so loudly that the contradiction gets drowned out.

Lumpongdeng is not an anomaly. It is a symptom. It would be intellectually dishonest and journalistically negligent, to treat it as an isolated incident. Consider: in June 2025, the Meghalaya Cabinet approved the leasing of 273.41 acres of unused MeECL (Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited) land to the Tourism Department for a period of 60 years — extendable by a further 30 years , yes 30 years — at the astonishing rate of Rs 1 per acre (at the astonishing rate of Rs 1 per acre (Rs 0.000022956841139 per sq. ft. — less than the cost of a matchbox, and that is the cheapest price we have put on our children's inheritance) .

The land covers key locations including the IB campus, Lee Junction, Nomsdea, and L. Ponging Island. Ninety percent of the lease revenue would continue to flow to the Power Department. The tourism department gets the land; private entrepreneurs get the contracts; the communities who have lived beside these lands for generations get — what, exactly? A press release? A promise? This is the architecture of dispossession in its most legible form: the common form - the systematic conversion of public and community-adjacent land into instruments of private profit, wrapped in bureaucratic language dense enough that most citizens cannot penetrate it until the bulldozers arrive. In his landmark work Manufacturing Consent, Intellectual Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman described how state and corporate power operate in tandem, constructing narratives that legitimate the transfer of resources from the many to the few. The government of Meghalaya does not need a propaganda model imported from Washington. It has developed its own, finely calibrated to the terrain of the Northeast.

The Green Tech Foundation has been conducting an indefinite silent sit-in at Lumpongdeng Island itself, and later moved its protest to the steps of the State Secretariat in Shillong. The Hynniewtrep Integrated Territorial Organisation (HITO) wrote a formal letter to the Chief Minister urging revocation, (clearly) stating with admirable directness: "We earnestly urge you to reconsider this misguided course of action." HITO also invoked the Land Transfer Act of 1971 — a piece of legislation specifically designed to prevent non-tribals from acquiring land in Meghalaya — questioning whether the lease to IHCL was consistent with its spirit, if not its letter. Local headmen in the area have publicly denied having endorsed the project, contradicting government claims of community backing.

These are not fringe voices. These are the constitutionally recognised custodians of indigenous land — the very people whose consent should have been the precondition, not the afterthought, of any such transaction. And yet the deal proceeded. The lease was signed. And now, as the government has essentially confirmed, the property is sold — or as good as sold for the next six to nine decades. We are told that "no permanent structures" will be built. But a 60-year lease over 66 acres of a pristine lake island is itself a permanent alteration of the social and ecological contract. Duration is permanence by another name.To understand the present, one must reckon with the past. India's post-independence development narrative has been, in too many instances, a history of state-sanctioned dispossession. The great dams of the Nehruvian era — Bhakra, Hirakud, Rihand — displaced millions of people, the majority of them Adivasi. Arundhati Roy, in The Greater Common Good, documented how "big dams are to a nation's 'development' what nuclear bombs are to its military arsenal." The logic is crystal clear and identical: sacrifice the peripheral to serve the centre. Sacrifice the community to serve the corporation. You always witness. The vocabulary changes like — "eco-tourism," "luxury hospitality," "revenue monetisation" — but the geometry of power remains unchanged.

In our state Meghalaya specifically, land dispossession carries a particular violence, because the Khasi and Jaintia peoples have always understood land not merely as property but as inheritance - the root from which identity grows. The traditional system of community land governance through Dorbar Shnong and clan structures was never merely administrative; it was cosmological. When the state converts community-adjacent land into a corporate lease without genuine free, prior, and informed consent, it does not merely take land. It severs a people from their sense of place, from their ontological coordinates.

This is the question that should be keeping every citizen of Meghalaya awake at night. The government's lease-and-monetise logic, already applied to 273 acres of MeECL land and now to Lumpongdeng's 66 acres, is not a policy. It is an appetite. And appetites, historically, do not self-regulate. What other ecologically sensitive land, what other community-adjacent island or forest fringe or lake shore, is currently being mapped by consultants in the corridors of the Secretariat? What other "unutilised" land is being prepared for the next 60-year handover? The citizens of Meghalaya deserve answers to these questions before the deeds are executed, not after.

The Green Tech Foundation, HITO, and the local headmen who have objected are performing the most fundamental act of democratic citizenship — dissent. But dissent, as recent events have shown, runs headlong into a government that has already decided. The money is counted. The documents are signed. And so, like Zorba's fool beating on the deaf man's door, we protest. We write. We document. We demand.

Perhaps the door will never open. But the knocking must be heard — in the courts, in the legislative assembly, in the conscience of every Meghalayan who understands that what is leased today cannot simply be reclaimed tomorrow. The island does not belong to the government to give. It belongs to the lake, to the ecosystem, to the unborn generations who will one day ask us what we did when the deeds were being signed and the hills were being sold.We had better have an answer.

(The writer is Advocate , Trade Unionist Ethicist & the Humanist Architect. Views expressed are personal.)

Beyond Words: Khasi Language and the Question of Existence in India

By Latyngkaihun Nongrem

India officially gained independence from British colonial rule at midnight on August 15—a moment that marked not only the birth of a nation but the awakening of many voices long unheard. India is situated north of the equator between 8°4' north (the mainland) to 37°6' north latitude and 68°7' east to 97°25' east longitude. It is the seventh-largest country in the world, with a total area of 3,287,263 square kilometres (1,269,219 mi²). India measures 3,214 km (1,997 mi) from north to south and 2,933 km (1,822 mi) from east to west. It has a land frontier of 15,200 km (9,445 mi) and a coastline of 7,516.6 km (4,671 mi). As of April 2026, India consists of 28 states and 8 union territories. Yet beyond these measurements, India is more than geography—it is like a vast river of languages, where each stream flows with its own rhythm, merging into a larger current of identity and existence. In such a river, every voice matters, every current contributes; and if language is the medium through which Being is revealed, can a nation afford to leave some languages unrecognized?

Meghalaya, the "abode of clouds," stands as one of the last regions in India where matriliny continues to thrive. In this land, where clouds descend like quiet thoughts upon the hills, language too becomes inheritance—carried gently from one generation to another. The demand to include the Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India is rooted in cultural, political, and developmental concerns. Khasi is not just a means of communication—it represents identity, heritage, and knowledge systems of the Khasi people. It is like a living root beneath the soil, unseen yet essential, holding together the ground of community and memory; and one must ask, does excluding Khasi from the Eighth Schedule risk silencing a unique way of understanding the world?

The Constitutional provisions relating to the Eighth Schedule occur in article 344(1) and 351 of the Constitution. Article 344(1) provides for the constitution of a Commission by the President on expiration of five years from the commencement of the Constitution and thereafter at the expiration of ten years from such commencement, which shall consist of a Chairman and such other members representing the different languages specified in the Eighth Schedule to make recommendations to the President for the progressive use of Hindi for official purposes of the Union.

Article 351 of the Constitution provides that it shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language, to develop it so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India, and to secure its enrichment by assimilating—without interfering with its genius—the forms, style and expressions used in Hindustani and in the other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule, and by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages. It would thus appear that the Eighth Schedule was intended to promote the progressive use of Hindi and for the enrichment and promotion of that language. Here, the Constitution appears like a careful gardener, tending certain plants while drawing nourishment from many roots; yet even a gardener must recognize that growth depends on the diversity of the soil, which leads us to wonder—can the promotion of one language truly succeed without the inclusion of others that enrich it?

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his Letter on Humanism, asserts that "language is the house of Being," signifying that language is not merely a tool for communication but the essential medium through which reality (Being) is revealed and human beings "dwell." Language structures understanding, bringing beings into existence for us. In this light, every language becomes a home of existence, a space where identity resides; and to leave one outside recognition is like leaving a house without a name on the map of a nation—ultimately raising the deeper question: is the inclusion of Khasi not just a constitutional decision, but a recognition of existence itself?

Mallikarjun.B (2021), in the study "The Eighth Schedule Languages – A Critical Appraisal," found that the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution consists of the following 22 languages: (1) Assamese, (2) Bengali, (3) Gujarati, (4) Hindi, (5) Kannada, (6) Kashmiri, (7) Konkani, (8) Malayalam, (9) Manipuri, (10) Marathi, (11) Nepali, (12) Oriya, (13) Punjabi, (14) Sanskrit, (15) Sindhi, (16) Tamil, (17) Telugu, (18) Urdu, (19) Bodo, (20) Sananshali, (21) Maithili and (22) Dogri. Of these languages, 14 were initially included in the Constitution; Sindhi language was added in 1967; thereafter three more languages—Konkani, Manipuri and Nepali—were included in 1992; and subsequently Bodo, Dogri, Maithili and Santhali were added in 2004. The National Sahitya Akademi recognizes the languages of the Schedule as literary languages by default. The Eighth Schedule has played the important role of an arbitrator In deciding the medium of instruction in secondary schools, where the languages used should be modern Indian languages mentioned in the Schedule as well as English. The All-India level competitive examinations are conducted for entrance into higher and technical education and employment by different organizations.

Thus, the Eighth Schedule is not merely a list—it is like a gatekeeper of opportunity, deciding which voices enter classrooms, institutions, and the corridors of power; and in this role, one must reflect—what does it mean for equality if some languages shape education and governance while others remain outside them?

Scholars, linguists, and activists have long argued for the expansion of the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to include more languages, aiming for cultural preservation, recognition of linguistic diversity, and administrative, educational, and literary development. This demand is like a knock on a closed door, asking not for privilege but for acknowledgment, not for dominance but for dignity.

And so, the reflection continues: should the Eighth Schedule remain a fixed structure, or evolve as a living reflection of India's diversity? Is recognition of a language a matter of numbers, or of the depth of identity and heritage it carries? In the end, the question lingers like an echo across the many voices of India—not only whether Khasi should be included, but whether a nation that calls itself diverse is ready to truly listen to all the languages through which its people exist.

The Eighth Schedule has played the important role of an arbitrator In deciding the medium of instruction in secondary schools, where the languages used should be modern Indian languages mentioned in the Schedule as well as English.

Letters to the Editor

Persistent Power Outages & Low Voltage Crisis in Patharkhmah, Ri-Bhoi District

Editor,

Through this letter I wish to draw the urgent attention of the concerned authorities to the persistent and worsening electricity crisis in Patharkhmah village, Ri-Bhoi District.

For several months now, residents of our village have been enduring frequent and unpredictable power outages, along with inadequate low voltage levels. While other parts of the district appear to enjoy relatively stable electricity, Patharkhmah continues to suffer from 5 to 10 hours of unscheduled load shedding on a daily basis. Even during periods when electricity is available, the voltage is so low that basic appliances such as lights and fans barely function.

This ongoing crisis is not merely an inconvenience but has serious repercussions on multiple aspects of daily life:

Education: Students are unable to study effectively after sunset. With the growing dependence on digital learning tools, the lack of reliable electricity places them at a severe academic disadvantage.

Agriculture: Farmers are unable to operate irrigation pumps efficiently due to low voltage, which directly threatens crop production and livelihoods in this agrarian community.

Safety and Health: Prolonged darkness has increased the risk of petty thefts and compromised public safety. Additionally, the inability to store perishable food items and medicines due to non-functional refrigeration poses serious health concerns.

Despite repeated complaints to the local Electricity Department, no concrete steps have been taken. Residents are often met with vague assurances, while the underlying issue—possibly outdated and overburdened infrastructure—remains unaddressed.

In light of the above, I earnestly urge the higher authorities of the Power Department to take immediate and decisive action. A thorough inspection of local transformers and distribution systems must be carried out, along with necessary upgrades to ensure a stable and equitable power supply to our village.

I hope this matter receives the urgent attention it deserves.

Yours etc.,
Wealman Wahlang
Shillong

Inadequate Street Lighting & Public Safety

Editor,

Through this letter I wish to highlight the serious issue of inadequate street lighting in Shillong, which has become a growing concern for public safety.

In many parts of the city—particularly in secluded and less-frequented areas—people are forced to walk in near-complete darkness due to the absence of functional street lights. This not only creates an atmosphere of fear and vulnerability but also turns routine activities, such as walking home, into a distressing experience.

The problem is further compounded by the large number of broken or non-functional street lights. Poor visibility at night poses significant risks for both pedestrians and drivers, increasing the likelihood of accidents. Navigating roads and surroundings becomes difficult, and the sense of insecurity among residents rises considerably after dark.

Adequate street lighting is a basic civic necessity and a key component of urban safety. Its importance has long been recognised by both citizens and authorities. It is therefore imperative that this issue be treated with urgency. The installation of new street lights, along with regular maintenance and prompt repair of existing ones, must be prioritised.

I call upon the concerned authorities to take immediate steps to address this problem and ensure safer, well-lit streets for all.

Yours etc.,
Amanika Bhusal
Shillong

Misleading Remarks from Responsible Leaders

Editor,

I write with a deep sense of disappointment after reading recent remarks suggesting that the proposed Taj resort and spa at Umiam could lead Meghalaya down the path of "sex tourism." Such a statement is not only shocking and alarming, but profoundly disheartening.

One is compelled to ask: what does this imply about the youth of Meghalaya? Does it suggest that they are only capable of being drawn into immoral activities? Or does it overlook their potential to contribute meaningfully as professionals in marketing, human resources, sales, front office, administration, finance, event management, handyman services, interior decoration, landscaping, electrical work, general upkeep, gardening, chefs, sous-chefs, kitchen staff, cooks, suppliers of raw materials like meat, vegetables, masala, etc., to these kitchens, housekeeping, and culinary services? The young people of this state deserve far more respect than such biased assumptions, keeping in mind that there is an IHM Shillong and IIM too, so placements and internship training will be easier within the state for the local youth.

A hotel is not a building, but a complete employment ecosystem. It creates meaningful opportunities for the youth of Meghalaya to step into professional roles across marketing, human resources, sales, hospitality management, housekeeping, and culinary services fields that build skills, dignity, and long-term careers. Directly, it generates employment in front office operations, food and beverage, kitchen staff, finance, engineering, security, and wellness services such as spa and fitness. Indirectly, it supports a much wider network including local farmers, transport providers, tour guides, artisans, suppliers, and small businesses that feed into its daily operations. In essence, a single hospitality project generates opportunities far beyond its walls, contributing to livelihoods, skill development, and the broader local economy.

The Taj Group, operated by Indian Hotels Company Limited, is one of India's most respected hospitality brands, founded in 1902 by Jamsetji Tata. What began with the iconic Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai in 1903 has today grown into a global hospitality network spanning over 200 hotels worldwide, with a significant presence across India and multiple international destinations, including Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Under its luxury Taj brand alone, the group operates dozens of premium hotels across 70+ locations, setting benchmarks in service, professionalism, and ethical hospitality. To reduce such a legacy institution, built over more than a century, to insinuations of impropriety is to overlook not just its global credibility, but also the thousands of dignified careers and professional pathways it continues to create.

The recent rise of certain political voices has undoubtedly brought a disruptive edge to Meghalaya's discourse, challenging established narratives and amplifying grassroots concerns. However, such disruption must remain grounded in responsibility. Raising valid questions around development is necessary, but framing modern hospitality projects through fear-driven assumptions risks undermining both public trust and the potential of the very people such politics seeks to represent.

It is particularly saddening that such statements, especially when coming from a reputed and trusted leader with influence across grassroots levels and rural communities, risk creating unnecessary fear among those who may not have access to complete information. Instead of offering clarity, they can reinforce bias and mislead the very people leadership is meant to guide. Why mislead when leadership calls for clarity and honesty?

Meghalaya, with its rich culture and natural beauty, stands at a point where thoughtful development and preservation must go hand in hand. Concerns around environment and inclusivity are valid and necessary, but narratives rooted in fear risk misguiding public opinion and undermining opportunities for growth.

It is about how we choose to see our own people and whether we believe in their potential or diminish it. Do the people in power have faith in the potential of our youth?

I humbly request, with folded hands, that those in positions of influence choose clarity over speculation and responsibility over rhetoric. We have elected you to lead us, not mislead us. Please do not assume that we, the common citizens, are like Gandhi ji's three monkeys, closing our eyes, ears, and mouths. We are watching, we are listening, and we will continue to ask for clarity and truth. We will follow you, but refuse to follow blindly.

Your's 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*

Gallipoli's four lessons for Strait of Hormuz crisis

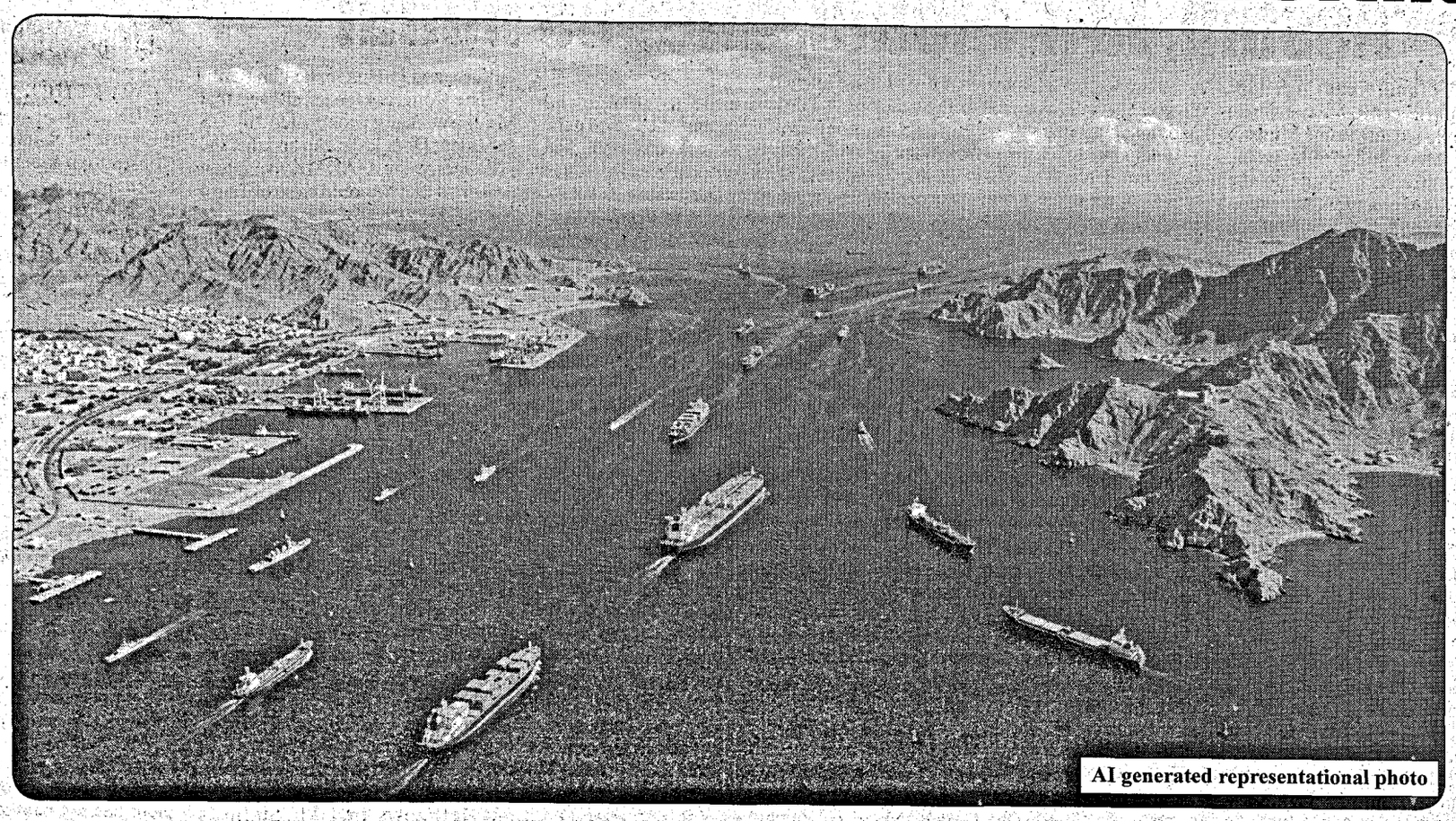
The Iran war reminds us small strategic moves can mushroom into expanding military commitments. The United States decided to blockade Iranian ports by controlling access to and from the vital Strait of Hormuz, as a response to Iran's asserting control over it — which it had long threatened to do if attacked.

In its list of conditions to end the war, Iran is for the first time demanding recognition of its sovereignty over the waterway — considered the world's most critical energy corridor.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's key maritime choke points: strategic corridors where large volumes of global trade pass through extremely limited space.

A heavy price has often been paid for assuming this type of operation will be over quickly and easily.

America's allies might wisely consider this history now — particularly as the April 25 anniversary of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, which aimed to open the way to the Black Sea during World War I, approaches.



AI generated representational photo

Gallipoli was about controlling sea routes

By early 1915, Europe's most powerful states — including Britain and its empire — had been at war for months, with no end in sight. Keeping Britain and France's ally, Russia, in the fight meant delivering it a steady stream of munitions and other critical war materials.

The only realistic route lay through the Ottoman (Turkish) controlled Dardanelles, the straits linking the Mediterranean and Black Seas, between the peninsula of Gallipoli and Asia minor.

And since the Ottoman Empire was already at war with Britain, France and Russia, this would necessitate Allied forces attempting to destroy Turkish resistance to force a way through.

After months of discussion, the Allies settled on a purely naval operation: no need for army support. It was mostly the brainchild of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty.

If the cream of the Royal Navy needed to stay in home waters to contain the threat of a powerful German navy in the North Sea, obsolescent warships could carry the day. This "side show", the Allies concluded, could be called off at any time.

Other leading government ministers and admirals, including the prime minister and secretary of state for war, supported Churchill's plan — or appeared to. Privately, some had deep reservations.

Why did it fail?

When sailing in open water, naval forces are safe from most land-based weapons. However, when they are constrained in limited waters, such as maritime choke points, they become extremely vulnerable to attack from land (as well as from sea mines). An expensive warship can be damaged or destroyed by much cheaper land-based artillery.

British decision-makers underestimated Turkish defences and ignored disagreeable intelligence. With the outbreak of World War I, Turkish forces had set about reinforcing heavy artillery on both shores of the straits and laid mines in the waters.

The Gallipoli Campaign (1915–1916) was a major World War I operation that aimed to knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war and open a vital supply route to Russia. It is remembered as one of the Allies' greatest failures due to poor planning and staggering loss of life

When the Anglo-French fleet attempted to clear a path with minesweepers, the Turkish batteries rained fire on them, driving them off. Then, when the old battleships advanced to knock the guns out, they too came under artillery fire and rapidly fell prey to unswept sea mines, losing nearly one third of the armada.

As historian Jorn Leonhard wrote, "With just one minelayer, the Turkish navy had successfully sealed the mouth of the Dardanelles." Things got much worse.

With British prestige now at stake, the Allies escalated their efforts. On April 25, 1915, Allied (including Anzac) ground troops intervened in an attempt to finally crush the coastal defences.

As historian John H. Morrow Jr insightfully describes: "There they would remain for the next eight months, through bloody attacks and counter-attacks, as both sides launched ferocious and suicidal assaults against each other. The troops now mown down by shell or machine-gun and rifle fire fell in frenzied hand-to-hand combat, as men bit, punched, bludgeoned, and stabbed each other to death, all to no avail."

Though outnumbered, Turkish forces held superior positions and proved a formidable opponent. There were roughly 483,000 Allied and Turkish military casualties. The Allies were forced to withdraw.

Four lessons of Gallipoli

1. Beware of the allure of the dominant personality. Complex strategic decisions require broad consultation and a base in evidence that considers all crucial factors. Of course "they should have known better" at Gallipoli. But those decisions were considerably more thought out than the strategy employed so far in the US attack on Iran, which has been labelled by some as erratic.

2. Don't fall unto the trap of underestimating your enemy. "Gunboat diplomacy" (showing up and militarily threatening a weaker adversary) did not work in 1915 and so far it is not working in 2026. It is possible that US president Donald Trump was seduced by the ease of US military actions against Venezuela. But Washington has significantly underestimated Tehran's resolve and strategic position.

3. Mission creep: Once initial resources prove inadequate, powerful states are likely to scale up, not scale down, their efforts — the definition of the dreaded "mission creep".

4. War is costly in terms of human life. This is a point often forgotten when calculating for a perceived easy win. Gallipoli led to horrific military casualties. The current war has left mostly civilian casualties. And if the conflict escalates, even if ostensibly at sea to control merchant shipping, further civilian casualties will occur.

Furthermore, we are yet to comprehend the scale of the harm being caused due to the wider economic costs of disrupting crucial energy and fertiliser supplies, not least to disadvantaged areas of the world.

Australians have options in Iran war

Naval forces at maritime choke points are more vulnerable than ever. The proliferation of cheap, land-based systems such as drones and missiles means traditionally much weaker states — and even non-state actors — can effectively contest seaways against the most costly, sophisticated militaries.

We should be as critical of the current Iran war as we are of the Gallipoli campaign today. It is unlikely to be solved quickly, and not at all by military means alone.

The difference between 1915 and 2026 is that Australia is no longer automatically drawn in by the interests of others. Now, a sovereign Australia has the right to make its own decisions. *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Meighen McCrae, Australian National University

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, APRIL 19 2026***

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Mercury on your solar return chart will give mixed results. You have the urge to do a lot of things, but circumstances pull you back. Your plans may not materialize. You may have skirmishes with subordinates at place of work. Your seniors could also appear to be dissatisfied with you. You will have mental tensions and stress due to them. But it would be wise for you to show some patience. You would appear to be overtaken by problems but if you show will power and courage you will emerge winner. Hurdles may try to overtake you, but you will refuse to bow down. Your enemies will try to harm you, but you will manage to overcome them. Family will support you. Financial position will be moderate. Health will be generally fine. You will take to spiritualism in a big way and could also visit some holy places with family.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a wonderful week. There will be progress in your work or business. You will also have a scientific approach in your work. You will also win confidence of your boss. You will have monetary gains. Entertainment, fun, love and romance will keep you busy. You will develop close bonding with your spouse. You need to be careful in financial deals. Do not take any step in haste and you also do not invest without proper investigation. You will also appear worried about yourself. You will also meet an influential person. There are possibilities of new thoughts and of being inspired. You will be in a good mood and full of self-confidence. You will also undertake a business trip. You will feel relaxed and secure. You will think of doing everything with your mind but leave something to your heart.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Your financial position is going to be good. Your mind will be in turmoil. You will introspect and the thought will occur to you that you must live for yourself. You will have gains in business. You will get the results of your efforts. Your children too will do well in studies and will have good results. Visitors will keep you busy. You will acquire literary knowledge. You will also enjoy your holidays. Your time will be spent on entertainment. You will be mentally and physically fit. Friends will help you a lot. Do not trust anybody in money matters. Keep control over your speech and anger. You will take steps to obtain benefits. You will obtain a balance in both work and conversation. You will be mentally alert. Your contacts with people will increase.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) Your love affair will get better. You will have a wonderful time with your mate. You will also like the company of your own people. You will be happy. You will get lot of job and business offers. It is up to you to make the right choice. There will be an increase in your income. You may also have to make the rounds of hospital to see someone. Gradually the work that was stalled will gain momentum once again. You might take out time for entertainment and creative things. Honesty, good character and loyalty will reflect in your work. You will meet some influential person and will be greatly influenced by him. You will also get money from such a source that you would not have imagined. Take care of your health.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) You will take steps to obtain benefits. You will maintain a balance in both work and conversation. You will feel a bit low, but you will be mentally alert. Your contacts and meetings with people will increase. Work done by you will be fully successful. You will maintain your dominance because of your liberal and flexible attitude. There can be meetings, trips and contacts with regards to work. You will get results later. Do not interfere in other affairs, otherwise you might have to feel sorry. All your work will be stalled midway due to over confidence. Pay attention to your work. You need to think and act big. There are chances of getting money. Your friends and relatives will help you a lot.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) It is time to acquire knowledge and put it to your best use. It is a good time for students. They will work hard. They will be happy at getting admission to the college of their choice. You will have financial gains. Money and wealth will keep coming. It is the perfect time for studying, research, meditation and prayers. You will get an opportunity to make progress in your job. Children related problems will be solved. Visitors will drop by and you will be busy welcoming them. You will extend a helping hand to old and needy people. Jupiter and Moon will bring peace and calm. Some problems will arise in the completion of a work, and you might even have to face tough competition too.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) Your time will be spent on social activities. All your plans will move in the direction of fruitification. Your life will be once again back on track. Delayed and pending work will gather speed. There will be an increase in your prestige. The atmosphere at home will be peaceful. The unemployed will have ample opportunities to get job. Romance with partner will deepen. You will be full of energy and enthusiasm. Income will be good. In money-related matters you will move forward with intelligence and cleverness. You will make plans. There will be praise for you from all quarters. This will be the time to travel. Do not trust anyone in business. Keep a distance from strangers. Your health will improve.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) You will think about yourself and complete all your tasks. You will also pursue your hobbies. You will enjoy gardening, cooking, walking around eating, photography etc. Your family members will give you company and make you feel a lot better. You will also have gains in business. The economic side will be strong. Most of the time will be spent on social media. Your time will be good. You will engage in government related activities. Your mind will move about your business, and you will pay more attention to it. You will attend important meetings. You will also introspect deeply. You will also think about family and financial matters. Your thinking will be such that you take such steps, so life can be enjoyed with pleasure. This is a lot more favorable phase.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) You will be able to live comfortably. You will also respect the feelings of others, understand and help others. Your thoughts will be positive. You will go to your native place and enjoy the climate there. You will be busy working. The officers will be happy, and your salary will also increase. Business will double up. People will believe you blindly. You will spend time in love, romance etc. You also need to control your anger. Do not criticize or resist any kind of criticism, if you do not pay attention, you will be better for you. You will enjoy good food. You will finish your work in a unique style. You will have the ability to take everyone along with yourself. You will do all your work with sincerity and dedication.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) The week will be in your favor. You will be able to do your work smoothly. The scope of friends and fans will increase which you will enjoy in good deeds. You can feel tremendous attraction towards anything. All kinds of partnerships and relationships will be important to you. You will earn a lot of money. You will have full enthusiasm. Your honor will also increase. You will meet good people, and they will help you with completion of some work. The loved ones and family members will come close to you. Your health will be good. Stay away from disputes. You will also help yourself by helping others. You will forget all the problems and get involved in the work.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) If you have political approach, then important leaders will come in contact with you and your respect will increase. You will get financial benefits. You will feel relaxed. You will do all your work smoothly. At this time, you will not do anything special but experience mental peace. You will forget all the problems and get involved in the work. You will remember your loved ones in difficult times and miss them too. You may get trapped in any litigation. You can develop an interest in spiritualism. You will be a position to compromise with the circumstances. You can feel refreshed yourself.

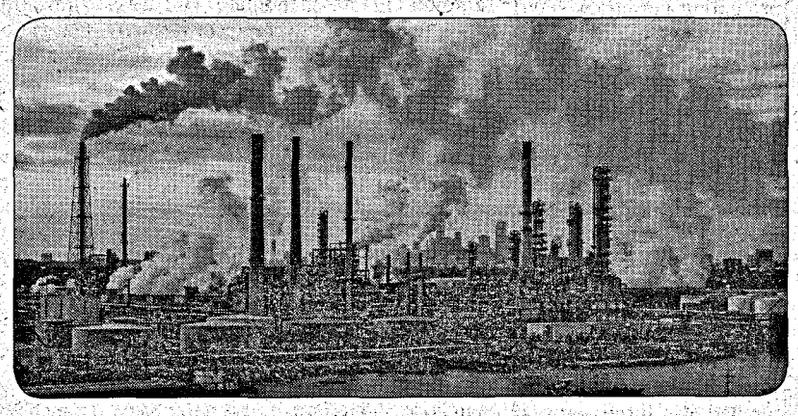
Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) The week will be spent in a great way. You will have time for your family and will enjoy some unforgettable moments. You will be very happy, relaxed and cheerful. Because of busyness in the work, irritability will prevail over you. You will expect a lot from your family members. They too will not disappoint you. You will be very fortunate in financial matters and will have gains in business. You will be welcomed as a special guest somewhere. Your social popularity will peak. You will also value the sentiments of your well-wishers. They will stand with you at every moment. You will have continuous money inflow. Along with work you will also enjoy time. You will win the court related works.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) Your work will be appreciated. Your expectations and hopes will be fulfilled. Your dilemma and restlessness will overcome. You will feel full of energy. It will be your beneficial time. You will have the power to make even a difficult task possible and successful too. You will not be able to handle the relationships due to your fierce and indecisive nature. Your relationships with parents will be good. You will enjoy happiness from children. Moon and Jupiter will give you success. You will be engaged in interviews, meetings, conferences, higher education and research. You will get relief from a chaotic life. Money matters will be the main matters of concern. Yet, you will not have many problems.

When oil refineries burn, here's what happens to your lungs, heart

The fire at a major oil refinery in the Victorian city of Geelong has now reportedly been extinguished. But with thick smoke from the blaze lingering in the air on Thursday, many residents in Geelong and surrounding areas will understandably be worried.

What is released into the air when a refinery burns? And is the smoke bad for your health? For most people, serious long-term health effects are unlikely. However, there can be short-term risks, and some groups are more vulnerable than others. So here's what to look out for and how to stay safe.



What is in the air when an oil refinery burns?

Smoke from an oil refinery fire is made up of many different pollutants. The exact mix depends on what material is burning, how hot the fire is, and how long it lasts.

Typically, these fires release fine particles, known as PM2.5 and PM10, which are small enough to travel deep into the lungs.

They can also release toxic gases such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide, along with volatile organic compounds including benzene.

For people living further from the fire, fine particles are typically the main concern because they can travel long distances and linger in the air.

What are the health risks?

For most healthy adults living in the area, short-term exposure to these pollutants will cause irritation rather than lasting harm.

You may notice sore or watery eyes, a scratchy throat, coughing, headaches or a feeling of chest tightness. These symptoms are unpleasant but usually settle once air quality improves and exposure is reduced. This kind of exposure is very different from the long-term occupational exposure experienced by refinery workers or emergency responders, for whom risks of cancer and lung diseases are much higher and better studied.

Who is most at risk?

When air quality worsens, people with existing lung conditions such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are more likely to experience symptom flare-ups.

Smoke particles can irritate already inflamed airways, leading to increased breathlessness and coughing. For those with existing respiratory conditions, this may mean needing to use reliever medications more frequently than normal.

Those with heart disease are also at greater risk as air pollution can place extra strain on the cardiovascular system, increasing the risk of chest pain, irregular heartbeat and heart failure.

Older people are also generally more sensitive to poor air quality because they are more likely to have chronic diseases, and their heart and lungs might not work as well as they did when they were young.

Children have the greatest risk of developing health issues in the long term, as their lungs are still developing. But the risks from an isolated exposure, such as the Geelong fire, are relatively low.

Some studies suggest repeated or prolonged exposure to air pollution during pregnancy may increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes for babies, such as low birth weight. But again, the risk for pregnant people from an isolated incident such as this is low.

These kinds of events often make people worry about cancer risk. But based on what we know, being exposed in the short term, from a single fire, does not meaningfully increase your risk of developing cancer â?" though these kinds of events are difficult to study, so evidence remains limited.

Cancers associated with oil refinery emissions are linked to years or decades of exposure, usually among workers and those in heavily polluted environments.

So while monitoring the air pollution and for any health issues is still necessary, it's important to keep the risk in perspective.

Continued follow-up of workers directly involved in firefighting or cleanup will be essential, as their exposure levels are likely to be much higher than those in the surrounding community.

How to protect yourself from smoke

There are practical steps people can take to reduce their exposure if smoke or poor air quality persists.

It sounds obvious, but the less time you spend outside in smoke, the lower your risk of health issues caused by smoke inhalation.

Staying indoors with windows and doors closed can significantly reduce your exposure to particles, especially if air conditioning is set to recirculate indoor air.

If you have asthma or other chronic lung diseases, it's important to keep your reliever close at hand, follow your existing written action plan, and seek medical advice early if symptoms worsen. This can prevent more serious flare-ups. Well-fitting P2 or N95 masks can reduce inhalation of fine particles when worn correctly. Loose-fitting surgical or cloth masks provide much less protection against smoke.

Residents in and around Geelong concerned about air quality can check real-time monitoring data for the area at the Victorian Environment Protection Authority website.

If your symptoms worsen or persist, you should speak to a health-care professional, and in an emergency, always call triple 0. *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Brian Oliver and Peter J Irga, University of Technology, Sydney

"Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength."

—Corrie Ten Boom

The Shillong Times

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Women's empowerment dramatised

WHAT was proved beyond doubt about the Women's Reservation Bill is that it nothing more than a drama; a drama enacted on the basis of imagination with no bearing on reality. Imagination can run riot. However, the august Parliament should not be a stage for drama. While the Opposition may have whimsical ways, the Government should conduct itself responsibly toward the nation. The Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in Parliament, marking a fifth attempt to ensure one-third representation for women in both Parliament and state assemblies. If proportional representation is resorted to – which is ideal – women should be given half the total number of seats. The one-third reservation was also a good step forward. But beyond the drama and the huge expenses the exchequer bore by convening a three-day additional session of Parliament to discuss and vote on the legislation, it produced a stillborn result. The "foetus" that Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to in his address to the nation on Saturday could be termed as another deceit. It was rather a metaphor for his own duplicity.

Had Modi been serious about this legislation, the first and foremost thing he and the government he heads should have done was engage in discussions with the Opposition and forge a consensus before introducing the legislation. He, however, was not even willing to listen to the Opposition. He expected it to stand on a line that he had drawn. It is well-known that Modi did not receive a majority mandate in the last parliamentary polls. He could form and run the present government with the support of two parties not part of the NDA: the JDU of Nitish Kumar and Telugu Desam of Chandrababu Naidu – the two regional satraps who were at the forefront of undermining him in the past. The Opposition this time is powerful; the Congress itself won around a hundred seats. It managed to group together some 230 MPs in the Lok Sabha to vote against the bill – not against the agenda of women reservation, per se – while the government side was backed by 298 members. The divide is glaring. Knowing this, it is a big question why Modi attempted to introduce this legislation through a special session, other than for his questionable urge to act as the sole messiah of women and garner their votes.

The Opposition has a mind of its own. Unless a consensus is reached, the Government cannot steamroll such legislation through Parliament because it does not have a two-thirds majority. Sadly, Modi attempted this even when his original NDA set-up did not even have a simple majority in Parliament. Perceptions suggest that Modi sought to fool women. Having attempted what could amount to deceit, it looks strange that he turns back and blames the Opposition. In this shameful scenario, women failed to get what's their due. The Government should have been serious about passing this legislation by not linking the whole process to delimitation and the increase in the number of seats in Parliament based on population. This would have filled Parliament with North Indian MPs while seats for the rest of the country would dwindle or remain the same. It was a clever way to try and pass a legislation that would have been strongly opposed if done separately. Thankfully the Opposition voted out this treacherous bill.

Lumpongdeng Is More Than What Meets the Eye

By H H Mohrmen

The protest fast by HB Nonglang, the Chairman of Green Tech Foundation (GTF), raises the usual but very critical question of whether we have to choose development at the cost of the environment. Why has this issue come to such an impasse that a youth has to protest in order to protect the environment? This is a very pertinent question. The truth is that there is more than what meets the eye in this issue, and this essay will try to discuss a few matters relating to this problem.

Land in the Tribal Area

When the Constituent Assembly deliberated on the future governance of these regions, the North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi played a crucial role. The committee recognized the need to protect tribal customs, safeguard land from external exploitation, and ensure that governance structures reflect indigenous ways of life. It must therefore be clearly understood that governance in these regions rests on the recommendations of the Bordoloi-led Committee to the Constituent Assembly, which led to the adoption of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to protect the tribal communities of the North East.

The Autonomous District Councils derive their authority from the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India under Article 244(2). This Schedule allows autonomy of considerable magnitude, conferring legislative, executive, judicial, and financial powers upon District and Regional Councils. The question is: does this project safeguard our land from external exploitation?

The District Council vis-à-vis the Rivers and Water Bodies

Paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule empowers the District Councils to make laws regarding the protection and preservation of rivers and water bodies. The question is: what have the District Councils done to protect the rivers in their respective areas?

In the District Council in Jaiñtia Hills, the Daloi recommends the issue of Land Holding Certificates, but can he recommend issuing of land holdings on land situated on river banks? Are there any rules that ensure no construction takes place on the banks of rivers? Which Council was able to protect its rivers?

The Council and the Traditional Institutions

The District Councils have not only failed in the matter of protecting rivers and water bodies, but have not even made the best use of the Traditional Institutions under their purview. In Jaiñtia Hills, the two-layer traditional institutions, which include the Daloi or Sirdar and the Waheh Chnong, are now recognized by law after the Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District (Establishment of Elaka and Village and Election, Appointment, Powers, Functions and Jurisdiction of Daloi/Sirdar and Waheh Chnong) Act of 2015 received the assent of the Governor. But what about the other ADCs?

The Councils have under their jurisdiction a huge army of staff in the form of Traditional Institutions, which include the Syiem, Daloi, Sirdar, and the village heads in every village. All these institutions operate and administer their villages based on the Sanad that they receive from the Syiem or Dalois, who are also under the District Council. The question is: what measures have the ADCs taken to empower these traditional institutions? Have they ever conducted capacity-building workshops to empower the traditional heads in their respective District Councils?

Lack of Convergence

Different government departments like Soil and Water Conservation, PHE, and Fisheries are engaged in matters related to protecting rivers and water bodies, but does the government even create a platform for these agencies to cooperate with the ADCs?

Not only is there no convergence between the different State Government departments, there is also no platform for these departments to interact with the ADCs. Questions can also be asked as to whether there is convergence even among the different departments within the Autonomous District Councils themselves.

When different State Government departments implement projects connected to rivers and water bodies, do they even inform the ADCs? Where is the autonomy of the District Councils when, in truth, the ADCs are now functioning at the mercy of the State Government?

The JHADC Is More Progressive and Proactive

To some extent, the JHADC is more proactive than the other District Councils by successfully adopting its Village Administration Act. The enactment of the JHADC (Establishment of Elaka and Village...) Act of 2015 marks a significant milestone in this regard. It represents a conscious effort by the Jaiñtia Hills Autonomous District Council to codify, strengthen, and empower traditional institutions within a legal framework. The Council is among the few to have enacted such a comprehensive law governing the appointment, powers, functions, and jurisdiction of the Daloi or Sirdar and the Waheh Chnong.

This Act also reinforces the continuity between customary authority and statutory recognition. The JHADC 2015 Act is also more gender inclusive, as it mandates that not less than one-third of the members of the Executive Committee of the Dorbar Chnong should be women. The Act did not bar women from contesting elections to become Waheh Chnong. The recent election for Waheh Chnong in Sohmynting village, where a woman candidate unsuccessfully contested, is a case in point.

Of particular relevance to this article are the provisions under Article 18 of the Act, which outline the powers and functions of the Daloi or Sirdar. Among the fifteen functions listed, four directly relate to environmental conservation. These powers and functions empower them to protect forests, rivers, and water bodies, and they are even empowered to arrest and fine those who violate the law. The pertinent question is: has the council been able to protect and preserve the environment?

Economic Development: The Example of Cement Industries

The argument given by business promoters and the government is that by encouraging industries, we will bring economic progress to the State, and that is why corporate houses were encouraged to invest in the tourism sector too. However, the question is: what development has the State achieved, and how much has the wealth of the community increased in return for selling their land and environment to companies? Let us take the case of the cement industries in the State.

Cement industries are mushrooming in the State, but the question is: who benefits from the presence of these industries? And how much revenue has the State earned from these cement plants? When the JHADC cannot even pay its staff regularly, the question that begs an answer is whether they have even received the royalty from both major and minor minerals used by the cement industries that is due to the Council.

What has the community benefited in return for allowing their land to be destroyed? The pertinent question is how many folds the wealth of the promoters of these companies has increased from when they first started their units till today. Compare the increase in the wealth of the promoters with that of the people who live in the area.

Star Cement now produces more cement outside Meghalaya than within the State. Meghalaya is only producing clinkers now. The company has three grinding units in Assam, two at Sonapur near Guwahati and another in Silchar, and one in Mohinagar near Jalpaiguri West Bengal.

One can even question the cement companies' claim of providing employment to local people, which again needs to be examined from all angles. How many people does the company engage in Lumshnong, and how many does it engage in the four grinding units in Assam and West Bengal? How many staff does it employ in its corporate office in Kolkata?

The company is now even engaged in the transport business, which not only denies locals the benefit of participating in the transport of clinker to the grinding units, but also seeks to control the entire business chain to ensure monopoly. The undeniable truth is that wherever corporations are involved, the wealth of the promoters and the corporation increases many folds, while the people receive only crumbs or leftovers at the cost of the environment.

Community vs Corporate-led Tourism Model

Again, the question that begs an answer is what tourism model the government is planning to promote in the State. Is it trying to promote a corporate-led or grassroots-led tourism model? Or in short, is the government trying to promote the Sohra, Mawlynnong, and Shnongpdeng model, or the Marriott Vivanta model? In fact, the State already has plenty of community-led tourism examples, and these are just a few.

In the community-led model, ownership and operation remain with the community. It is economically beneficial for local residents and environmentally sustainable.

Corporate-led tourism will not only be unsustainable, it will also lead to destruction because corporations thrive on building infrastructure rather than empowering communities. Whenever infrastructure development is involved, it requires investment beyond the reach of communities, and they will be compelled to sell their land to the highest bidder. In such cases, they will not only lose their land but also their livelihood, which has sustained them for many generations. Is this the kind of development that the government wants to promote and at the cost of the environment?

When the Earth Speaks, Are We Listening? Lessons from the Kogi

By Maitphang Syiem

Somewhere in the indigenous hill areas of Colombia exists an interesting ancient indigenous community - the Incas, the Aztecs and the Kogi tribe which is often not talked about until recently when their ancient indigenous knowledge and their philosophy of ecological relationship came to light. The Kogi tribe of the Sierra Nevada, Santa Marta, has maintained a profoundly ecological philosophy for millennia. Interestingly their worldview offers some of the most compelling indigenous wisdom which have accumulated with experiences and insights that came from listening and meditation, Undoubtedly, they present the most captivating wisdom for Earth stewardship available today.

The core philosophy of the Kogi tribe is 'Aluna' which they believe refers to the mind, conscience thought, memory and cosmic consciousness. Digging into their untranslatable concept is something that can be referred to as the amniotic sea, the cosmic principle of Mother. It is in that realm that the original intelligence from which the universe was dreamed came into being. The Great Mother concentrated her thought within Aluna and from the act of cosmic contemplation, the Earth was born. Some may say that what is seen physically is the manifestation of the unseen (Aluna). A famous filmmaker Alan Erira says, One way to understand Aluna is that the world has life and awareness. It is absolutely mysterious to the Kogi that we do not think the Earth experiences what we do to it." Now this perhaps may seem intricate but if we look at it from the Kogi lenses it becomes justifiable that the mother (Earth) is facing excruciating pain and every day is seeking help.

Now taking this concept forward let us take time to imagine what would we do if our biological mothers were in pain. Wouldn't our hearts beat to rush in to assist? Let us answer that question within ourselves. Now furthermore, "the mother" for the Kogi is not a static realm; it is actually a living acting generative force and as it is the Earth manifests those dynamic attributes thereby making it active in many ways from the bio-geochemical cycles, the nutrient cycles to the meteorological cycles. These in the eyes of the Kogi are generative forces. They are a boon when in balance and a bane when out of balance. What can be learnt from the Kogi is that the Earth itself is a living being with humanity as her children.

The Kogi Law of Origin is interesting because it is the framework that binds them. It emphasizes the intricate interconnectivity among humans, water, mountains, forest, animals and the air. Having delved into the worldviews of the Kogi and considering the philosophy mentioned, the Kogi are governed by both male and female spiritual leaders called the Mamas and Sagas. The most compelling fact is that they are trained to listen for a period of 18 years. Some call it a Dark Ritual because they are kept in complete darkness. Listening is an art and the Kogi are masters in the art of meditative listening. At this juncture it is appropriate to recall what famous personalities have quoted. Jimi Hendrix says "Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens," and the 14th Dalai Lama also said "When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new." In the context of "Listening," both of these personalities speak about gaining wisdom by listening. For the Kogi this is an ancient art practiced solely to listen to the cosmic lesson, the calls of the mother. What many say about the Kogi is that they go by the motto, "To listen is to think and thinking is what creates the world."

So our takeaway from this discussion is that we need to imbibe the art of listening in a modern way though not locking ourselves in the dark for 18 years to gain wisdom to understand what needs to be done to sustain the Earth. A question may arise as to what to listen to and how to listen. This is something we need to learn from the Kogi community and it is appreciable that the Kogi have started to collaborate with global environmentalists to create educational materials and pool in their conservation methods in universities and schools worldwide. The Kogi offer a radically different environmental ethic from global models and they believe that humans are not managers of nature but they are caretakers and any ecological collapse is a spiritual failure before it becomes a destructive physical manifestation.

On the other hand it is understood globally that there is a continuous efforts to sustain and protect this Mother Earth but what it's actually missing is the spirit and wisdom in the likes of Kogi in our implementations. Yes development cannot stop and who does not want development? However, there is a natural aspect we must understand: certain aspects must be treated much like a human body where each part has a specific place and function and all must be interrelated to maintain a healthy overall state. A key takeaway from the Kogi indigenous philosophy is that every physical action must have a spiritual hold and conservation must also be spiritually connected.

In the context of various spiritual traditions, we are not the creators of this planet. In fact we are the manifestations of that generative force which emanated from Mother Earth; therefore, it becomes a mandatory and spiritual responsibility to listen to the mother. When we discuss the Kogi concept of "Mother," it seems to parallel the world view of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. The Kogi call the Earth as Jaba Se (Mother of Origin); Khasis and Jaintias call it "Mei Ramew" and the Garos - Aman-Asong. This reflects a common belief that Earth is not a resource but a parent and humanity is indebted to her. We have the Sacred Groves, they have the sacred sites.

The Kogi maintain several codes that act like ecological maps such as the spatial entity called (Gaka) marking all the life saving areas (LSA), natural landscapes, waterfalls, rivers, valued natural areas. The interesting fact is that they have that spatial understanding in a spiritual aspect and how these are intertwined. They believe that if these Gaka are destroyed the balance is disturbed the spiritual and material world collapses with the possibility that human and nature co-existence would be endangered. The Kogi have been very practical and just in their approaches. Presently, in the context of governance and assessment the modern world has tools like the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), hence it would be beneficial if indigenous knowledge and the modern tools supplement each other. EIA asks what will this project damage? SEA asks what is the cumulative cost across policies? LCA asks what does this product cost the Earth, from birth to end? All three are vital. But they all begin after a decision has already been imagined.

The Kogi begin with Aluna, the living thought-world of nature itself. Before any act of taking, they listen. Their sacred site governance mirrors SEA's landscape-scale thinking. Their (pagamentos) offerings before any harvest embody the reciprocity that LCA quantifies but never spiritually honours. Their Law of Origin, which sees every human action as rippling through an interconnected whole, is the philosophical backbone that EIA's scoping phase has always needed.

The Kogi do not replace these frameworks they complete them. Where our tools measure consequence, Kogi wisdom cultivates conscience. Together, they offer the planet something neither can provide on their own - rigour with reverence.

(The writer is a Geospatial Expert)

Letters to the Editor

Urgent Action Needed on Rising HIV/AIDS Rates in East Khasi Hills

Editor,

I am writing to express my grave concern regarding the alarming surge of HIV/AIDS cases in Meghalaya. As of early 2026, the East Khasi Hills district has reported over 10,293 cases—one of the highest caseloads in India. This crisis is disproportionately affecting our youth, and the situation demands immediate public attention.

The rapid expansion of digital media and the uncritical adoption of "hookup culture" trends have led many young people toward risky behaviours. While globalization brings cultural exchange, the lack of health-focused guidance leaves our youth vulnerable to peer pressure and misinformation. Many are engaging in casual relationships without fully grasping the long-term health consequences, specifically the risk of STIs and HIV.

It is imperative that the state government and local authorities launch comprehensive, locality-based awareness programs. These should not be confined to posters but integrated into the curricula of schools and universities, focusing on sexual health, responsible relationships, and self-respect.

We must empower our youth with accurate information and a sense of responsibility. I urge the concerned authorities to recognize the urgency of this health crisis before it further compromises the future of our community.

Yours etc.,
Kerlie Steffrine Mawrie
Shillong

A Timely Call for Societal Introspection

Editor,

I read your article published on 17th April, 2026, with great interest , titled 'Critical Thinking and Khasi Society: Hazards of Living in a Bubble & Glamourising the Past.' It is not often that one comes across an article that indeed compels us to pause and reflect so deeply on the realities around us.

I must say the piece is truly insightful and reflective. It gently but firmly reminds us that while we take pride in our culture and traditions, we must also have the courage to examine where we stand today. The emphasis on nurturing a questioning mind, both at home and in our classrooms, is particularly striking. Without such openness, it is difficult for any society to grow.

I was especially moved by the concerns raised about environmental degradation, widening inequalities, and the struggles faced by ordinary families. These are issues we see around us every day, yet seldom discuss with honesty. The observations regarding the role of women and the need to create space for their voices are equally important and deserve serious thought.

At the same time, there are communities ---even within our own region---that still strive to live in harmony with nature, much like our forefathers once did. Their way of life stands as a quiet reminder that respect for the environment is not merely an idea of the past, but a practice that can still be sustained if we choose to follow it with sincerity.

What I value most in the article is its sincerity. It does not seek to criticise for the sake of criticism, but rather to encourage introspection and a more grounded understanding of our present condition. Such writing serves as a quiet but powerful reminder that progress begins with honest self-examination.

I must thank the Editor for bringing these matters into the public domain with such clarity and balance. I do hope this will lead to meaningful conversations and, in time, positive change.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Rapid Deforestation Leading to Climate Risks

Editor,

I wish to draw attention to the growing problem of deforestation in Meghalaya and its alarming impact on rainfall patterns.

Known for its abundant rainfall—particularly in regions like Cherrapunjee—Meghalaya is now witnessing noticeable changes in its weather. Forests play a vital role in sustaining the natural water cycle. However, increasing deforestation driven by urban expansion, mining, and indiscriminate logging is severely disrupting this balance. As a consequence, rainfall has become erratic, leading to both water scarcity in some areas and sudden flooding in others.

The impact of this environmental imbalance extends beyond climate concerns. Farmers are facing unpredictable agricultural conditions, groundwater levels are declining, and the state's rich biodiversity is under threat. If such trends continue unchecked, Meghalaya risks losing its identity as one of the wettest regions in the world.

In light of these concerns, I urge both the authorities and citizens to take immediate and collective action to protect our forests. Strict enforcement of forest conservation laws is essential. At the same time, we can draw inspiration from traditional practices, such as the preservation of sacred groves like Lawkyntang, which reflect a deep respect for nature.

Equally important is the promotion of reforestation. Public awareness and community participation must be encouraged at all levels. Schools, in particular, can play a significant role by introducing activities such as regular tree-planting drives, helping instil environmental responsibility among young minds.

Deforestation is not merely an environmental issue; it is a threat to our climate, livelihoods, and future. Through sustained conservation efforts and reforestation initiatives, we can restore ecological balance, improve air quality, and protect the diverse life forms that depend on our forests.

Yours etc.,
Sniawbhalang Pyrbot,
Shillong

Social Media Overuse

Editor,

I appreciate your publication's consistent efforts in highlighting issues that resonate with the youth. I am writing to draw urgent attention to the growing concern of social media overuse, a trend that is beginning to manifest serious consequences for both individuals and society.

While these platforms have revolutionized communication, their excessive use is a double-edged sword. Perhaps most alarming is the impact on mental health; constant exposure to "perfected" lifestyles fosters feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Furthermore, as screen time increases, real-life social interactions dwindle, subtly eroding our interpersonal skills.

Productivity is also under siege. From students to professionals, the habit of "endless scrolling" has become a significant barrier to focus. Compounding this is the rapid spread of misinformation, which often triggers unnecessary public panic.

To address this, we must champion digital literacy. Parents and educators should collaborate to encourage "digital detoxes" and set healthy boundaries. It is vital that we reclaim our time and ensure that technology remains a tool for our benefit, rather than a master of our lives.

Yours etc.,
Judy Lyngdoh,
Shillong

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"Life is made of ever so many partings welded together."

— Charles Dickens

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Selective Environmental Advocacy

IN Meghalaya the forests are dwindling and rivers face serious pollution issues. While this is a state inhabited largely by the indigenous Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes that are extolled as having an intrinsic connection with nature, today what is visible is that tribals appear to have distanced themselves from nature. Forests are mindlessly denuded without any concern for consequences, so long as they are of commercial value. Available data suggests that there are about 40,000 coal mines in Meghalaya of which 26,000 are abandoned rat hole mines. In 54 years the state has failed to reclaim these abandoned mines and to reafforest the areas where these mines are. Consider the forests that have been brought down to make way for these mines across the state. There is as yet no data on how much forest cover has been lost as of today and how much of forest cover is needed to balance life in this state which was once a biodiverse ecosystem.

According to the last India State of Forest Report (ISFR), Meghalaya has experienced a significant loss of over 84 square kilometres of forest cover between 2021 and 2023. This should be a wake up call as it concerns the state's environmental health. But no civil society group really cares to read through these disturbing statistics. They are interested in only those sensational issues that bring political dividends. While the Lumpongdeng issue is real and needs advocacy as it means constructing a 5-star facility right next to the Umiam Lake without any clear environmental clearance and public consultations which is the foreground to every project implementation, other issues matter too. That public consultations hardly ever happen is Meghalaya's sad governance trajectory. Having said that the fact that Lumpongdeng has found so much traction as to turn the issue into a political football, raises important questions about the rest of the environment. Have the VPP or Congress or NPP or BJP ever come near a polluted river to help in cleaning up garbage and restoring the marine health of the rivers of this state? Its easier for them to shout on the streets and create public opinion in their favour. This is a great disservice to the living environment from where humans draw their breath.

Picking and choosing environmental issues undermines the credibility of the group/groups taking up the matter. If a group protests against deforestation in one place but ignores pollution in another (especially when politically inconvenient), people begin to see advocacy as biased rather than principled. People begin to lose trust in such NGOs. Besides, the last thing that is needed at this critical juncture in Meghalaya's history is to politicize environmental issues. When advocacy targets only the Government or certain projects, the environment becomes a political weapon not a shared concern. This then leads to polarisation even while the environment loses its non-partisan character. The environment needs all minds to converge and speak on its behalf. River pollution which is a now an environmental crisis in Meghalaya affects forests while mining affects agriculture as acid mine drainage kills the water. Selective advocacy shows that the NGOs pick only some projects to draw attention to themselves while leaving out deforestation, mining, river pollution and poor garbage management. In short selective advocacy means caring about the environment when convenient instead of caring for the environment consistently. Its time to call out this selective love for some environmental issues and not for others that are in a more critical state.

Promise, Politics and Paralysis: The Unending Saga of Women's Reservation in India

By K C Monnappa

India is the world's largest democracy, yet only about 14 percent of its Lok Sabha members are women. In a country where women constitute nearly half the population, cast roughly half the votes, and increasingly lead households, businesses, and even defence missions, this number is not merely a statistic. It is an indictment. The 106th Constitutional Amendment, passed with near-unanimous fanfare in September 2023 and popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, was supposed to change that forever. It promised 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Yet here we are in April 2026, in the middle of a specially convened three-day Parliamentary session, and the bill meant to make that reservation a reality has just failed to secure the two-thirds majority required for a constitutional amendment. The 131st Amendment Bill, the government's implementation vehicle, was defeated in the Lok Sabha, 298 in favour, 230 against, well short of the 352 needed. The Delimitation Bill and the Union Territories Amendment Bill that rode alongside it were subsequently withdrawn. The curtain has fallen on another act of a very long and very dispiriting play.

The idea of reserving a third of parliamentary seats for women is not new. It was first mooted in 1996 as the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill under the United Front government of H.D. Deve Gowda, and promptly collapsed without being passed. It was reintroduced in 1997 and 1998, each time lapsing with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. Under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA government, it was raised again without success. In 2010, when the Rajya Sabha finally passed the Women's Reservation Bill under Manmohan Singh's UPA government, there was cautious celebration. But the Lok Sabha never took it up, and it lapsed again. The bill's graveyard stretched across nearly three decades and six distinct governments, each citing different reasons for failure but producing identical outcomes for women. From the very beginning, the reservation bill attracted a peculiar coalition of opponents: male politicians who feared losing their seats, parties worried about caste arithmetic being upset, and ideologues who argued, with varying degrees of sincerity, that reserved seats would produce proxy women legislators controlled by their male relatives. Mulayam Singh Yadav's notorious 2010 objection, suggesting that reservations would lead to wolf-whistling in Parliament, captured the most grotesque end of this resistance, but the substance of political anxiety ran deeper and wider than such rhetoric.

In September 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government did what no government before it had managed: it passed the Women's Reservation Bill through both Houses of Parliament with overwhelming support, 454 votes in favour and just 2 against in the Lok Sabha, and 214 in favour with none against in the Rajya Sabha. President Droupadi Murmu signed it into law on September 28, 2023. The law reserves one-third of Lok Sabha seats for women, including a sub-quota for women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and sets a 15-year sunset clause on the reservation. But the government included a critical condition buried in the law's provisions: the reservation would come into force only after the completion of a fresh delimitation exercise, which in turn would occur only after the publication of a new national census. With no census having been conducted since 2011, the 2021 census having been indefinitely postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and administrative delays, the gateway to implementation remained firmly shut. The law's gazette notification was delayed for over two and a half years, finally issued on April 16, 2026, the very eve of the special Parliamentary session where the government sought to push through its implementation framework. Critics were quick to note the optics: a government notifying a law at midnight to create political theatre, even as it knew its own bills would face fierce opposition the next morning.

The Modi government's April 2026 strategy was ambitious. Rather than simply implementing the 2023 Act, it sought to fundamentally reshape India's electoral architecture. Three bills were introduced on April 16. First, the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026, proposed increasing the Lok Sabha's strength from the current 543 seats to 850. Second, the Delimitation Bill, 2026, sought to enable a fresh delimitation of constituencies based on the 2011 census, rather than waiting for the 2027 census that has been scheduled. Third, the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill extended these changes to Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu & Kashmir. The government's logic had surface coherence. The 2023 Act requires delimitation before reservation can operate. Delimitation requires a census. Since the next census is only due in 2027 and its results would not be available before the 2029 general elections, waiting meant women's reservation could not apply until 2034 at the earliest. To break this deadlock, the government proposed using the 2011 census data for delimitation and simultaneously expanding the Lok Sabha so that no state would lose seats, only gain them. Home Minister Amit Shah argued that this expansion was the only fair way to accommodate both the demographic realities revealed by the 2011 census and the constitutional mandate for proportional representation, while ensuring that the southern states that had successfully controlled their populations did not pay a political price for their developmental achievement.

The opposition's rejection was neither uniform nor entirely principled, but its core arguments deserved engagement. The INDIA bloc's central demand was unimpeachable in isolation: implement reservation immediately on the existing 543 seats without tying it to delimitation. Congress's K.C. Venugopal put it plainly, withdraw the 131st Amendment Bill, call an all-party meeting, and the opposition would support full implementation on the current House. This had real constitutional merit: the 2023 Act requires delimitation, not a larger Parliament. The second argument concerned caste justice. Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party's Dimple Yadav argued that without an explicit sub-quota for OBC women, reservation would disproportionately benefit upper-caste women with greater access to education and political networks. India's experience with women's reservation in panchayats supports this concern, numerical representation often masks caste capture. The failure to include an OBC sub quota was a substantive gap the government chose not to address, handing the opposition a legitimate grievance. The third argument was federal. Under strict proportional representation using 2011 census data, southern states with lower population growth would lose seats to the Hindi heartland. Independent estimates suggested Tamil Nadu could lose 11 seats, Kerala 8, Andhra Pradesh 5, while Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan gained. The BJP's Tejasvi Surya countered that expansion to 850 seats ensures every state gains in absolute terms. But the opposition correctly noted that proportional share, not absolute count, determines federal leverage in coalition politics, budget negotiations, and administrative appointments. A smaller slice of a larger pie is still a smaller slice. Finally, the opposition raised a procedural objection that transcended partisan interest: decisions of this magnitude—restructuring Parliament, redrawing thousands of constituencies, fundamentally altering the federal balance—warrant standing committee scrutiny and broad consultation, not a three-day special session.

The government's fundamental error was conflating three distinct policy questions—women's reservation, delimitation, and Lok Sabha expansion—into a single take-it-or-leave-it package. Each is consequential enough to warrant separate legislation and separate political mandates. By bundling them, the government manufactured the very opposition it publicly lamented. The honest path was available and was not taken. The overdue census should have been conducted immediately after the 2024 elections. Women's reservation should have been implemented on the existing 543 seats as an interim arrangement, the law, properly read, does not require the Parliament to be larger, only to be delimited. The OBC sub-quota should have been included in 2023 itself, foreclosing the opposition's most principled objection. And delimitation, a constitutional obligation that cannot be avoided forever, should have been built through genuine cross-party consensus, not bundled with a women's bill to serve as political cover. The opposition, too, has sins to account for. The demand for immediate implementation on 543 seats was correct. But several INDIA bloc members signalled resistance to any delimitation under any circumstances, which is constitutionally untenable. Delimitation is not optional; the dispute is about timing and methodology, not whether it should happen at all. Perhaps most damning is the arithmetic the government walked into knowingly. The NDA held 292 seats. A constitutional amendment required 362. No serious political strategist could have expected this to pass without significant cross-party support, which no one had attempted to build. Which raises an uncomfortable question that hangs over this entire exercise: was passage ever the actual goal, or was forcing the opposition to vote against women's reservation the political objective all along?

The ledger of losses from this episode is instructive. The clearest losers are Indian women, particularly from marginalised communities. Women's absence from Parliament is not politically neutral, it shapes budgets, welfare policy, and laws governing marriage, property, and safety. Every year of delay compounds that democratic deficit. The government also loses, not immediately but over time. It had an opportunity to cement a genuine legacy on women's empowerment. Instead, it is left with a law on the books with no implementation date and an opposition that has successfully repositioned itself as the champion of women's interests. PM Modi's 2023 warning that those opposing the bill would pay a heavy price may yet prove ironic. And Indian democracy itself is a loser. A constitutional amendment that required consensus was deployed as a political manoeuvre. The idea that certain questions, like women's equal participation in governance, should transcend partisan advantage has been further eroded. That erosion is the most durable damage of all.

India's women have been asked to wait before. They waited through Deve Gowda's government, through Vajpayee's, through Manmohan Singh's. They waited through the 2023 Act's passage and through its two-year gazette notification delay. They are waiting still. The argument for women's political representation needs no further validation from electoral mathematics or parliamentary strategy. It is a matter of elementary democratic justice. The only honest question before Parliament is not whether women deserve reservation, but why a nation that unanimously agrees they do keeps finding reasons to postpone the reckoning. Until that question is answered, not in speeches but in implementation, every special session and every presidential assent and every gazette notification is merely theatrics. And the audience, which is to say the women of India, deserves considerably better than this.

Iran's Asymmetric War with the US and Israel

By H Srikanth

When the US and Israel bombed and killed the top-brass leaders in Iran, everyone thought that was the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on the experience of Iraq, Syria, and Libya, many assumed that there would be a puppet regime in Iran that would dismantle the nuclear program and hand over the oil reserves to the US. But nothing of that sort happened. To everyone's surprise, Iran fought back and it continues to fight the combined forces of two nuclear nations–the US and Israel–which boast of the most sophisticated weapons, ammunition, radars, interceptors, and surveillance systems. None of the original objectives for which the US and Israel attacked Iran have been realized. Iran not only resisted the aggression and even compelled the Trump regime to negotiate the terms of a ceasefire. Iran has redefined and perfected the art and science of asymmetric warfare.

Many who viewed Iran as just another Muslim country underestimated the strength of its political and military establishment. Unlike Iraq and Libya, which relied on the strength of individual personalities like Saddam Hussein and Col. Gaddafi, Iran created a powerful yet flexible political establishment, following the Mosaic doctrine. In the system that Iran created, individual leaders matter little. If any leaders die or are assassinated, their positions will be instantly replaced by others in the line. Khomeini is not an individual leader; it is a position, which will be filled by others in the hierarchy of religious leaders. So are the political and military positions. Instead of concentrating its forces in and around Tehran, Iran has de-centered its military and political establishments, locating the units under different commands.

The leadership in Iran knows that one day they have to confront the US, which lost its hold over Iran in 1979, and Israel, which views Iran as a potential challenger to its supremacy in the Middle East. Iran has been preparing for war for decades. Iran knows it cannot match the US or Israel in conventional weapons like warplanes, ships, and tanks. Hence, it focused on indigenous missile and drone technologies and developed a variety of missiles suited to its military needs. Sometimes, Iran acquired military technology from Russia and Iran. Instead of opting for costly weapons, they started producing low-cost drones and missiles in bulk. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) used Iran's geography–its vast size, mountainous regions, long coastline, its islands, and its geographical proximity to Gulf countries - to its advantage. It built fortified underground 'military cities' where it preserved its missiles and drones, preventing aerial surveillance and attacks by enemies. Iran ensured no one had prior knowledge of the weapons it possessed. The world was in awe when Iran fired cluster missiles, bombs, and ICBMs at Diego Garcia.

Accumulating weapons makes little sense if the country does not have an effective military strategy. The waves of Iran's missiles and drones pierced through the prestigious Israeli Iron Dome, the American radars and other interceptors dysfunctional and caused heavy financial losses to the US and Israel. Iran's cluster bombs forced the Israelis to take shelter inside the bunkers for weeks. The US and Israel could destroy Iran's aircraft and warships, and attack oil reserves and civilian infrastructure in Iran. In response, Iran destroyed the aircraft, including F-15E jets, challenging US prestige and supremacy in warfare. Using non-state actors such as the Houthis in Yemen, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and the Shia militants in Iraq, Iran forced Israel to focus on multiple fronts. Avoiding a conventional one-to-one battle, Iran expanded the zone of conflict by attacking Gulf countries. To preempt the US from using its military bases in the Gulf, Iran bombed military and financial establishments in Gulf countries, causing panic among the Gulf rulers allied with the US.

The most effective strategy that Iran adopted in the war was to globalize the conflict by blockading the Strait of Hormuz. It is through the Strait of Hormuz that 20 to 30 percent of oil and gas is traded across the countries. Iran began regulating the movement of commercial ships and imposed a toll on all ships passing through the Strait of Hormoz. It declared that it would trade its oil in petro-yuan, instead of petro-dollars. Iran's control over Hormoz increased oil and gas prices in different countries, including the US, and adversely affected the global stock index. The crisis compelled the US to forget the original demand for regime change and make the opening of Hormuz its immediate goal.

A good war strategy seeks to minimize the number of enemies and increase the number of supporters. Iran maintained good relations with Russia and China. Russia has been providing military and technological support to Iran. China depends heavily on oil supplies from Iran. During the war, China and Russia stood by Iran and vetoed the Security Council resolution against Iran. Apart from relying on China and Russia, Iran used global contradictions to ensure that NATO countries in Europe do not join the US and Israel's war against Iran. Iran could neutralize NATO countries in Europe and ensure they would not join US military operations against Iran. Taking advantage of their dependence on oil from the Gulf, Iran assured it would keep the Strait open to all countries except the US and Israel. While attacking US military and financial establishments in Gulf countries, Iran assured that its fight was not against the Arab countries. All it wanted from the Gulf countries was to ensure they did not allow the US to use military bases in their countries against Iran. Further, by supporting the Palestinian cause, Iran sought to bridge the gulf between the Sunnis and the Shias and project itself as the leader of all Muslims.

Modern warfare involves not only arms and ammunition but also perceptions and propaganda. While attacking Iran, the US and Israel tried to project the Iranian regime as undemocratic and illegitimate. Iran effectively countered the western propaganda by showing that the regime in power has the support of the crores of Iranians. By showcasing the bombing of the school, which killed over 165 innocent children, Iran exposed how hollow the US-Israeli claims about human rights are. By appealing to the people of the US, Iran convinced a large section of Americans that America is fighting the war at the behest of Israel, and the war is not in the interest of American citizens. Through effective propaganda, Iran neutralized the US and Israeli attempts to paint Iran as a barbarian state and a threat to world peace. Despite the losses it suffered, Iran agreed to negotiate with the US but refused to submit to its one-sided demands. By valiantly resisting the aggressors, Iran won the admiration of all progressive forces in the world opposed to imperialist aggression.

In the war of public perceptions, Iran has already won. But the actual war has not ended. There is a deadlock in the peace negotiations, as the US expects Iran to accept conditions that are not acceptable to Iran. One needs to see whether the US resumes full-scale attacks after the ceasefire ends. If the war continues, Iran would inflict considerable damage on the aggressors and deepen the political and economic crises in the US and Israel. True, the Iranians will also suffer, but they would not give up. For Iran, it is a war of survival.

Letters to the Editor

Urgent Need for Inclusive Waste Management Beyond City Limits

Editor,

I wish to draw urgent attention to a growing crisis that is often sidelined in public discourse: the disparity in waste management between our urban centres, like Shillong, and our increasingly vulnerable rural areas.

In our cities, while municipal systems exist, besides the respective Local Dorbar, they are buckling under the sheer volume of waste. Overflowing bins and irregular collection schedules have become an unfortunate norm. However, the silence surrounding our villages is even more concerning. In the absence of formal disposal infrastructure, rural communities are often forced into a "hidden" environmental crisis—burning trash in open pits or discarding it in the very fields, forests, and water bodies that sustain them.

The environmental cost is devastating. The open burning of refuse releases a concoction of toxic pollutants, such as carbon monoxide and particulate matter, into the air we breathe. Meanwhile, non-biodegradable plastics are quietly contaminating our soil and choking the natural drainage systems essential for monsoon safety. Perhaps most critically, our water sources—the literal lifeblood of the region—is being poisoned, threatening both human health and our unique biodiversity.

This crisis reveals a significant failure in policy implementation. Waste management must cease to be an "urban-only" service. We need decentralized, community-driven solutions that reach the last mile. This includes establishing village-level composting units for organic waste, localized recycling hubs, and strictly enforced bans on open burning.

Furthermore, we must bridge the awareness gap. Public education campaigns are vital to help rural communities transition toward waste segregation and sustainable disposal practices.

Waste management is not merely a civic chore; it is a public health emergency. If we continue to treat it as an urban-centric issue, we ignore the reality that our ecosystems are interconnected. I urge the authorities to adopt an inclusive, sustainable, and strictly enforced waste management framework before the ecological damage becomes irreversible.

Yours etc.,
Phibanrisuk Kharkongor
Shillong

Restoring the Spirit of Inclusiveness in Shillong's Public Parks

Editor,

This letter flags a growing concern regarding the dwindling accessibility of public parks in Shillong. While our "Scotland of the East" is famed for its natural beauty, the spaces where our citizens can freely enjoy this greenery are becoming increasingly restricted.

Public parks are the lungs of a city—not just environmentally, but socially. For the youth in particular, these areas are essential sanctuaries for mental well-on-being, physical exercise, and community building. In an era dominated by screens and academic pressure, the lack of cost-free, open spaces creates a barrier to healthy development. When entry fees become the norm, we inadvertently gate-keep the benefits of nature, making them a privilege rather than a public right.

However, the conversation around accessibility is a two-way street. We must candidly acknowledge that the imposition of fees and strict regulations is often a direct response to public misconduct. Issues such as littering, vandalism, and behaviours that disregard the sanctity of shared spaces have forced authorities into a defensive posture.

A sustainable solution requires a dual commitment:

- For the Public: We must foster a culture of "Civic Stewardship." The youth and the wider community must treat these parks with the same respect they would their own homes. Maintaining cleanliness and adhering to decorum is the only way to prove that free access will not lead to the degradation of our city's beauty.
- For the Authorities: I urge the government to consider more inclusive management models. This could include "Free-Access Hours" (such as early mornings or weekends), although as of now just on two occasion January 26th and August 15th is entry free. Also please designate specific zones within larger parks that remain open to all.

By balancing administrative foresight with citizen responsibility, we can ensure that Shillong remains a city that breathes together. Let us work toward a future where our parks are not just "tourist spots" behind a pay-wall, but vibrant, inclusive hubs for every resident.

Yours etc.,
Ohidon Wa-e Laloo,
Via email

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

"Success comes when people act together; failure tends to happen alone."

— Deepak Chopra

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Dealing with Russia

RUSSIA and India are steadily increasing their cooperation. The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) pact, which came into force earlier this year and the details of which were announced by Russia this month, is a step forward in the fraternal ties between the two countries. This, however, falls short of a defence cooperation agreement that India under Indira Gandhi signed with the USSR, which had helped New Delhi immensely in its intervention in what was then East Pakistan for the formation of Bangladesh as a new nation in 1971. Though Russia did not get directly involved, the existence of such a pact at that time came as a morale boost to India. The present pact, which was under discussion since 2019, has a limited purpose, but its implications are far-reaching. The agreement facilitates reciprocal access to military bases, ports and airfields for refuelling, repairs etc during joint military exercises, training and the like. The agreement allows India long-range naval deployments and exercises in the Arctic and the Pacific. The bilateral understanding, it is said, also helps India in importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia at a time when New Delhi is keen on diversifying its energy sources.

Notably, India's active engagement with Russia comes after a period of alienation between New Delhi and Moscow, especially after the end of the Cold War, and coinciding also with India's warming up with the US since the early 1990s. After the dismemberment of the USSR and with Vladimir Putin heading Russia for over a quarter of a century, Russia too adopted a policy of disengagement from the global power play. Putin, on his part, cared less for India. India reduced its sourcing of military equipment from Russia and reached out more to the West. In between, Russia under Putin had closer linkages with Pakistan, also in relation to the Afghanistan affairs. Putin strengthened Russia's ties with China. India looked at these with scepticism. However, Russia's war with Ukraine occasioned a fresh cooperation between Russia and India through an energy deal. Despite the UN sanctions on Russia, the Narendra Modi government tied up with Russia for oil supplies to India in rupee trade – which antagonised President Donald Trump. The hefty rise in US tariffs on Indian goods followed as a punitive step.

It is safe to suspect now that Trump's tariff hit on India also had in its backdrop the increasing bonhomie between Moscow and New Delhi. The India-Russia logistics pact was quietly signed in February 2025; and the US hike in tariffs on India by 50 per cent came six months later. Curiously, the good relations that India sought to build with the US in the last quarter of century, starting with the Narasimha Rao term, took a hit now. At the same time, India explains that the US's pro-Pakistan stands are a reason for New Delhi to get closer to Russia. Notably, Indian diplomacy is facing odds on different fronts. Close allies have distanced themselves from India – Nepal first and later Bangladesh. The distancing between the US and India might also have a negative bearing on India's regional security vis-a-vis China.

BJP's Meghalaya Dilemma: Indigenous Rights or Outsider Politics?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

In recent times, the BJP has been making some right moves to shed the tag of being a party geared towards protecting only the interests of outsiders. It was the BJP, under the leadership of Bernard Marak that raised the issue of preventing the non-indigenous community from taking part in the ADC elections. This was argued to protect the rights of the indigenous community who are said to be reeling under the onslaught of illegal immigration. Census data reveals that while the absolute population of indigenous tribals has increased in Garo Hills, their percentage has gone down, while the non-indigenous population has indeed gone up. So, influx did take place, and the fear of the indigenous community becoming a minority in their homeland is real in Garo Hills. This is not the case in the Khasi region (i.e., Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ri Bhoi), where outmigration is the norm. The next Census is, therefore, going to be very crucial. I suspect the proportion of indigenous tribals in the Garo region might have gone down a little more, while in the Khasi region, it will go up. I hope that is the case. If not, the agitation for ILP is going to become very volatile.

However, one thing that must be kept in mind is that the non-indigenous populations in question are Bengali Muslims, a community the BJP has labeled as illegal immigrants. Of course, they are immigrants, but labeling them illegal is not justified if they have been residing in the state since Independence. While new migrants did arrive after that, it is not correct to label everyone illegal without verification. The fear of being overwhelmed by the migrant population is persistent, but the place where that has actually taken place is Tripura, and the groups involved were Bengali Hindus, not Muslims. The NRC also showed that around 19 lakhs had suspect nationality; this number is bigger than the total population of the Garos. A large number of them are Bengali Hindus.

Recently, there was controversy in Assam over the candidature of Vijay Gupta, originally from UP, for the Guwahati Central Constituency. However, BJP leadership and Gupta dismissed the charge, asserting that Gupta is Assamese. This is, of course, in keeping with Himanta Biswa Sarma's claims that even North Indians who have stayed in Assam for a while should be considered Assamese. This is also the reason why, after the violence that claimed the life of an indigenous Karbi, the illegal Hindi-speaking settlers have still not been evicted from public lands in Karbi Anglong by the Government. This is where the recent amendment to bar the non-indigenous community from taking part in ADC elections becomes very important. Will something similar happen in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao? The illegal settlers in these two areas, and the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), are not only Muslims but also Hindus. And this problem is what the BJP has to fix if it has any chance of forming the government on its own in Meghalaya, where the indigenous population is in an overwhelming majority. They did try to do just that by helping to get the amendment to bar the participation of the non-indigenous population in ADC polls. But right after that, they have done something that reinforces the perception of them prioritizing the non-indigenous community over the dignity of the indigenous community.

"The fear of being overwhelmed by the migrant population is persistent, but the place where that has actually taken place is Tripura, and the groups involved were Bengali Hindus, not Muslims."

There is a news report that the Meghalaya unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is preparing to submit proposals to the Centre for the development of key religious and cultural sites in the State under the PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan 2.0 schemes. One of the proposed sites is the Mawjymbuin Cave in Mawsynram, which was at the centre of a storm last year. Immigrants from outside the state are claiming the site holds religious significance, since the natural formation resembles a Shivalinga, a symbol of the Hindu god Shiva. This was contested by the local indigenous community, which has always maintained it to be a natural formation and a tourist site with no connection to Hinduism, which is a Niam-Dkhar, i.e., a foreign religion. By that logic, every single limestone cave in the state can also be turned into a religious site.

Ultimately, this could be an attempt to somehow include the indigenous territories of the Khasi as part of the larger mythical Hindu past known as Akhand Bharat. The fact that the Khasi are an older people whose language, culture, and traditions are more ancient than Sanskrit and Hinduism itself is being deliberately ignored. For the followers of Niam Khasi, this is particularly dangerous as their distinct identity is being threatened with assimilation. This is particularly happening at a time when the struggle for distinct recognition under the Census is becoming critical. If Khasi territories have Hindu sites (not man-made but natural), then the argument that indigenous peoples like the Khasi are not adivasi (ancient settlers) but simply vanvasi (which simply means forest settlers, i.e., Hindus who live around forests) becomes more potent. Why do they need distinct recognition or rights since they simply need to come back to the mainstream? Is that not what non-indigenous leaders during the Constituent Assembly debate wanted: indigenous communities assimilating with the mainstream and opening their land for settlement by immigrants? I am sure this is something some members of the Don Burom class, who may not support the Sixth Schedule or similar provisions, are secretly hoping for.

The proposal is coming from the Meghalaya unit of BJP, but I suspect it could be due to input from outside the state. I do not understand how a Khasi can ever think of auctioning their indigenous identity and history for political gains. Is membership of a political party more important than the political future of the community? The argument that this is only a suggestion and the local community will have the final say is a farcical argument. It is an insult to the local community, which has already made it clear that they do not consider the cave a religious shrine. My own non-indigenous friends have also told me that in the past the place was never used as a religious site. This has only started in the recent past. Today it is Mawjymbuin Cave, which if allowed will be followed by claims over other places as well. Next could be the sacred groves or natural formations like Khoh Ramhah.

The group, ironically, that is going to be most affected by this is the local non-indigenous community. These are people who have been residing in Meghalaya for many generations and are part and parcel of the state's history. Despite the influx in Garo Hills, the number of these 'genuine non-tribals' has been declining, which is a big loss for the state. Many are highly qualified individuals whose talent is badly needed by the state. In fact, the last person from Meghalaya to clear the IAS was Ankur Das, who cleared the Civil Services Examination (CSE) in 2021 with an All India Rank of 52, becoming the highest ranked candidate from the North East. But moves like this are only going to increase the animosity of the local community against them, who will suspect some of them of being part of this attempt to disenfranchise the indigenous community in the long run. Many of them, however, genuinely care about the local people and their home.

Over the years the non-indigenous community has been put under increasing pressure through direct means (threat, intimidation, violence) and indirect means (restricting their livelihood, e.g., trading licence issues). BJP, in fact, is considered a party perceived as being concerned about their plight. However, this is only going to increase the mistrust between them. Such a move may make sense for outsiders who have no connection to the state, but not for those who call this place their home. As indigenous peoples, we need to do better in terms of building a more just and inclusive society, but attempting to ignore our identity and take away our rights to our land is not going to achieve it. It is going to make it more difficult. After having done some right things in the recent past and projecting an inclusive candidate like Sanbor Shullai, the BJP has again reinforced that it is a party that gives preference to outsiders over indigenous people. Let us see how that works out in the upcoming Lok Sabha bypoll.

(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

Your Actions Advertise Your Faith...!

Somewhere in the madness of war, where bullets argue louder than philosophers and explosions interrupt even the sincerest prayers, two soldiers found themselves in a moment that no debate show could ever recreate.

One was wounded. The other was not.

Now if this had been a panel discussion, experts would have arrived within minutes, armed with statistics, opinions, and expressions of deep concern. They would have analysed the situation, discussed the historical context, and most importantly, tried to determine what religion each soldier belonged to. Then they would have argued with great passion, interrupted each other with even greater passion, and finally concluded that the situation was "complex," which is a very intelligent way of saying, "We have no idea what to do."

But on that battlefield, there was no studio lighting, no scrolling headlines, and no anchor dramatically asking, "Who is responsible?"

There was only a man dying of thirst and another man holding a water bottle.

And here is where the story becomes slightly uncomfortable for all of us who enjoy discussing faith from the safety of our living rooms, preferably while sipping tea and occasionally shaking our heads at the state of the world.

The uninjured soldier did not ask for identification. He did not inquire about beliefs. He did not say, "Before I help you, please confirm that you follow the same path as I do."

He simply gave.

Even though his own throat was parched.

Now many of us would have paused at this point. We would have thought about our own needs first. We might have reasoned that we could not help others if we ourselves were not comfortable. We may have even considered waiting for a more suitable time, perhaps after ensuring our own well-being.

But this man did not calculate.

He cared.

Then came the cold, the kind that does not gently arrive but storms in like an unexpected guest who refuses to leave. The uninjured soldier removed his coat and covered the wounded man. Not because it made sense. Not because it would benefit him in any way. But because it was the right thing to do.

He stayed with him through the night.

No speech. No lecture. No attempt to explain his actions.

Just presence.

And if there is one thing we seem to be losing today, it is exactly that, the ability to simply be there for someone without turning it into a statement or a performance.

As the wounded man felt his life slipping away, he looked up and said something remarkable. He said, "I do not know what faith you belong to, but if I could live again, yours would be the faith I would follow."

Now that is a statement that would make many of our modern debates rather unnecessary.

Because it suggests something very simple and yet very powerful.

Faith is not proven by argument.

It is revealed by action.

We live in a time where people defend their religion as though it were a cricket team. We cheer, we argue, we criticise the opposition, and we feel victorious when our side appears to be winning. But in all this noise, we often forget the actual purpose of faith.

It was never meant to be a competition.

It was meant to be a way of living.

Today, we measure devotion by how loudly someone speaks, how often they post, or how strongly they argue. We forward messages, share opinions, and engage in endless discussions, believing that we are doing something meaningful.

But imagine if, instead of forwarding messages, we offered help. Imagine if, instead of criticising, we encouraged. Imagine if, instead of debating, we simply cared.

Faith would suddenly become visible.

Not in grand buildings or impressive rituals, but in simple, everyday acts of kindness.

Because at the end of the day, people do not remember what you argued. They remember how you treated them. No one lies on their deathbed wishing they had won one more debate or proved one more point. But they will remember the person who stood by them, who helped them, who made them feel valued.

The soldier on that battlefield did not set out to prove anything. He did not know that his actions would be remembered. He did not expect recognition. He simply responded to a human need. And in doing so, he demonstrated what faith truly looks like. It is not about labels. It is not about identity. It is not about being right.

It is about being kind.

In a world that is increasingly divided, where people are quick to judge and slow to understand, perhaps what we need is not more discussion but more action.

Not more words but more compassion. Because when everything else fades, when arguments lose their importance and opinions no longer matter, what remains is how we made others feel.

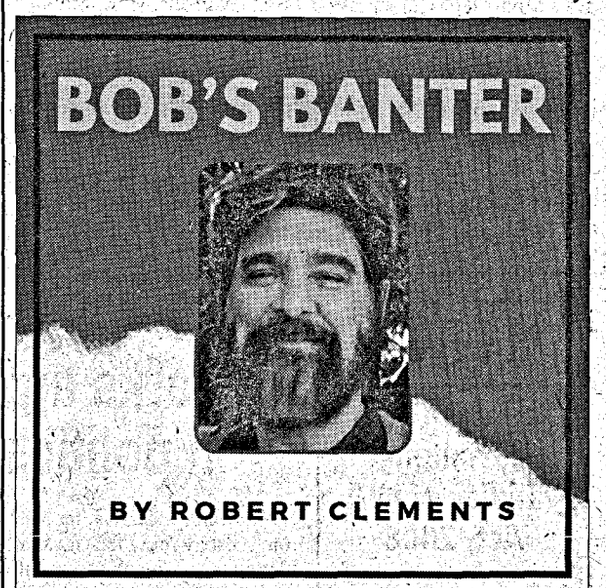
And perhaps that is the quiet truth we often overlook. People are drawn to your faith not by what you say, but by what you do.

Your actions speak far louder than your words ever can. And in those actions, your faith is seen, understood, and often even followed.

Because, most often, people are drawn to your faith, not by the words you speak, nor by propaganda or conversion inducements, if there's any such thing, but only by the life you live! And in the same way, the more violence and hatred that is seen in you, the more they move further and further away from your way of worship.

Remember, your actions advertise your faith...!

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



Letters to the Editor

Give Us Back Our Patch of Green

Editor,

In 1894, a patch of land measuring more than 5 acres was identified and created for the recreation of the people of Shillong. 132 years ago British civic sense recognized the need for a quite secluded piece of property where citizens could literally unwind from the tensions of work; for people to relax and chill out whenever they felt the need to do so. An artificial lake was thus built with its supply of water starting right from Risa Colony, along the periphery of the paddy fields of Dhankheti, along the sides of Survey of India campus, along a canal parallel to the Government printing press, into Lok Bhavan and finally emptied itself into the artificial lake to be called Wards Lake. Of course the entire canal has disappeared but it once did exist to feed a scenic man-made lake called lovingly by the locals as "Nan Palok" in an enchanted fairy tale land called "The Scotland of the East".

Today after 132 years of Ward Lake's existence plus some doubtful political civic understanding , activities within the lake compels us to ask a seemingly stupid question – are the original objectives and aims behind the Lake's existence still considered relevant or has a society weaned by AI 21st century wisdom decided that these fundamental and innovative ideas behind its creation have become stale, irrelevant and outdated? The Lake is owned by the Government and the Department chosen to oversee the maintenance and well being of the lake was entrusted on the Forest Department till 2023. Protecting and maintaining environmental cleanliness was the Department's TOR and for more than 54 years , whatever is said about that Department, it cannot be denied that they performed the task they were given. They patronised Wards lake; looked after it ; took care of its unique Japanese bridge, tended to its glamorous flower beds and the carpet like lawns; till it became one of the iconic heritage sites that Shillongites boast about.

It is now learnt that about a year ago the upkeep of the lake was handed over to the Tourism Department. I happened to pass that way 3 days ago and what I saw shocked me to the core. The beautiful flower beds were gone. In their stead there were clumps of bamboo scaffolding , which I am told were used for setting up tents during some recent festival of the Government. Black plastic sheets covered the once stunning lawns that covered the lake shore. It was a nightmare! I was told that this garbage had been lying ever since the Shillong Literary Festival. Lit Fest for what and for whom?) The Late Sambha Lamar used to hold her famous and popular CALM (Creative Arts Literature and Music) Festivals at Soso Tham auditorium. Now why can't the same be done there instead of destroying one of Shillong's heritage sites. Or if the Tourism Department really wants to hold any meaningful festival why can't the abandoned PWD compound at Barik be used or the hideous concrete boxes littering the space where the old Assembly Building be brought down and replaced with decent looking structures fit for a festival? Wards Lake is a peoples space for recreational purposes. PLEASE GIVE IT BACK TO THE PEOPLE OR ELSE ENTRUST ITS UPKEEP TO A DEPARTMENT THAT HAS THE WILL AND THE ABILITY TO DO SO.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Serving Nature Is Serving the Almighty

Editor,

Nature is beautiful, and its creations are inconceivable. In the 21st century, if we do not feel eager to touch, feel, and understand how nature works, then we should not consider ourselves civilized. True wisdom is not found in the sleek glass of an iPhone. Being hooked on endless scrolling on a mobile device goes against our natural way of living. When will we realise this? The younger generation barely passes a single moment without dumping the garbage of frivolous stimuli into their minds, a habit that is profoundly dangerous. It is exactly like how we pollute our rivers and streams with harmful waste and intoxicants, blind to their consequences. This is nothing but disrespecting nature, and we will inevitably pay the price. Yes, if constant inhalation of cigarette smoke leads to lung cancer, then the continuous consumption of trivial distractions leads to a kind of "mental cancer"-- a creeping psychological decay.

We have too often witnessed a ludicrous contradiction these days: two lovers whisper "I love you", "I love you" all night, only to bark "I leave you" the next morning, and by evening one thunders --"I will kill you if you…..". Is this not the perfect case of mental decay? This happens because a mind becomes so contaminated that it loses the ability to think critically and act with sanity. I will not go deeper into this for now, but I wish to underscore a powerful point raised by Patricia Mukhim in her recent Friday article, "Critical Thinking and Khasi Society: Hazards of Living in a Bubble & Glamourising…." She rightly laments, "Have we failed to inculcate the importance of respecting our forests, rivers, birds, and beasts? Rivers and forests are the very basis of life, yet the vengeance we have wreaked on our rivers is abominable. It is important that we introspect on the interdependence between humans and nature." At a deeper level, everything in creation is interconnected and interdependent --- even a banyan tree in our courtyard influences the balance of our living environment in the village, in the town!

Let us dwell on this matter for a while. Suppose the Himalayan mountain ranges vanished overnight. How would our survival be possible then? These are indeed the natural defence mechanisms of our planet Earth. Without them, most of the land would transform into arid deserts. Mighty rivers such as the Ganga and Brahmaputra will cease to exist, rendering millions without water. The forests would die out, the animals would perish, and the very cycle of the seasons would turn topsy-turvy.

Alas, despite repeated warnings from environmentalists, we keep tearing apart our hills, cutting down trees, and poisoning our streams and rivers. Ponder this -- have so many rivers in the state dried up for no reason? For decades, we have shipped countless metric tons of coal, limestone, boulders, and wood beyond our borders and even outside the country. Worse still, we do not even feel guilty about it. To many, the NGT ban on coal mining is dismissed as a hoax.

Despite frequent tragedies and increasingly freakish weather conditions, it still has not occurred to us that the natural resources cradled in the womb of Mother Earth are the very foundation of healthy living and of our perennial existence. These resources must be used judiciously and with restraint; they were never meant to be plundered for the sake of momentary greed by a single generation. Unless we wake up to this bitter truth, our civilization will remain hollow, built precariously on the ruins of the very ecosystem that sustains us. Take it to heart that caring for the natural world and its delicate ecological balance is a service of the highest order. It is every bit as important as worshipping the Almighty.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

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"It is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped."

— Tony Robbins

The Shillong Times

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Special Intensive Revision in Meghalaya

THE Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Meghalaya has not been officially announced. The SIR process is usually considered necessary when there are concerns that the voter list may not fully reflect the actual eligible electorate due to several reasons. While the SIR intends to clean up the electoral rolls of voters enrolled at two or three different places because they have migrated for work, etc., the lack of transparency and arbitrary inclusion and exclusion of voters' names to suit the whims of the ruling establishment has turned it into a politically contentious issue. The Opposition parties have made serious allegations against the present Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar and 193 MPs from the INDIA Bloc sought his removal by Parliament. Across India, SIR has become politically contentious because of the selective deletion of certain voter groups, lack of transparency, and, above all the potential influence on election outcomes. As of April this year, a total of 91 lakh names have been deleted from West Bengal's voter list since the SIR began. The state's voters have shrunk almost 12%, from 7.66 crore electors in October 2025 to 6.75 crore now. West Bengal had 7.34 crore eligible voters in the 2021 assembly elections. West Bengal goes to the polls on April 23 with what the Opposition claims is a defective electoral roll where names of largely Muslim voters are arbitrarily removed.

Interestingly in Meghalaya's Garo Hills, in Phulbari there is a household with 176 voters. In another case a household which had 14 voters in 2005 today has 84 which is a 4000% population growth. Yet another household had people of different religions living under a single roof. Many of these voters' names were not included in the voters' list in 2005 so how did their names appear in 2025? These are indeed matters of concern. SIR is intended to remove ineligible or duplicate voters because as stated above electoral rolls can accumulate names of people who have moved away. There could be duplicate entries. Some voters may have died without anyone informing the Election authorities. There may also be individuals who are not eligible because they don't have the necessary papers to prove their citizenship. An intensive revision helps clean the list so that only valid voters remain.

In Meghalaya the experience is mainly of movement of voters between rural and urban areas, largely towards Shillong. Migration also happens across district boundaries besides students and workers are constantly shifting locations. The SIR ensures that voters are registered where they actually live. Then there is the addition of voters who have become eligible to vote on turning 18. If what is alleged by civil society groups in Garo Hills is correct then Meghalaya requires an SIR but it should not be conducted with ulterior motives and eligible voters should be included in the list. But can this be ensured under the present Election Commission of India (ECI)?

What Model of Development (Social, Political & Economic) is Meghalaya Following?

By Ubahunlang Dkhar Tmar

To bring change and development it is not only the sole prerequisite and authority of the government, but also the people who will be impacted by development initiatives and policies. In an absolute liberal democracy, government is the servant of the electorate. Any lands that belong to the government belong to the people, thereby forming the term 'public property'. The government is only the caretaker of these properties of the state; citizens. It cannot bypass its citizens. The people are the custodians who put the checks and balances on those who decide on their behalf through informed consent. By informed consent it means the processes of deliberations and negotiations that stress transparency and accountability. Backdoor or closed-door negotiations only happen in a fascist and communist state.

Furthermore, we no longer live in colonial times under the dictates of a foreign empire whose sole aim is to extract, exploit, and loot the inhabitants and their land's resources. We live in a breathing democracy under the guidance and framework of the Indian Constitution, which clearly divides the terms of reference, responsibilities and duties. These must be respected and executed firmly. Any deviation is considered illegal and lose it legitimacy. Short term objectives and electoral populist politics has tarnished all these principles of a union, also, greed and obsession for power and control have further weakened Democracy, Society and the Constitutional obligations. This is also why Plato, in his book "The Republic," stated that only a philosopher, who seeks the fulfillment and development of their mental faculty and inner self rather than superficial material desires, should lead a government justly.

Normally, in a highly functional efficient government or state, the political executive has a major role to play since they are the designated drivers and initiators for change and policymaking. If the political executive fails and if the cabinet of ministers is filled with people who can't even read or comprehend policymaking and formulation, the vicious cycle of underdevelopment, myopic and stalemate policy is repeated again and again. Therefore, education, foresightedness and the critical ability are the prime requisites for running the wheels of governance.

Development in the context Meghalaya: In general, Meghalaya is afflicted with serious issues: unemployment, urban-rural divide on basic amenities, disparity in income between the rich and the poor, failure of education, healthcare issues, ecological disturbances, low agricultural productivity, increasing crime rate, drug addictions, fiscal deficits, corruption etc. To discuss and deliberate on all these critical issues requires a thesis of multiple volumes and a room full of experts. After 50 years of statehood, considering the rate of inflation of the economy, the majority of the people in Meghalaya are still surviving on whatever they can. As a state, we will reach a tipping-point in the coming years if we take into account the humongous loans that our government took from the international financial agencies on our behalf. To call a spade a spade, in all these past years, with the exception of a few, we observe that only the political class and people close to power have amassed wealth and assets. This is not to cast aspersions or launch a smearing campaign but this is a glaring fact.

The government of the day has chosen a path of easy, superficial quick-fix development initiatives and economic policies, ranging from concert economy to handing out development responsibilities to outside consultants while keeping the coming elections in sight. Also, to appear pro-people, which is part of projecting a positive image, the government has passed several executive orders and no one has any clue how these decisions were made. Most of the focus is also on producing immediate results (GDP) sacrificing long-term objectives. In this scheme of things and all this hulla-baloo, where is the Meghalaya State Planning Board? Has it gone with the wind?

To continue, discounting the Central Schemes/Projects, the State directed economic development initiatives seems to appear only on paper, the process for laying the groundwork of the economy is not spelt out, What and where is the blue-print? Prof H. Chang, the Cambridge Economist, said "Economic development is not simply a matter of increasing income (economic growth)..., it is a matter of acquiring and developing more sophisticated productive capabilities." The sectors of the economy which are part of these 'Productive capabilities" includes health and education. Both health and education address long-term economic growth, economic development and sustainability.

Development; Meghalaya Lexicon

Economic Development is a loaded term, it does not only mean employment generation per se. During this Lumpongdeng debate, those who support the government, talk about employment: without understanding the nature of employment, employment systems, labour issues etc. Majority of people have this perception, that development equals employment. Those who support the government stance and even cabinet ministers seem to talk about development without spelling out what they mean. Inferring from this Lumpongdeng issue, Development for them is also to bring in consultants, business tycoons, corporates, forgetting that these entities and individual's main interest and objective is to minimize the cost and increase the profit.

There are also several advisers now popping up and populating under this present government who themselves have not done or shown credible work in the field of 'Development Strategies/ Economics/ Environmental Issues. If you are closer to the establishment, articulate, and attracted to power, glory and cash, any Tom, Dick, and Harry can become an adviser, provided that you have the ability to create a positive narrative and disturb the opposition. The self-styled spokespersons of the establishment, advisers, give lectures on the balance of development-environment without knowing what exactly it is and how this 'balance' is actually going to operate. Actually, 'balance' is a subjective assumption, which is always a false positive.

Holistically, development is the interaction of many attributes and one of the major attributes is the natural conditions of a place and the human activities on top of it. Development initiatives are not only "Table Based, Power-Point Based" but require groundwork initiatives. We need Grassroots process of development, that is, experts are embedded within the community and area of operation because Meghalaya is still at the initial stages of development. The strength of Meghalaya's economy lies in the rural areas where 78% of the state population resides.

We do need expert advice to a certain extent but not to sell-out to the highest bidder on what we have, as given to us by our elders. We have seen how the Cement Industry, through the Single Window agency has negatively affected our state and especially those areas where cement factories are located. We must not be satisfied only with gaining employment with no job security; we must also be concerned about well-being. Furthermore, will the land affected by limestone mining, the area's ecology, and local water bodies and springs be restored to their past condition?

There is now even talk of a Rain Museum. What will it include? An artificial - 3D model of orographic rainfall? I don't see any logic nor rational justification, because Mawsynram as it is, is a natural setting located in the southern slope that faces the rain bearing Monsoon winds during summer. Why not use the funds for the Rain museum to develop Mawsynram and its surroundings, Mind you, tourists especially foreigners come here not to see our shoddy RCC buildings, but the natural and cultural settings, because these are our unique selling points. Whatever the case maybe, any infrastructural development has to blend in with the natural surroundings, landscape, aesthetics and within those structures are the imprints of our culture and indigenous knowledge either combined with modern engineering or architectural style. For example, the Mawsmai stone sculpting/architecture has gained a lot of attention. They are more durable, adapt to our ecology and tropical climate. That is what we must promote and augment local artisans with. With the exception of 'Root bridges' which is actually a local traditional initiative, as a State we have neglected most of our indigenous knowledge, cultural and natural assets; House Types/ Architecture, Springs, Rivers, Forests etc.

Concluding Remarks: We have heard and read so much that the state has increased its GDP an is second only to Tamil Nadu, got awards etc., but have we cared to verify these declarations? Have these achievements trickled down to the pockets of the poor? Are these economic assets that were erected, improved income? What about the 'depreciation values' of these assets generated? Are these assets/structures of credible quality? We have seen large projects with expenditure in crores starting from the humongous Covid expenditures which the government said was to augment health infrastructures, the Smart City Project from Wah Umkhrah to ISBT. The Green Tech Chairman had even highlighted these River Projects in one of the discussion programmes now on YouTube DD News Meghalaya. When will we gain our senses and wake up from our reverie?

The Myth of the "Average" Menstrual Body

By Saumya

What if every shoe in the world came in just one size? Not small, not large, just average. If your feet hurt, pinched, blistered or bled, the problem wouldn't be the shoe. It would be you. You would be told to adjust, to get used to it or quietly accept the pain. Over time, you might even start believing that hurting is just part of walking.

This is the literal reality of how we have built the world of menstruation. We are living in a "one size fits all" era and as we slowly hand more of our healthcare decisions to apps and artificial intelligence, that average shoe is about to get even tighter.

Menstruation is a biological masterpiece of variability. If you sit with ten people who menstruate in a room, you will find ten different experiences. Some experience a light, breezy cycle that looks like just another day while others face a monthly storm so violent it stops their ability to work, sleep or go to school. Cycle length varies. Hormone levels don't just rise and fall, they dance like crazy. Symptoms change month to month. Even bleeding differs on different days of the same cycle.

Menstruation is not only experienced by women. Trans men and some non-binary people menstruate too, often under very different social and physical conditions. Imagine bleeding every month in a world that insists only "women" bleed. Imagine needing pads but feeling uncomfortable entering a "women's hygiene" aisle. Imagine the dysphoria of a body doing something society has rigidly gendered. Biology does not create a single menstrual experience, yet society keeps forcing it into one neat, pink box.

This flattening begins with a well-meaning but flawed reliance on the "average." Science depends on averages because they are easy to measure and compare. But they can also mislead. If one person's value is 2 and another's is 1000, the average is 501, a number that represents neither. In medicine, designing for the average may be convenient, but it is rarely safe. Real health risks exist at the margins: heavy bleeding, irregular cycles, severe pain, limited access to sanitation, or bodies that don't fit the idea of "normal." When we design for the middle, we exclude those at the edges,

The problem is reinforced by how menstrual data is collected. Much of it relies on self-reported surveys that reduce complex bodily experiences to simple categories. Period-tracking apps, for instance, often ask users to classify their flow as "light, medium, or heavy." This is like describing a thunderstorm as "slightly wet" or "moderately wet." The body does not operate in drop-down menus. Mood is not just "happy, sad, or neutral." Yet research often focuses on what is easiest to quantify: cycle length, frequency, regularity. These fit neatly into spreadsheets, but they fail to capture the full complexity of lived experience.

Where is the box for pain so sharp you can't sit in class?

Where is the question about having privacy to change a pad?

Where is the space to mention gender dysphoria while bleeding?

What we don't measure doesn't disappear. It becomes invisible, and what science overlooks is often dismissed in real life. These assumptions don't stay in journals. They shape how pain is labelled, how policies are written, and even where vending machines are placed, often only in women's washrooms.

For a non-binary student or a trans boy who menstruates, that is not a small detail. It is a monthly reminder that the system was not built for them. If you don't fit the "average," the system turns it into your inconvenience, something you are expected to manage quietly.

Now, enter artificial intelligence. You don't need to understand coding to grasp this. AI learns patterns from past data to predict what comes next.

Think of teaching a child what a bird is by only showing sparrows. The first time she sees a peacock, it doesn't fit the pattern. AI works the same way. What appears frequently becomes "normal," while rare experiences, like a trans man's cycle or endometriosis, become statistical outliers. And outliers are often treated as noise.

This isn't malice. It is mathematics. When a health app claims "95% accuracy," it sounds reassuring. But 5% of millions is still millions of real people whose bodies don't fit the model. To maintain accuracy, systems prioritise the majority, quietly sidelining those who don't conform.

This is where it becomes dangerous for common people. If your period app tells you your symptoms are normal, you might doubt your own pain. If it predicts your cycle incorrectly every month, you might blame your body. If it never accounts for the fact that you are a trans man using testosterone, it may treat your experience as an error instead of a variation. Technology feels objective. But it reflects the data we feed it. If that data was narrow or incomplete, the technology will carry those same blind spots forward. And this is not just about apps. It's about everyday life.

It's about the student who misses class every month because their cramps feel unbearable, yet everyone says "it's normal."

It's about the trans-boy trying to make products designed for someone else's body work for him.

It's about the non-binary person who avoids public washrooms because they do not feel safe in gendered spaces.

When systems are built for the "average woman," they erase diversity within womanhood and erase everyone outside of it. When someone is repeatedly told their pain is normal or their experience is rare, they slowly begin to believe that they are the error.

So what do we do?

We need a science that values thoughtful data, not just more data. Instead of rigid checkboxes, we allow descriptive experiences. Instead of ignoring the 5%, we design for them too. Inclusivity is not decorative. It is a safety feature. And this responsibility is not limited to researchers or tech companies. It includes all of us.

It shows in how we speak. When we say "only women get periods," we erase people. A shift to "people who menstruate" may feel unfamiliar, but for someone listening, it can feel like recognition. It shows in how we respond to pain. Instead of "it's normal," we can say, "That sounds hard." Validation matters.

It also means noticing who is missing. If products or policies assume one kind of body, question it. These are not attacks, but expansions. And when using health apps, remember they are guides, not authorities. If something feels off, trust your body. Data can inform, but it cannot replace lived experience. Ignoring an "outlier" to keep the math clean always means leaving someone behind.

If we keep building for the average, the future will look efficient and polished but unequal. But if we design for the messy, beautiful edges, science becomes humane. It's time to stop shrinking bodies to fit models and start building systems big enough to hold all of us: women, trans-men, non-binary people, the heavy bleeders, and the irregular cyclers.

Because hurting should not be part of walking. And invisibility should not be the price for being different.

(The writer is Third Year BTech Student, Plaksha University)

Letters to the Editor

Unfair LPG Distribution in Lama Villa

Editor,

I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities through your esteemed newspaper to the ongoing hardship faced by residents of Lama Villa due to the highly irregular and inconsistent supply of LPG cylinders by MECOFED Gas Agency.

It is deeply concerning that the last distribution of LPG cylinders in our locality took place in February 2026. Since then, residents have been left struggling to manage basic cooking needs. For a service as essential as cooking gas, such prolonged disruption is unacceptable.

What is even more alarming is the growing perception among residents that the shortage is not merely a result of supply constraints but may involve deliberate and manipulative practices in the distribution process. There is a strong sense that certain areas are being given preferential treatment, while others, like Lama Villa, continue to be unfairly overlooked. Such actions, if left unchecked, not only create inequality but also severely damage public confidence in the integrity of essential service providers.

We urge the concerned authorities to investigate the matter thoroughly, ensure transparency in LPG distribution, and hold accountable those responsible for any malpractice. A fair and regular supply system must be restored immediately to prevent further inconvenience to the residents.

I hope this issue will be highlighted through your publication and prompt necessary action from the authorities.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Redefining Sporting Success in Meghalaya

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I wish to address the recent announcement by the Government of Meghalaya regarding the awarding of government jobs to National Games medallists. While the intent—to provide security to our state's heroes—is commendable, the policy highlights a stagnant mindset: the belief that sporting excellence is merely a means to a clerical end.

Why must a podium finish in a high-octane athletic discipline inevitably lead to a desk job in a government department? By primarily rewarding athletes with civil employment, we are inadvertently signalling that sports, in and of themselves, are not a viable or sustainable profession. This "job-for-medal" model treats sports as a stepping stone rather than a career, effectively retiring our best talents just as they reach their prime.

If we truly wish to transform Meghalaya into a sporting powerhouse, we must move beyond this transactional approach. A robust sporting culture requires:

- Professional Ecosystems: Instead of one-off job appointments, the government should facilitate the creation of professional leagues and clubs that offer competitive salaries to players and coaches.
- Corporate Synergy: Creating a policy framework that incentivizes private sponsorship and corporate social responsibility (CSR) investments into individual athlete brands.
- Specialized Infrastructure: Investing in high-performance centers where athletes can transition into roles as specialized scouts, sports scientists, or high-level coaches, keeping their expertise within the field.
- Long-term Financial Security: Implementing pension schemes or sports-specific endowments that allow athletes to focus on training without the looming anxiety of "what comes next."

Our athletes bring pride to the state through their sweat and discipline. They deserve the opportunity to remain in the arena, not be redirected into administrative roles unrelated to their lifelong dedication. If we want our youth to dream of the Olympics, we must show them a future where being an "Athlete" is a respected, lifelong profession—not just a shortcut to a government payroll.

I hope this sparks a necessary dialogue among policymakers and the public alike on how we can truly professionalize sports in Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Jim Rudolph Diengdoh,
Shillong

A Protest or an Election Campaign? Beware of Opportunists

Editor,

I write as a concerned citizen and as a layman who was never affiliated with or sided with any political party. Time and again, I have witnessed political parties taking advantage of public sentiment and on issues raised by common citizens or pressure groups in our state.

The ongoing protest by the Green Tech Foundation against the project at Lumpongdeng island has drawn the attention of both the public and the State Government. Amid this protest, the Voice of the People Party (VPP) has intervened in a manner that appears opportunistic. While I do not object to any party campaigning since it is indeed the duty of every political party to propagate its views and seek electoral victory, however, I am compelled to raise certain questions.

To the VPP I ask: Is your party genuinely concerned about this issue, about the environment, and about the people of this land? If so, why was the matter not raised in the Legislative Assembly for a thorough debate on the merits and demerits of the project? Instead of mobilising a street protest, why did the party not press the ruling government or petition the Hon'ble Governor to convene a Special Session, as is within its power as a legislative entity?

The primary duty of a political party is to raise matters of public importance in the Assembly and engage in substantive debate, not to resort to street theatrics for political sympathy. Street protests are the last option for a political party. Pressure groups may justifiably take that way, as they do not have access to the Assembly, unlike elected representatives.

The VPP has announced a protest on the 22nd of this month, listing eight demands. Have its leaders forgotten that the electorate sent them to the Assembly to deliberate and legislate, not to stage demonstrations? Can laws be enacted in the streets? If so, why do we elect representatives to the Assembly at all? If not, then what is the true intent behind this street protest?

As stated earlier, pressure groups or individuals may protest when dialogue with the government fails. However, for a political party with access to the Assembly, it is premature to call for a public demonstration without first exhausting legislative avenues. This street protest announced by the VPP seems more like a political agenda to deceive the people than genuine concern for the public.

Yours etc.,
Carmel Fedrick Malngiang,
Wahkaliar, Sohra

Absence of trash bins in Shillong City

Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw attention to a pressing issue affecting the city—the severe lack of trash bins in public areas. Despite increasing awareness about cleanliness and hygiene, citizens are often left with no option but to dispose of waste improperly due to the unavailability of basic waste disposal facilities.

This shortage is particularly noticeable in busy markets, streets, and public spaces, where littering has become a common sight. The absence of sufficient bins not only leads to an unhygienic environment but also contributes to the spread of diseases and pollution. Furthermore, it undermines initiatives aimed at maintaining cleanliness and discourages responsible behavior among residents.

Shillong is a city known for its cleanliness amongst tourists, but they see a whole new world when they come here and see the streets littered with wastes. The city should live up to its reputation and I hope the concerned authorities will take actions regarding this matter to install trash across the city and ensuring their regular maintenance. Such steps will greatly contribute to a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable urban environment.

Yours etc.,
Akangtila Lèmtur
Shillong

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C M K

"Every decision you make, you got to stand on that decision."

— Young Dolph

The Shillong Times

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India's fluctuating economy

INDIA as an economy is growing – and so is its powerful club of billionaires. A global wealth survey has said India now has the world's six largest 'population' of ultra-high net-worth individuals and that their number would rise by 51 per cent from 207 now to 313 in another five years' time. The rich here have a gala time. They're making money here and spending lavishly, but mostly abroad. This is one side of India. On the other side is pathetic – with over 30 per cent of the people living in 'poor' conditions. Governmental claims are that the poverty rate has been reduced from 23 per cent of the population to 16 per cent. As per some estimates, some 60 per cent of the people live with an income of less than Rs 300 a day. Extreme poverty is a reality, mainly linked to the backward and underdeveloped regions like tribal homelands set closer to the forests. Urbanization has helped reduce poverty levels, as work is easily available in cities. The food security scheme introduced by the UPA government too helped reduce poverty through provisions for free or subsidized rations.

Admittedly, the nation's economy remained in good shape for the past two decades when the GDP rates fluctuated between six per cent and nine per cent, its height being during the Manmohan Singh dispensation. While neighbours like Sri Lanka and Pakistan have seen a near-collapse of their economies, India stood its ground. This was thanks mainly to the economic reforms the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh governments introduced since the early 1990, which did away with the Socialistic concepts and liberalized the national economy. The Narendra Modi era since 2014 saw the GDP growth reducing but, despite the Covid-19 and other adversities, it retains a decent 6.5 per cent level. Singh's claim that economic growth would have a trickle-down effect -- meaning the gains of the rich would percolate down to the poor and empower them too – has not been proven to be true. Millions of the poor remain almost where they were 20 years ago. The rich who make big money either through business or through their professions as in the case of senior lawyers and specialized doctors prefer to spend their money holidaying abroad. Politicians and bureaucrats who make big money through foul means deposit them in tax havens abroad or amass property for them in exotic locations.

Yet, economic growth for a nation benefits all in ways big or small. The recent IMF report downgrading India from being the fourth largest economy to the sixth largest is more in technical terms. At the same time, it also exposed the big claims by the Modi government that it's set on raising the Indian economy's status to the world's third top slot – next only to those of the US and China. We have a long way to go to reach such goals. This involves hard work on the ground. India's strong point today is the large bulk of its youth population. Effective use of their energies is a guarantee to India becoming an economic superpower in future.

Women's Reservation & Delimitation Must Come with New Delimitation Concessions & New Category of States

By Kitdor H. Blah

Article 81 & Clause 2 of the Indian Constitution remains to this day the only law that defines the manner in which seats in the Lok Sabha are to be allotted to each state and each parliamentary constituency. According to this constitutional formula, the ratio between the number of seats of each state in the House of the People and that state's total population must be the same across all states. Similarly, the ratio between the population of each parliamentary constituency within a state and the number of seats allotted to that constituency must be the same throughout that state. This formula which speaks of ratio between population and seats might seem confusing until we realize that India started with multi-member constituencies. Multi-member constituencies were meant to increase the participation of SCs/STs. A large constituency could hold two seats—a general seat and a SC/ST seat—or it could even have a general seat, a ST seat and a SC seat. The first Lok Sabha elections had 489 elected seats from 401 constituencies, made up of 314 single-member constituencies, 86 two-member constituencies and one three-member constituency. This multi-member constituency created problems in the 1957 elections where ST/SC candidates contested and won from both the general and reserved seats. The Supreme Court also upheld the ability of SC/ST candidates to contest from both reserved and general seats. Due to opposition, the Government abolished this system in 1961. Therefore, since we only have single-member constituencies today, the constitutional formula in Article 81 effectively means that each seat in the House of the People must represent the same number of people as every other seat in the House.

But this seat to population ratio formula was never intended to be absolute. The formula was circumvented in two ways to protect the federal nature of the country and to give equitable representation to lower-population states. One was that Article 81(2) contained a proviso that those states with population lower than 60 lakhs did not have to have the same seat to population ratio as those states with population more than 60 lakhs. For example, after the 1971 census and the delimitation of 1972-75, the average population to seat ratio of the major states was 10.40 lakhs. However, delimitation concessions were made for smaller states and UT's which together shared 36 seats. During this time, the population of Meghalaya was only 10.12 lakhs, however it was allotted two seats. Mizoram with a population of 3.3 lakhs was allotted one seat. The second way that this formula was circumvented was that the government amended the Constitution in 1976 and again in 2001 so that delimitation would remain tied to the 1971 census until the year 2000 and again until the year 2026, so that all future censuses from 1981 to 2026 would not change the states' representation in Parliament. This was done for two reasons – the uneven population growth between states would have affected the representation equity between states and secondly, the government itself had been implementing a National Population Policy since 1976, and by freezing delimitation to the 1971 census, it provided an incentive for states to implement population control without fear of under-representation. The assumptions were that by the year 2000, or by the year 2026, all states would have successfully achieved population stabilization.

Just as the multi-member constituencies system created problems of representation, the 106th Constitution Amendment Act, which provides for one third reservation of seats for women in the LokSabha and the State Assemblies, has also created problems with regards to representation. The first problem is that if the strength of the House remains the same, then the implementation of women's reservation will necessarily exclude many of the sitting male Members of Parliament whose constituencies end up being reserved for women. At present, there are 74 female members in the House. Even if these are all included in the reserved constituencies, it would still mean that 107 sitting MP's would be excluded. The question of which constituencies to reserve for women is a political dilemma. To circumvent this problem, the government, through the defeated 131st Constitution Amendment Bill, had sought to increase the strength of the House from the existing maximum permissible limit of 550 members (states 530, UT's 20) to 850 members (states 815, UT's 35).

The Women's Reservation Act itself, which was introduced in parliament in 2023 by the Law Minister and which passed with a thumping 454-2 majority, says that the reservation for women will come into effect only after delimitation is done as per the figures of the first census to be done after the Act is passed. The government, through the 131st Amendment Bill, had sought to change direction, and to de-link the Women's Reservation Act from the first published census after 2023, and to link it to the next delimitation as per "such census, as Parliament may by law determine, of which the relevant figures have been published." Thus, the Government is displaying one of two things: either a sudden hurriedness to implement women's reservation or a sudden hurriedness to undertake delimitation. Regardless, any delimitation that is delinked from the 1971 census will concentrate power in the northern Hindi belt states due to their disproportionately high population growth. If after 50 years since 1976, the States have not equally succeeded in implementing population control, it would be undemocratic to enforce any other census on delimitation, and erase all the principles that guided past governments, such as federalism, equity between states, population stabilization, and delimitation concessions.

But the Law Minister and the Prime Minister attempted to allay this fear by proposing that every state would increase their seats in the House by 50% as per a pro-rata basis. This means the strength of the House would also increase by 50% from 543 to 815. The percentage share of the states in the strength of the House would remain the same as it is now and the extra 50% would cover the seats reserved for women. But the problem with this statement is that there is no provision either in the Constitution or in the defeated 131st Amendment Bill itself for a pro-rata increase in the seats of the states. The Amendment Bill sought to amend all the relevant articles, in the Constitution such as 55, 81, 82, 170, 330, 332, 334A, that affect the definition of population for the purposes of delimitation of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, reservation of seats for SCs/STs, valuation of MLA's/MP's votes in election of President, but it does not touch on Article 81(2) which remains the only law that governs the formula for delimitation and allotment of seats in Lok Sabha. So, that statement was a blatantly false assurance. But even if this could be done, and all states could increase their seats by 50%, the lower population states would still be losers when it comes to the election for President. If Article 55 is no longer tied to the 1971 census, then for the purpose of election of President of India, the value of the votes of MLA's of lower population states will diminish and the value of votes of MLA's of higher population states will increase, as per the formula - Value of MLA Vote = (State Population divided by Assembly Seats) divided by 1000. The President is known as the First Citizen. He ideally sits between the Parliament and the people of the country. If the value of the votes of any state's MLA's is diminished, then this also affects the federal nature of the country and the equity between states.

Conclusion: Besides diluting the federal nature of the country, the concentration of power in a few higher population states also makes the formula for control much simpler not just for the ruling party, but also for the corporate sector, lobbies and foreign entities. A country is easier to control if you only need to influence fewer dominant states/regions, either by money or ideology. The only possible solution would be that any future delimitation that is based on any census other than 1971 must come with new concessions and new category of states. The small states (below 60 lakhs population) already have their own category under Article 81(2). Those states with disproportionately high growth of population must also be placed in their own separate category. The states that have successfully implemented population control must also be placed in their own category. The seat to population ratio must be different for each of these category of states. The 'one vote one value' doctrine was never based on an absolute seat to population formula, as circumvented by the Constitution itself in the proviso under Article 81(2), and as circumvented by past governments.

The deeper story of a bill that failed

By Jagdish Rattanani

The issue of women's reservation in the Lok Sabha should have been a straightforward affair. The government says it wants it; the Opposition is all for it. Yet, what the nation got was not reservation for women but a bill that was designed to fail. The BJP has now gone on the offensive after the collapse of the bill, almost as if the entire purpose was to take the political discourse to a new level of confrontation and bitterness against the Opposition. This is the sorry state Indian democracy has reached in recent times. Led by the BJP, this is a culture that has fashioned politics in the image of a boxing ring in which the Opposition must be surprised, shocked and knocked out every step of the way. The issues surrounding the women's reservation are only the latest example of trickster politics contributing to a climate of increased the political heat, reduced trust and the erasure of any scope for bipartisan actions that should be a part of everyday governance in a democracy.

Consider that the bill linked to reservation for women (The 131st Constitution Amendment Bill) arrived in the midst of important State elections that are hotly contested. Without any prior circulation or consultation, the bill that needs two-thirds majority in the House was bought in with surprise clauses – a new and hurried delimitation exercise that would increase the Lok Sabha seats from 543 to 850, with 33% of the increased strength reserved for women before the 2029 polls. The government would have known that such a wild change will not pass without due consultation and a prior agreement. The inevitable collapse of the bill then became the ground for a renewed attack against the Opposition as part of the BJP's election campaign.

Quite obviously, the bill was opposed by the Southern States. Passing the bill meant that they would lose seats by proportion as their populations have reached fertility or near-fertility levels while the Northern, BJP-controlled States would gain seats despite (or because of) poorer development efforts. This is inevitable since delimitation seeks to normalise populations that the representatives of the people serve so that a larger population means more seats in the Lok Sabha.

Quite obviously, the bill was opposed by the Southern States. Passing the bill meant that they would lose seats by proportion as their populations have reached fertility or near-fertility levels while the Northern, BJP-controlled States would gain seats despite (or because of) poorer development efforts. This is inevitable since delimitation seeks to normalise populations that the representatives of the people serve so that a larger population means more seats in the Lok Sabha. Further, how can a government that has never built confidence with the Opposition be trusted with redrawing parliamentary boundaries in a delimitation process that is not due for several years yet? Lack of support for such a plan was obvious. Yet came the bill, followed by its expected collapse, and the BJP appeared to use this as fodder for a new slanging match to present itself as supporter of women's reservation while the Opposition was painted black. The sorry episode was made worse by the 8.30 p.m. address to the nation on April 18 which reduced a high public office to a party appendage amid important State elections. Instead of a non-partisan explanation of the fiasco over the bill, the address was more in the nature of pamphleteering for and by the BJP.

The Prime Minister named the opposition parties and blamed them for not wanting reservations for women when the issue at stake was deep mistrust in the government and its short-term agenda for the 2029 elections. In the process, an opportunity to rise as a statesman-leader who was duty-bound to explain, clarify and bring the nation together was lost. The loss may count for nothing in the playbook of the BJP, but it marks one more notch down on the slippery slope towards a breakdown of trust that further reduces the space for engaging across the aisle. The Prime Minister's special address to the nation has never in the past been used for a slanging match, including addresses by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself on earlier occasions.

Meanwhile, the issue of reservations has now been left languishing with more political noise that does not serve the real question: how can the government find pathways to implement reservations for women here and now as the Opposition has indeed demanded, without waiting for a new delimitation process and all the contentious issues that it brings. Over the weekend, the DMK introduced a private members constitution amendment bill to implement 33% reservation of seats for women based on the current Lok Sabha strength sans delimitation or census reports. It is noteworthy that it is the Trinamool Congress that has the highest number of women in the Lok Sabha as a percentage of its sitting members at 38% (11 women out of 29) while the BJP sits at a low of 13% (31 women out of 240).

In sum, what the entire exercise achieved was the breakdown of what is sometimes described as vertical trust and horizontal trust. The former is between the ruling class and the people who elect them. The elected are trusted to serve the needs of the electors. The latter is trust among citizens, who must jointly work the levers of the democratic state and its institutions to watch and exert the required pressure to keep the rulers in check. A balanced give-and-take is thus the life blood of a democratic order. But as a vocabulary of violence takes hold and as shriller voices are encouraged, they shrink the space for civil discourse and reduce democratic voices. The resultant reduced trust signals a declining democratic order that should be the biggest worry for the nation at this stage. The bill that failed thus tells the deeper story of all that is going wrong in the Indian democracy, bit by bit, in areas that are clearly visible and sometimes in many invisible ways.

The tone set at the top is liable to be mimicked by party leaders and workers down the line so that the same concoction of violent language, threats or bullying will be tried out in a hundred other ways in situations across the country that may never hit the headlines but will deliver their tiny blows to break democracy and turn people off. With its superior budgets, the BJP may claim a win for today, but its actions are body blows to the democratic spirit of a nation that still famously recalls the first special address to the nation – the "tryst with destiny" that inspired not only India but also the globe.

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

Letters to the Editor

Politics Over Real Solutions

Editor,

The approach taken by the Voice of the People Party (VPP) increasingly looks less like responsible opposition and more like a calculated exercise in political popularity. By framing complex governance issues as urgent crises that demand immediate street mobilisation, the party risks reducing serious policy debates into slogans and spectacle.

Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit is tapping to genuine public frustrations on jobs, land, and governance but the method raises concerns. Calling on students and job aspirants to "sacrifice" studies or work for protests is not a sustainable path to reform. It places the burden of political pressure on those already struggling for stability. Leadership should be about protecting these groups, not pulling them into prolonged agitation.

There is also a noticeable tendency to generalise and dramatise issues. Allegations of widespread corruption and democratic erosion without clearly outlining actionable, realistic policy alternatives. Criticism of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission or land policies may be valid, but solutions require institutional reform, legal clarity, and administrative will, not just mass rallies.

By leaning heavily on mobilisation politics, the VPP risks fostering a cycle where visibility is mistaken for effectiveness. Street strength can highlight grievances, but it cannot replace the hard work of governance: drafting laws, building consensus, and implementing reforms. If every issue is pushed toward confrontation, it may deepen divisions rather than resolve them.

In the end, opposition politics carries a responsibility: not just to oppose, but to offer credible, practical alternatives. Without that, the VPP's strategy risks being seen less as a movement for change and more as a pursuit of political capital through public sentiment.

Yours etc.,
Mantre Hame Dkhar,
Via email

Please Treat Retired Teachers With Respect

Editor,

With reference to the news item published in The Shillong Times dated April 22, 2026 regarding the opposition by the Khasi Jaintia Deficit School Teachers' Association (KJDSTA) to the Meghalaya Non-Government Schools and Colleges Employee Centralised Fund Scheme, 2026, I wish to humbly place a few concerns for kind consideration.

As of now there appears to be a deep sense of anxiety among the teaching and non-teaching fraternity under the deficit grant-in-aid system. The issues raised by the association, especially concerning retired teachers and employees appointed prior to April 2010, deserve serious and sympathetic attention.

At this point in time, it may kindly be appreciated that matters relating to pension and retirement are not merely administrative in nature but are closely linked with human dignity and survival. We know old age is a time when financial stability matters a lot not only for survival but also for meeting medical expenses and basic needs. As of today many retired teachers are reportedly facing financial hardship and sadly a few of them are no more leaving behind their families in the hope of a pension for survival.

In the present social condition where the family is becoming more and more nuclear, expectations from one's own offspring cannot always be assured. This makes pension not just a benefit but something necessary for living with dignity.

It is respectfully submitted that the concern regarding lack of adequate consultation with stakeholders may not be overlooked. A policy of such importance should ideally be based on mutual understanding and trust. The reference to an earlier agreed draft of 2023 also gives this expectation.

As things stand today employees appointed before April 2010 have been governed by the Contributory Provident Fund system under existing provisions. Any move to club different categories without clear safeguards may create confusion and insecurity among employees.

In the present circumstances directives for compliance even when the matter is under judicial consideration may be seen as premature. A balanced and humane approach would help restore confidence.

It is therefore humbly requested that the government help retired teachers and future retiring teachers to live a life of dignity. This I believe will truly materialise the recognition and respect which are otherwise expressed every year on Teachers Day.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Stop blocking roads for your political agendas

Editor

"Stop blocking roads for your political agendas" – a message delivered with impeccable timing. The Iron Lady's explosive outburst came at a time when it is needed the most. It manifests sheer courage and civic sense. After the VPP Supremo openly called for "Citizens to join in Lakhs for March to Secretariat," the first thing that comes to mind is the pestering thought of what that future event might cause – the utter disruption of traffic in an already suffering system. The 8-point charter of demands is a valid cause and rightly deserves public support. Yet, there are other ways to mobilise public support instead of outrightly calling one and all to throng the streets, an idea prone to causing a serious law and order situation (if things go haywire). One stone, thrown in the wrong direction can spark a huge fire. Whether the term 'Lakhs' is just an exaggeration or real (judging from the crowd at Motphran), VPP leaders should practice restraint and resort to diplomatic strategy first, rather than tagging the crowd. The ultimate losers as history had unveiled (in the past decades) are the school/college-going-students. At a time when chaos is disrupting peace in several areas of the country and the world, we need a Pope Leo XIV more than a Donald Trump. Please don't block the Strait of Motphran or PB (or Kashari/Governor's House/SP Office...), for heavily laden ships need to pass through.

Yours etc.,
Kyntiewborlang Kharakor,
Via email

Preserving the Sanctity of Ward's Lake

Editor,

Recently, several letters published in The Shillong Times have drawn attention to the increasing misuse of Ward's Lake, particularly the erection of temporary structures for government-organized events within its grounds. It has also been noted that such installations are often left uncleared for days after events conclude, leading to the accumulation of clutter and debris that detracts from the lake's natural charm.

Ward's Lake is not merely a convenient venue; it is a vital urban sanctuary. It offers residents and visitors alike a rare sense of calm, a place for reflection, and an essential green lung within the city. To allow its open spaces to be cluttered with makeshift installations and to leave behind debris that lingers for days is to erode the very qualities that define its significance. Such practices not only diminish its visual appeal but also place unnecessary strain on its fragile environment.

While it is commendable that members of the public have voiced their concerns, it is difficult to understand why authorities would permit the compromise of a protected and shared natural space intended for public repose. It is reasonable to assume that alternative venues exist within the city that are better suited to hosting such events, without encroaching upon areas meant for leisure or for the community's common refuge.

The concerns and constructive suggestions put forward by citizens deserve thoughtful consideration. A balanced and judicious approach is essential to ensure that such spaces are used and maintained in accordance with their intended purpose. Anything less risks deepening public frustration and reinforcing the perception that environmental stewardship remains a secondary concern.

Yours etc.,
K L Tariang,
Via email

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"Making a wrong decision is understandable. Refusing to search continually for learning is not."

— **Phil Crosby**

The Shillong Times

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Much Ado About a Spa

THOSE who have used a spa's facilities will testify that it is healing and restful for the tired body and mind. It's another form of bodily care for those who can afford it and it is part of a growing industry that provides jobs for many. When a spa is sexualized the problem lies not with the spa but reflects a deeper issue: the inability to perceive the sacred and healing without converting it into desire or pornification. Some critics argue that heavy exposure to pornographic scripts makes people interpret ordinary touch, care, leisure, or relationships through those scripts. This partly explains why places like spas are sometimes wrongly eroticized. Psychologists believe that those who see a spa as a sexualized space are also those most prone to watching pornography.

It's true that spa treatments involve physical touch like massaging pressure points and partial undressing is required for this. But for a state and people steeped in a pedantic censoriousness anything involving the body and touch can get sexualized, even when it's purely professional and therapeutic. To reduce a spa to a space for prostitution is to use hyper-ventilated moral lenses. There are hotels and salons in Shillong city that offer spa treatment to their customers but no one seems to have a problem with them. So why has the proposed spa become a target for some political parties? Also some vigilante groups seem overly concerned with sex work and tend to link everything to prostitution. A professionally run spa in the rest of the country and the world is linked to health, wellness, and relaxation – nothing more and nothing less. To stigmatize a spa is to deprive workers in the wellness industry who are doing a legitimate job since it is associated with wellness, massage, hydrotherapy, relaxation, beauty treatments, and healing.

In feminist or cultural critique, spaces that offer grooming, beauty, or body services are sometimes "objectified," but that does not turn a spa into a sex object. For those whose minds are limited by lack of exposure anything involving the body and touch can get sexualized, even when it's purely professional and therapeutic. Since spa workers are generally women, old stereotypes can sexualize care work itself—similar to how other feminized professions have sometimes been viewed through distorted lenses. Sometimes even non-sexual pleasure—such as rest, pampering, bodily ease—gets morally suspect or eroticized. There is such a thing as non-sexual intimacy but some people struggle to imagine touch, beauty, relaxation, affection, or sensuality outside sex. Such people have not experienced the difference between the sensual and the sexual. Sensual can mean soothing, embodied, aesthetic, pleasurable. Sexual is something else. Misogyny often defines how individuals perceive things. Misogyny insists on gate-keeping what women can and cannot do instead of allowing women the right to decide for themselves what profession to choose. In any case massage is an old Khasi livelihood where men are massaged by women masseur and no one saw anything wrong with that. Why does massage in a 5-star facility given the misogynistic twist?

A Generation Still Trying

By Dapbianglin Sohkhlet

In a world consumed by politics, wars, environmental crises, elections, and ideological divides, we often assume we are all standing on the same ground. News cycles move rapidly, debates grow louder, and attention is constantly pulled toward global conflicts and public power struggles. Yet, in the quiet corners of that very world, there is a child waiting to be seen, heard, and understood.

Each of them is fighting a battle that rarely makes headlines a struggle for acceptance, identity, and a sense of freedom within their own thoughts. They carry silent pressures: the need to prove their worth, to justify their existence, to become someone who makes their parents proud. "I will do this, I will become that," they tell themselves, holding onto dreams that are both their motivation and, at times, their burden.

Wars are not fought only between countries; some of the most relentless battles are fought within us. They take shape as quiet urges the desire to do something meaningful in life, to be respected and loved, to be seen as someone capable of leading or creating change. These are not small desires; they shape identities, choices, and the way young people measure their own value.

These are the dreams we carry as children bold, fearless, and certain. A child does not doubt their potential; they imagine freely, without limits. But as time passes, reality begins to weigh in. Expectations grow heavier, comparisons become unavoidable, and failures leave their mark. Slowly, many of those dreams are reshaped or even crushed by circumstances. The child who once believed without hesitation learns to question every step, every decision, every possibility.

The reason this matter is important now because the pressure on today's youth is no longer just about winning it is about existing. To exist in today's world often feels like being in constant competition. We all want to do better in life, but the competition today is far more intense than it once was. Opportunities are limited, expectations are high, and success is often defined in narrow, unforgiving ways.

We are told we live in a competitive world and we do. But what is rarely acknowledged is how deeply that competition affects the human mind. Every day begins to feel like a race, like a do-or-die situation, where falling behind feels like losing everything. A single failure can feel permanent, as if one mistake has the power to define an entire future.

There is a constant fear of not matching the standards set by society, of missing out, of not becoming "enough." Social comparisons whether through academics, careers, or even social media intensify this pressure. Success is displayed, curated, and celebrated, while struggle is often hidden. This creates an illusion that everyone else is moving forward effortlessly, while one is left behind.

But the truth is, we are all trying.

We are learning from our mistakes. We are growing, even when growth feels slow and uncertain. We are pushing ourselves, even when we feel exhausted. And yet, alongside all this effort, we carry a fear of failure so deep that, at times, it feels stronger than anything else. For many, failure is no longer seen as a step in the process, it is seen as the end of the road.

Ours is a generation full of contradictions. We are among the most fearless. We speak up, we question authority, we challenge norms, and we stand up for ourselves and for others. We are more aware, more expressive, and more connected than ever before.

Yet at the same time, we are filled with doubt, instability, and uncertainty. Not because we are weak, but because we are constantly trying to be better, to do better, to become better. The weight of that constant effort can be overwhelming, especially when it is not met with understanding or support.

Blessed are those whose parents understand and support them. Blessed are those who are not judged for their struggles. Blessed are those who have strong minds, supportive teachers, and environments that allow them to grow without fear. These individuals are given something invaluable not just guidance, but emotional safety.

But what about those who do not?

What about those who are simply surviving holding on to life for one fragile but powerful reason: the belief that "I will become someone; I will make it"? What about those who are labeled too sensitive, too weak, too emotional, too unable to face the world?

They are not weak they are carrying battles we choose not to see.

Many students today are navigating not just academic pressure, but emotional isolation. They may sit in classrooms, surrounded by peers, yet feel completely alone in their struggles. Their silence is often misunderstood as indifference, when in reality, it is fear; fear of being judged, dismissed, or misunderstood.

At the very least, let them breathe.

Give them a sense of safety. Offer encouragement, not judgment. Create spaces where they can express themselves without fear of being labelled or rejected. Because for some, strength is not built by circumstances; alone words matter. A single moment of belief, a few words of encouragement, can give them the courage to keep going, to keep trying, to keep fighting.

Listen to them, and you will begin to understand the depth of their potential. Behind their silence, there are ideas, ambitions, and strengths waiting to be recognized. Ignore them, and they will shrink into silence, growing afraid that they are wrong even before they speak, afraid that their voice does not matter.

Education systems, too, must reflect on their role in this reality. When success is measured only through marks and rankings, students are reduced to numbers. Their individuality, creativity, and emotional well-being are pushed aside in favor of performance. This not only limits their growth but also reinforces the belief that their worth is conditional.

Tell them it is okay to fail. Tell them it is okay to feel lost, to feel sad, to lose faith sometimes. These are not signs of weakness; they are part of being human. What matters is not perfection, but the strength to hope again, to rise again, even after falling.

Parents, teachers, and society must recognize that support does not always require grand gestures. Sometimes, it is found in simple acts listening without interrupting, encouraging without comparing, guiding without controlling. These small moments can shape a person's confidence and sense of self in profound ways.

Remind them that their greatest achievement is not just success, but survival that they are still here, still breathing, still trying. In a world that often feels overwhelming, continuing to try is an act of courage in itself.

Their strength lies in that hope they carry within themselves the quiet belief that things can get better, that they can become better, that their efforts will eventually lead somewhere meaningful.

"All I hear is, 'What if we don't make it? What if we don't get jobs? What if we fail and never stand out? What will we do then?'"

These are not just passing questions or casual worries. They reflect the depth of uncertainty many young people live with today. Often, these fears are spoken lightly, hidden behind laughter or dismissed as overthinking. But beneath that surface, they are real, persistent, and heavy.

We need to start valuing and acknowledging these thoughts instead of brushing them aside. When a student voices such fears even jokingly it is not attention-seeking; it is honesty. It is a glimpse into the pressure they are quietly carrying every day.

And in those moments, what they need most is not pressure, comparison, or correction but reassurance. Just assure them that it is okay. It is okay not to have everything figured out. It is okay to move at their own pace.

Because what matters is that they are trying giving what they can from their own strength, not being measured against someone else's definition of hard work or success. Hard work does not look the same for everyone. For some, what is 100 percent effort in their own capacity may appear as 50 percent from the outside, but within their ability, it is still everything they have.

And that effort deserves recognition.

Instead of saying, "you did not do enough," we must learn to acknowledge what they were able to give in that moment. Growth is not only about results; it is about effort, intention, and endurance. Every step forward, no matter how small it may seem, is still progress.

When we start appreciating effort instead of only outcomes, we allow young minds to feel seen rather than judged. We give them space to grow without the constant fear of not being enough.

Because sometimes, the most powerful support is simply telling them: it is okay you are trying, and that itself already matters.

In the end, we may all stand on the same ground, but our battles are not the same. Some are loud and visible; others are silent and deeply personal. Some are recognized and supported; others are overlooked and dismissed. And if we continue to ignore these struggles especially in students, we are not just overlooking individuals; we are failing an entire generation. A generation that is not asking for perfection, not demanding ease, but simply seeking understanding, support, and the space to grow.

They are still trying. They are still fighting. And above all, they are still waiting to be understood.

A State in Crisis, A Nation Too Quiet

By Nimrat Ranhotra

The violence in Manipur, which started as tensions between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, has gone far beyond that now. It's not just clashes anymore, it's more like a breakdown. Areas are divided, trust is gone, and even when things look "calm", it doesn't feel normal at all. It just feels paused, like anything could happen again.I often come across posts on social media that openly defy the government so much so that it feels like people are turning away from the very nation they look to for safety.

In relief camps across Manipur, children aren't thinking about school or exams right now, they are just trying to feel safe. Families who lived next to each other not long ago are now separated by fear, by rumours, by things they may never fully forget. For them, this isn't really about politics anymore, it's about getting through each day somehow.

And honestly, that's what makes everything else harder to ignore.Because while all of this is happening, there is also a kind of silence that feels just as heavy. Not the silence of peace but something else, something like delay, distance, and not enough being said or done when it actually matters the most.

The violence in Manipur, which started as tensions between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, has gone far beyond that now. It's not just clashes anymore, it's more like a breakdown. Areas are divided, trust is gone, and even when things look "calm", it doesn't feel normal at all. It just feels paused, like anything could happen again.

I often come across posts on social media that openly defy the government so much so that it feels like people are turning away from the very nation they look to for safety. Will this change, or will Manipur continue to suffer as if it exists outside the country, never truly within it?

The Government of Manipur hasn't really been able to fully control the situation, and that much is clear. But what's more difficult to understand is the response from the Government of India, with so much power at both levels, you would expect stronger and more visible leadership; something that actually reassures people. Instead, it has often felt slow. Controlled. Almost a bit distant.

There have been internet shutdowns, curfews, more security forces but those things only go so far. They might reduce violence for a span of time, but they don't really fix what is broken underneath. You can't rebuild trust through restrictions, and you can't bring communities back together just by controlling movement or information alone.

And for people in Manipur, the impact is very real. Lives have been disrupted in ways that won't just go back to normal quickly. Students have lost months of education, families have lost homes and stability, and any sense of certainty is missing. The longer this continues, the more permanent this damage becomes, in ways we probably don't even see yet.

For many in the Northeast, this kind of distance isn't new exactly. There is often this feeling that issues here don't get the same urgency unless they become impossible to ignore. Even now, news from Manipur comes and goes in the national spotlight, but for the people living through it, it doesn't really dampen.

Criticising the government doesn't mean opposing it, but it should mean expecting more. Especially in situations like this. The Government of India needs to do more than just manage the situation. It needs to actively try and resolve it, openly, consistently, and with all communities being part of the process.

Because right now, this isn't just a conflict. It's also a test of how seriously governance takes people when they are at their most vulnerable phase. In Manipur today, what's broken isn't just peace, it's trust. Something that is much harder to rebuild than control.

Letters to the Editor

Where Greed Replaces Serenity

Editor,

Shillong has long been celebrated for its quiet charm—its rolling greens, pine-scented air, and tranquil waters that once offered both residents and visitors a refuge from the rush of life. Among its most cherished landmarks, Ward's Lake stands as a reminder of a time when even colonial planners recognized the value of preserving nature as a space for reflection and relaxation. Today, however, that legacy is under threat.

As a regular morning jogger, I find Nan Palok a place where tension and anxiety ease due to its natural beauty, accompanied by the melodious chirping of birds and the occasional sight of squirrels crossing the path.

What was once a picturesque haven is increasingly being overshadowed by unchecked commercial interests. The serenity of Ward's Lake, the gentle breeze, the lush green surroundings, and the sense of calm are slowly being replaced by developments that prioritize profit over preservation. This is not merely a matter of aesthetics; it is a question of ecological balance, cultural identity, and civic responsibility.

In this context, the demand raised by Bah Toki Blah, a respected voice in the community, to restore and protect the remaining green spaces around Ward's Lake is both timely and justified. His call is not radical, it is reasonable, thoughtful, and rooted in genuine concern for the city's future. It is a demand that deserves widespread public support. Left unchecked, it risks becoming yet another environmental casualty like Wah Umkhrah. The consequences are clear: loss of biodiversity, declining air quality, and the steady disappearance of spaces that define Shillong's character. More critically, future generations stand to inherit a city stripped of its natural soul.

Encouragingly, we recently witnessed the Green Tech Foundation take a firm stand in safeguarding natural heritage by helping scrap the proposed long-term sell-out of Lumpongdeng at Umiam Lake. Their intervention serves as a powerful example of how collective action can protect what is irreplaceable. It is now imperative that similar attention be directed toward Nan Palok.

Nan Palok, once a proud green patch within Shillong, has undergone a troubling transformation. Where greenery once thrived, makeshift structures with tarpaulin roofs and plywood floors now stand. Its natural beauty has been eroded, reduced to a state disturbingly close to that of the infamous Myrten dumping ground, with its environment degraded and littered. This is not development, it is disguised exploitation. The ecological consequences are evident. The degradation of such spaces disrupts local biodiversity, affects air quality, and diminishes the overall environmental health of the city.

It is therefore crucial that the government re-evaluates its approach. Preservation must take precedence over commercialization. Spaces like Ward's Lake or Nan Palok as we fondly called it, should be entrusted back to the Forest Department, whose mandate aligns with conservation, rather than to tourism-driven bodies whose priorities often lean toward revenue generation.

Shillong stands at the crossroads. The choices made today will determine whether it remains a city of natural beauty or becomes yet another cautionary tale of ecological neglect. Restoring Ward's Lake and reclaiming Nan Palok are not just environmental imperatives, they are moral ones. Greed should not replace serenity.

Yours etc,
HT Wells
Shillong

Support UPSC Aspirants from the Start

Editor,

The recent initiative by the Government of Meghalaya under the "CM INSPIRE" scheme to financially support candidates preparing for the Union Public Service Commission examination is a commendable step. Providing Rs 50,000 for clearing the Preliminary stage and Rs 1,00,000 for the Mains will certainly motivate aspirants. However, it raises an important concern—why is assistance provided only after crossing the first hurdle?

UPSC preparation is a long and demanding journey that requires access to quality resources, proper guidance, and a conducive study environment from the very beginning. If the government truly aims to increase representation from Meghalaya in civil services, support should start at the foundational stage. Free or subsidized coaching, mentorship programmes, and access to curated study materials can greatly benefit aspirants, especially those from economically weaker backgrounds.

In addition, all district libraries in the state should be strengthened and equipped with good and updated UPSC-related books, standard reference materials, newspapers, and digital resources. Ensuring that every district library provides quality learning materials will create equal opportunities for aspirants across urban and rural areas. Libraries play a crucial role as knowledge hubs by offering a disciplined study space and promoting self-learning.

A more inclusive approach that supports aspirants from the beginning, along with well-equipped libraries in every district, will go a long way in enabling the youth of Meghalaya to succeed in one of the toughest examinations in the country.

Yours etc.,
Tiplut Wann
Via email

Umroi Airport Entry Fee: Passengers Fleeced

Editor,

I recently travelled through the Shillong Airport at Umroi and noticed that the vehicle that had gone to drop me was charged Rs 60 for entry. My information regarding the practice that is followed in the other airports of the country is that a slip with a time stamp is issued during entry and when the exit is within a specified time, normally eight to ten minutes of entry, no fee is charged.

Is this practice being flouted by charging vehicles on entry irrespective of time spent at the Shillong airport in Umroi? Will the authorities please clarify?

Yours etc.,
Sanjeeb Kakoty
Via email

Reclaiming Our Air: Urgent Need to Curb Public Smoking in Shillong

Editor,

I am writing to draw urgent attention to a pervasive Public Health crisis currently plaguing our "Scotland of the East"—the unchecked prevalence of smoking in public spaces. This issue is particularly egregious in high-traffic hubs like Laitumkrah, Kyndailad, Motphran, Malki Point which serves as a daily corridor for thousands of students, families, and pedestrians.

While the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) 2003 has technically prohibited smoking in public places since 2nd October 2008, the ground reality in Shillong suggests otherwise. The sight of individuals lighting up on narrow footpaths and near educational institutions, even Religious institutions has become a common, albeit illegal, occurrence. This blatant disregard for the law does more than just offend; it subjects innocent bystanders—specifically children and the elderly—to the involuntary and documented hazards of secondhand smoke.

The medical consensus is non-negotiable: passive smoking is a direct catalyst for chronic respiratory issues, acute asthma attacks, and long-term risks of lung cancer. For a city that prides itself on its pristine environment and vibrant community spirit, it is disheartening to see public health treated as a secondary concern.

To restore the sanctity of our public air, I urge the District Administration and local authorities to:

Enforce Strict Vigilance: Increase patrols in high-density areas like Laitumkrah and Kyndialad, ensuring that penalties for violators are swift and consistent.

Strengthen Educational Outreach: Launch aggressive awareness campaigns within schools and colleges to de-glamorize tobacco use among the youth. Just declaring Tobacco Free Zone is not at all effective.

Establish Clear Boundaries: Clearly demarcate "No Smoking" zones with visible signage and provide a dedicated digital platform (helpline or app) for citizens to report violations in real-time.

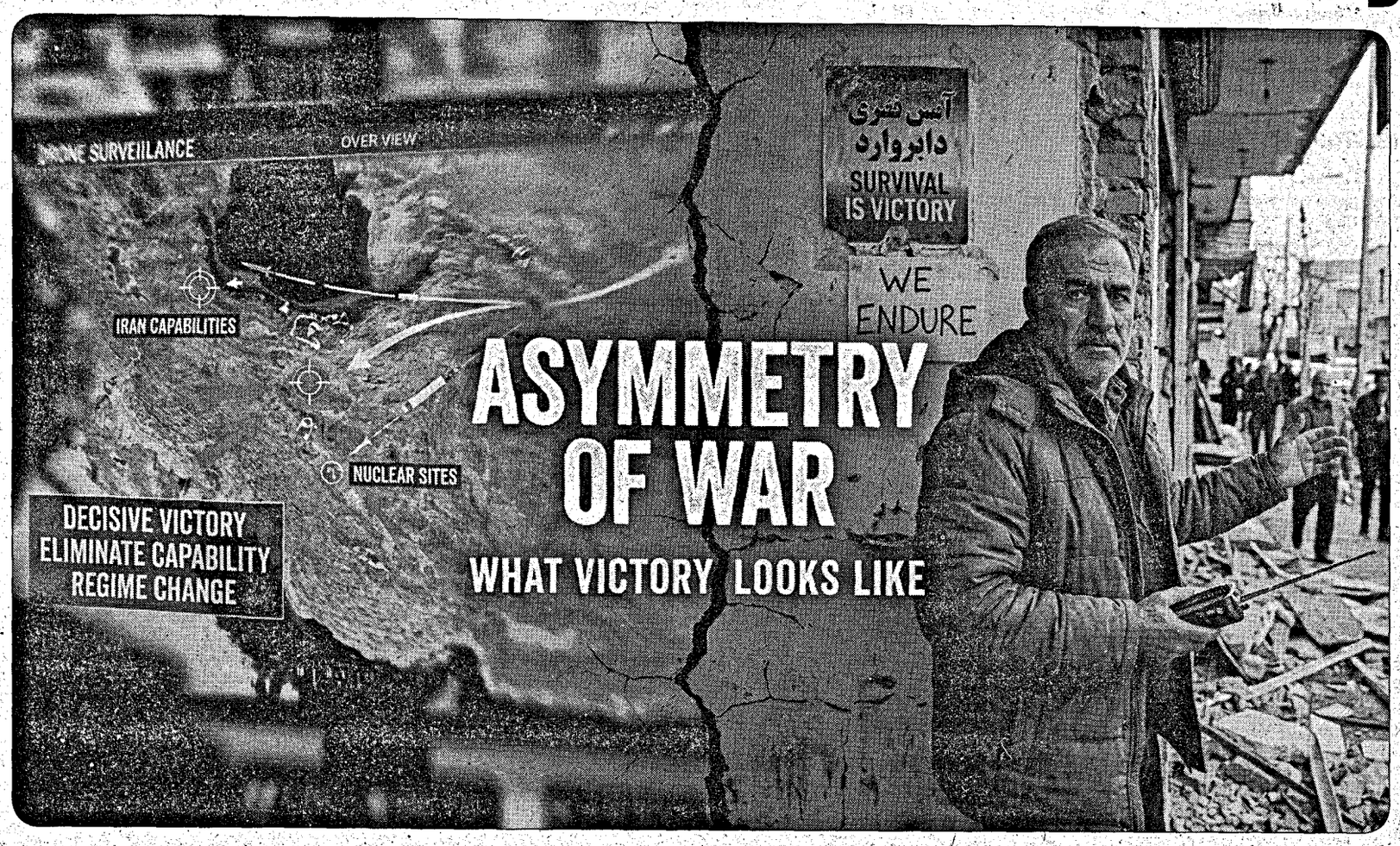
Support Cessation: Partner with local healthcare NGOs to provide accessible resources for those struggling with nicotine addiction.

The responsibility does not rest solely with the police; as citizens, we must foster a culture that prioritizes collective well-being over individual convenience. It is time we reclaim our right to breathe clean air and ensure that Shillong remains a healthy, liveable city for generations to come.

Yours etc.,
Iaidbha Paslein
Shillong

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

Middle East conflict looks like a war nobody can win



Let's begin with a simple question that rarely gets a straight answer: what would victory over Iran actually look like? In Washington and Jerusalem, the answers tend to sound definitive: eliminate Iran's nuclear capability, break its regional power, perhaps even force political change at the top.

It's the language of decisive war, the kind with a clear endpoint.

But shift the perspective to Tehran, and the definition changes completely. Victory, for Iran, is survival.

That asymmetry shapes the entire conflict. In wars like this, the side that needs less to claim success often has the advantage — and, right now, Iran needs far less.

There is no denying the military imbalance. The US and Israel can strike with extraordinary precision and reach. They have demonstrated that repeatedly — targeting infrastructure, leadership and strategic assets.

But tactical success has yet to translate into political outcome. Iran's state hasn't fractured. Its governing system remains intact, and its networks — military, regional, ideological — continue to function.

Even its most sensitive capabilities, including nuclear expertise, remain resilient.

The deeper miscalculation lies in assuming Tehran is playing the same game as Washington. It isn't. Iran is not trying to defeat the US or Israel outright.

It is trying to outlast them, complicate their objectives and raise the cost of progress until it becomes unsustainable.

This logic is visible in how the conflict has unfolded. The battlefield extends beyond direct confrontation into shipping lanes, energy markets and regional alliances. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz are not incidental — they are pressure points with global consequences.

Iran's strategy is not about dominance but entanglement. It doesn't need battlefield superiority if it can draw its adversaries into a conflict that is too costly to resolve and too complex to conclude.

When wars stall, the instinct is to escalate: more bombing, strikes on energy infrastructure, even, in extremis, "boots on the ground". The assumption is that more force will finally produce a different outcome.

But Iran is not a passive target. It has already shown a willingness to retaliate across the region, including against Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, as well as targets in Jordan and Iraq.

Strikes on Iran's energy systems would not stay contained — they would invite retaliation against these same states, widening the conflict.

There is another constraint: American is estimated to have already used up around 45 per cent to 50 per cent of key missile stockpiles, including roughly 30 per cent of its Tomahawk missile inventory.

So the stark reality is that escalation is no longer just about willingness, but capacity - and in any wider war, the question may not be how far the US can go, but how much it has left.

The consequences would also extend beyond the battlefield. Iran's response would be sustained attacks on neighbouring countries, on their power, fuel, and water systems, rendering parts of the region increasingly unlivable as temperatures soar over summer.

Huge numbers of people would be forced to leave, risking another large-scale displacement crisis.

Even then, the core reality remains unchanged. Iran is built for endurance — any ground campaign would likely become prolonged and attritional. More importantly, escalation misses the point — the problem is not a lack of force, but the absence of a political objective that force can realistically achieve.

Compounding the problem is a quieter but equally significant reality; the US and Israel do not appear to be fully aligned in their end goals. Israel's posture suggests a pursuit of maximal outcomes — deep, possibly irreversible weakening of Iran's system, if not outright regime collapse.

The US, by contrast, appears to oscillate between coercion, containment and negotiation.

These are not just differences in emphasis — they are differences in strategy. Wars fought without a shared definition of victory rarely produce victory at all. What they produce instead is sustained military activity without strategic convergence — constant movement, but little progress toward resolution.

No conclusion in sight

At some point, it becomes necessary to describe things as they are. This is no longer a war moving toward a decisive conclusion. It is a conflict settling into a pattern — strikes followed by pauses, ceasefires that hold just long enough to prevent collapse, and negotiations that advance just enough to avoid failure.

And those ceasefires tell their own story. Their repeated extension reflects not progress, but constraint. Washington, under Donald Trump, has strong incentives to keep talks alive, avoid deeper escalation, and end the war sooner rather than later.

The alternatives — regional war or global economic shock — are far harder to manage. That dynamic gives Tehran leverage. It does not need to concede quickly when delay itself strengthens its position.

Time, in this sense, is not neutral. The longer the conflict drags on, the more it intersects with the most sensitive pressure points of the global economy. Energy markets are stressed, with supply routes under strain and reserves tightening.

Industries that depend on stable fuel flows — aviation, shipping, manufacturing — are increasingly exposed.

What began as a regional conflict has morphed into systemic risk. Even limited disruption can ripple outward, affecting prices, supply chains and political stability. The longer the stalemate persists, the greater the cumulative strain and the closer it edges toward a broader economic shock.

Who really holds the advantage?

In purely military terms, the answer is obvious: the US and Israel retain overwhelming superiority. But wars are not decided by capability alone. They are decided by how goals, costs, and time interact.

In that equation, Iran's position is stronger than it appears. It has set a lower threshold for success, demonstrated a higher tolerance for prolonged pressure, and shown an ability to impose costs beyond the battlefield.

Most importantly, it does not need to win. It only needs to prevent its adversaries from achieving their aims. So far, it has done exactly that.

Which brings us back to the original question: can the US and Israel win this war? If winning means forcing Iran into submission or fundamentally reshaping its strategic posture, the answer is increasingly difficult to avoid — they cannot.

What they can do is continue. Manage the conflict, contain its spread and shape its margins. But that is not victory. It is endurance.

The real danger is not defeat, but the persistence of a belief that just a little more pressure, a little more escalation, or a little more time will produce a different result. If that belief is wrong, then this is not a war on the verge of being won. It is a war that cannot be won at all. A forever war. *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Bamo Nouri and Inderjeet Parmar, University of London

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — **Sunday, APRIL 26 2026**

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon Square Venus on your solar return chart will give mixed results for the whole year. You will not get the benefit of your efforts and hard work. The health of your mother or mother-in-law might be a cause of worry. Drive vehicles carefully. Abide by traffic rules. You will be troubled by some minor illness. There will be financial concerns and a tight situation. You will think of a job change. While talking on the phone use chosen words. Your family members will keep supporting you. Friends will remain on your side. Husband and wife will share amazing bonding. Marriage of a family member will get fixed. This year you will do some work that will bring you criticism, but there is no need to get anxious. You will emerge winner in the end.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) It is time to make the right moves. You will be making progress in your job. Your business will also prosper and flourish. There will be an increase in your work efficiency and as a result your income will also rise. You will feel a lot more secure. You will become very popular. Some people may become jealous of your success. You will get caught in a controversy and may find it hard to come out of it, but timely help of an influential person will help you. Your relations with your spouse/partner will be cordial. Family problems will get solved. You will be anxious to establish your dominance over others. However, your family members will give a lot of respect. You need to keep your expenses under control. You will get a hold of your financial condition. You will remain busy establishing contacts and travelling.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Some positive incidents will occur which will give solace to your mind. You will have gains from all directions. You will pay attention to work plans and achieve success at work. You will also complete your work as a mission. You will be very responsible and will discharge duties properly. There will be wonderful bonding between brothers and sisters. The time is good. Your mate will support you. You will become the favorite of your family. You will get good opportunities in job/business. It is also time to make profits. You will be busy with romance and love affairs. Those who are single will get suitable marriage proposals. Overall, you will be well and enjoy peaceful time. You will have mental peace. You will also undertake some short trips for relaxation. And could be attracted to someone's spiritualism. You will be receptive towards advice.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) Your professional relations will strengthen. You will be making lot of new contacts which will prove to be beneficial in the long run. The situation in business will be normal. Your financial position is going to be strong. You will remain busy in your work. You will get a promotion suddenly. A meeting with an old lover will excite your heart and you will be lost in memories. Property related disputes will get solved. You will not run away from responsibilities and will take everyone along with you. You will become aggressive and make progress in studies and will get good results. You will also undertake short business trips and will fix long-term goals. You will have to work hard to get happiness in life.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) It is full of fun and frolic time. You will be physically active. Halted works will gather momentum. You will get opportunity to race ahead in life. It will be a good idea to spend some time in the lap of nature with your family and have peace and bliss. You will do each work very carefully. Your enemies won't be able to harm you. These are victory granting days for you. Your desired work will be done. You will keep personal matters secret. You will get some good news from somewhere and take an important decision regarding your career. Income is good.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) There will be no obstacles in your progress. Your relatives will help you in your time of need. You will find close support coming from family too. You will be eager to finish your work. You will also plan to go on a business trip abroad. Your family members will praise you for the skies. And your luck will be with you. The time is advantageous. All the situations will be under your control. Old bitterness will get finished. You will also have new hope in life. You will keep racing ahead in your business/work. Women will be able to establish a balance between work and recreation. Health will be excellent. You will be full of self-confidence. You will meet your dear ones. This is the right time to bring plans into action.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) You will prosper in life. And you will not compromise with anything and will settle for only the best. You will spend some quality time with your family members. And you can also plan to go to a retreat for a short duration. You will do things of your choice and eat food you like. The housewives will be able to show their capabilities. Your investments will bring good returns. All your half-finished work will be completed. The young people will prepare themselves to achieve high. Your disputes with neighbors will get resolved. You might buy new clothes and ornaments. You will do right things and achieve your objectives. There will be lot of peace at home.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) You will think about yourself and complete all your tasks. You will also pursue your hobbies. You will enjoy gardening, cooking, walking around eating, photography etc. Your family members will give you company and make you feel a lot better. You will also have gains in business. The economic side will be strong. Most of the time will be spent on social media. You will engage in government related activities. Your mind will move about your business, and you will pay more attention to it. You will attend important meetings. You will also introspect deeply. You will also think about family and financial matters. Your thinking will be such that you take such steps, so life can be enjoyed with pleasure. This is a lot more favorable phase.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) You will pay attention to your house, property, family and your partnerships. You will have monetary gains. A major expansion in business is round the corner. You will also get a good job offer. You will be mentally agile and fit. There will be a slight inclination towards spirituality. You will have some new interests and enjoy yourself. Your personal life will get cool because of love and romance. You will make plans to buy a new vehicle. The small worries regarding home will dispel. You should curtail your expenses. Everything that shines is not gold is the saying that should be kept in mind while buying things. Spend only as much as you have in your pocket. After lot of struggles and efforts you will finally succeed in getting a loan.

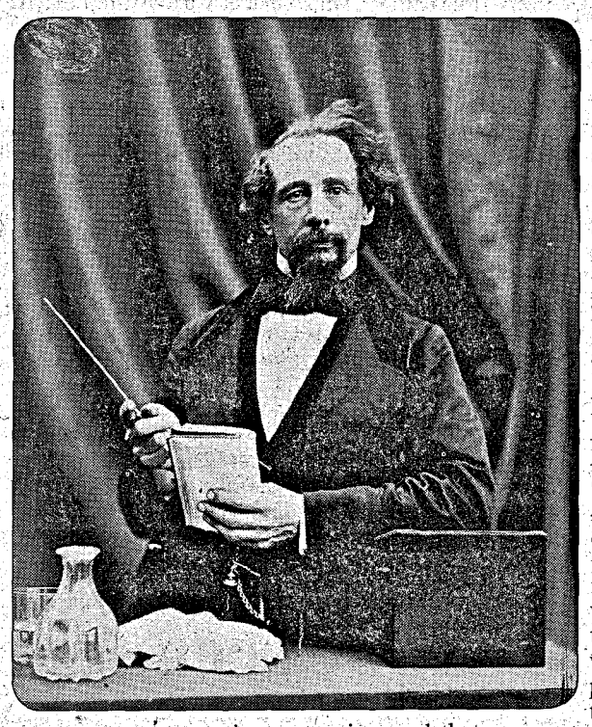
Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) Your work will get done with ease. So, you need to make best use of this opportunity. You will get success in legal matters. There are strong chances of division of property. You will also get success in love and romance. Love mates will enjoy a good time. Your income will also rise. There will be various activities in different directions. Marriage functions will take place. Commercial situation will improve. Your business partner might betray you. You need to remain alert. There is possibility of getting separated from your dear one, for a little while. You will also have differences of opinion with your life partner. You will face difficulties. You will have to remain cool and peaceful under all circumstances.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) If you have political approach, then important leaders will come in contact with you and your respect will increase. You will get financial benefits. You will feel relaxed. You will do all your work smoothly. At this time, you will not do anything special but experience mental peace. You will forget all the problems and get involved in the work. You will remember your loved ones in difficult times and miss them too. You may get trapped in any litigation. You can develop an interest in spiritualism. You will be a position to compromise with the circumstances. You can feel refreshed yourself.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) You will get good opportunities for professional growth. Your boss and seniors will be happy with you. You will also get new orders/contracts. You need to remain alert as you could be a victim of some evil conspiracy. Your disputes with family members related to property will get more complex. But you will find a way out. You will also bring about a massive change in your organization and staff. You will focus on cost cutting. You will enjoy a good time with your partner. There will be joyous and blissful moments. The progeny related worry may get considerably neutralized. You will get a stable career as your terms with your boss and seniors will improve. You will devote time to research and higher studies. And you may read different subjects

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) Students will do well in exams/interviews and will be willing to learn new techniques. You will have good time amongst your close ones. You will meet top officials. You will also buy something new for the house. You will be quite spiritual and ethical during this phase. Your reputation, prestige and glory will take an upward plunge. You will not compromise with your ideals and principles come what may. You will recover your long due money held by a party. Your enemies won't be able to scratch you, no matter how hard they try to damage your interest. Your creative talent will be recognized by all. Be vigilant about the evil moves of your enemies, rivals and adversaries. You will travel a lot. You will consolidate your energy and resources.

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* early exploration of 'romance fraud'



Shrinking into her yellowing wedding gown with the decay of her wedding breakfast around her, Miss Havisham, from Charles Dickens's 1861 novel, *Great Expectations*, is one of the best-known characters in English literature.

Jilted on her wedding day by her unscrupulous fiance, Havisham can be understood by modern readers as a victim of "romance fraud", where a fraudster manipulates someone under the guise of courtship for their own financial gain.

Although romance fraud is a 21st-century term, through the character of Havisham, Dickens clearly demonstrated its often-devastating effects.

In her youth, Havisham was manipulated by her fiance, the conman Compeyson and her half-brother Arthur, in a plan to rob her of her fortune.

Both the romance itself and the wedding are a ploy, and she is jilted at the altar, losing not only her wealth (which she had signed away prior to her nuptials) but also any hope of future romantic prospects due to the scandal that followed.

Alone, rich and looking for a companion, Havisham was particularly vulnerable to a criminal wanting to take advantage. Though she lost her fortune, Dickens makes it clear that the romantic betrayal is what had the biggest impact on her psychology.

The romantic duplicity shapes her relationships with both her adopted daughter, Estella, and Pip, the novel's protagonist, making her cold and hostile toward them.

The psychological impact of romance fraud

Since being jilted, Havisham has become a recluse, "stuck" within the moment of her abandonment. She remains in the house with the clocks all stopped, perpetually wearing her wedding gown. Her decayed hopes of romance are reflected in the decayed objects which surround her. As Pip muses: Avoiding her eyes, I took note of the surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine, and that a clock in the room had stopped at twenty minutes to nine. "Look at me," said Miss Havisham. "You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?" The clocks are all stopped at the time the promise of her future life ended — the moment that she received the letter from Compeyson, which made the crime apparent.

Herbert (a relative of Miss Havisham and friend of Pip) recounts the story to Pip: A certain man, who made love to Miss Havisham; Well! This man pursued Miss Havisham closely and professed to be devoted to her.

I believe she had not shown much susceptibility up to that time, but all the susceptibility she possessed certainly came out then, and she passionately loved him.

This description mirrors many modern elements of romance fraud. Compeyson "made love" to her, and she became "susceptible". Like contemporary romance fraudsters, Compeyson inserted himself into Havisham's life and manipulated and controlled her to believe that he loved her.

Romance fraud in Dickensian Britain

There was a lack of progression in fraudulent law during Dickens' time. It wasn't until the Fraud Act of 2006 that real change came about, making fraud by misrepresentation a criminal offence in the UK. Today, romance fraud is considered a "serious crime".

Long before this most personal form of fraud became illegal, Dickens saw its prevalence and drew attention to it. Others followed in his path, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon in *Lady Audrey's Secret* (1862), Arthur Conan Doyle in *A Case of Identity* (1891) and Agatha Christie in *Death on the Nile* (1937).

Havisham can be viewed in two ways, either as a victim or a fool. It is hard to determine how Dickens wanted her to be interpreted. Was she the stereotypical hysterical Victorian woman, as seen in other novels such as *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins (1860) or the character of Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847)? I don't think so. As he was with so many other social issues, I believe that Dickens was ahead of his time and was actively trying to raise the profile of the crime of romance fraud and the impact it has on his victims.

Beyond the canon

As part of the Rethinking the Classics series, we're asking our experts to recommend a book or artwork that tackles similar themes to the canonical work in question, but isn't (yet) considered a classic itself.

Here is Emma Linford's suggestion: If you're gripped by Dickens's depiction of fraudsters and criminals, you may also enjoy Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture by Juliet John (2003). In it, John explores the complex villains and anti-heroes of Dickens' novels. She looks at what inspired his writing, as well as the dramaturgical characteristics of his work. *(The Conversation)*

Authored by Emma Linford, University of Hull

"Seize the day, and put the least possible trust in tomorrow."

—Horace

The Shillong Times

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AAP's travails

THE Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is faced with a serious predicament after its what could be called a poaching game by the BJP in the national capital. Now the game has extended to Punjab, another province where the regional party is well-entrenched. With a set of AAP parliamentarians led by Raghav Chadha quitting the parent party and heading for the BJP route, regional chieftain Arvind Kejriwal must be crest-fallen and wondering how to stem a tide of exits from the party. Chances are that Chadha and his team, with their strong bases in Punjab could take the offensive to a new level – breaking the AAP in Punjab, where it runs the state with Bhagwant Mann as chief minister, carrying a hefty support of 92 of the 117 legislators. The defectors claimed they have the backing of some 60 AAP legislators in Punjab.

Punjab is heading for assembly polls in February next after the successful and likely completion of a five-year term by Mann. Being the ruling party, the AAP might have lost some of its eminent support there in recent years by its acts of omissions or commissions. The BJP, it appears, is bent on grabbing power even as it has only two MLAs there, against three by the former ruling party the Shiromani Akali Dal and 18 by principal opposition the Congress. The BJP is capable of pulling off a coup through the strength of its money power. It has wrested power from AAP in the national capital in last year's elections and simultaneously targeted Kejriwal and his associates in alleged corruption cases like the Delhi liquor scam. Kejriwal has managed to extricate himself after his arrest and imprisonment, but he has a more difficult road ahead. If, eventually, the AAP loses Punjab too through defections, he would lose the resources to effectively fight the coming assembly polls there. Kejriwal's attempts to establish a base in Gujarat and Goa have not found favour with people there.

Once a hero of the anti-corruption movement, Kejriwal has managed to keep up his reputation as a champion of the poor. His initiation to public service was through the humanitarian efforts he as a youth undertook in Delhi's slums. It eventually won him a Magsaysay award and good cash to launch his political establishment after leading the anti-corruption movement under the tutelage of veteran Gandhian Anna Hazare. But electoral politics required tonnes of funds. That he was accused of corruption was no small matter. It hurt his image to an extent though many believe he's sincere about his causes. He's a class apart in politics. The good part of Kejriwal as the head of government was that he stood by the ordinary masses – aam aadmi – unlike the present crop of politicians who speak up for the poor and pander to the whims of the elite. The BJP, with its RSS bulwark and religion-based ideology, exceeds its brief unchallenged. The anti-defection law, which helped check defections, might or might not come to the help of AAP and Kejriwal in the present context.

The Pnar Understanding of Cosmology

By H.H. Mohrmen

On its journey to discover the universe, when the Voyager reached a point of no return Carl Sagan asked the controller to turn the Voyager's camera toward Earth and take one last photograph of our home. And that was the beginning of the story of "The Pale Blue Dot" a photograph of Earth taken by NASA's Voyager 1 on February 14, 1990, at a distance of 3.7 billion miles (6 billion kilometers) from the Sun. Caught in the center of scattered light rays, Earth appears as a tiny point of light, a crescent only 0.12 pixel in size.

Carl Sagan remarked, "Look again at that dot." That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives—thousands of confident religions, ideologies—every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant—every mother and father—every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is but a tiny dot within the immense expanse of the cosmos. Consider the countless rivers of bloodshed by generals and emperors, all in pursuit of glory and victory, so they might briefly rule over a mere fragment of a speck. Our pride, our exaggerated sense of importance, and the illusion that we occupy a special place in the universe are all brought into question by this faint point of light. Few things reveal the absurdity of human arrogance more clearly than this distant image of our small and fragile world. (Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot, 1994)

My interest in cosmology started in 1989 when in Manchester I bought my first hardbound book, *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking, and since then there was no looking back. From the Hubble Telescope to the James Webb Space Telescope, human understanding of the Universe continues to change and amaze those who follow developments in this vast area of study. This leads us to the question: What is our ancestors' understanding of the universe?

Pnar's Understanding of the Cosmos

The Pnar of Raid Jwai also have a distinct understanding of the Earth, the sky, and what lies beyond. While they may not have a detailed understanding of astronomy comparable to Hindu or Western traditions, they do possess a distinct worldview about the Earth, the heavens, and the unseen realm beyond.

In ancient times, they may not have known about other planets or the various constellations, but they had stories connected to the celestial bodies familiar to them: ka Sngi (the Sun), u Bnai (the Moon), ki Khlur (the stars), u Pyrthat (thunder), and ka Leilieh (lightning). In these narratives, celestial bodies are often portrayed as living beings, and animals are interwoven with the cosmos as part of a single interconnected ecosystem (Mohrmen, H.H. The Shillong Times, Dec. 16, 2024).

The people's understanding of the Universe starts from the genesis of the tribe which begins with the sixteen and the nine remaining above and the seven deciding to descend below. In the Hynñiew Trep belief system the Sun is always depicted as a beautiful woman and one example is the story of the Peacock and the Sun. There is the story of ka Krem lamet krem latang, when human had to convince the Rooster to woo back the Sun from her hideout in the cave. Then there is the story about Thunder and a Civet which are etiological stories that also show the ancestors' understanding of the universe.

Their astronomical knowledge may have been limited, but they did recognize certain celestial bodies beyond the sun and moon. For instance, there are references to the visible constellation u Rah Bhar; u Khloor Janmiet (the evening star), and u Khloor Step (the morning star). These celestial bodies find mention in their day-to-day conversations and are considered part of their ecosystem.

The Pnar's traditional calendar

They closely observed the movements of the moon, noting that it takes 14 days to reach its full phase, hence the term u Bnai Khatsoo Synïaw (the 14-night moon) when it is full moon. All major activities, including farming, religious rites, rites of passage, and festivals, were organized according to the lunar calendar (Mohrmen, H.H. TST, Dec. 16, 2024). In the common vocabulary people mention about u bnai bneiñ which means they follow lunar colander. From their simple understanding that it takes 14 days for the moon to reach its full phase and another 14 days to cycle back to the beginning once again, it is safe to assume that the Pnar calendar has 28 days.

Although there is a Pnar calendar which has twelve months, this most probably developed at a later stage. It is certain that people's activities were influenced by the seasons and also by rice cultivation, which is the major crop of the area. Unlike their neighbours, the Khasi, who have names for all four seasons—ka Tlang, ka Pyrem, ka Liyur, and ka Synrai—the Pnar have only two seasons in their vocabulary: i Tlang and i Liyur. Within these two seasons, people are influenced by the farming activities connected with the major crop of the area. In the plateau, where the main crop is rice, there is ka por symbe (sowing season), ka por wer (weeding season), and ka por ah (harvest season). Not long ago, if we asked an elderly person his or her age, the reply used to be that he or she was born during the sowing, weeding, or harvest time of a particular year.

The Pnar's Three-Layered Universe

The Pnar understanding of the Universe is distinct and, in some ways, remarkably open and sophisticated. According to D. Lamar, Pnar cosmology divides the Universe into three layers: i Pyrthai, which is the physical world where all living beings dwell; i Bneñ, heaven or the sky, the visible realm above the Earth; and i Soorkep, the invisible realm considered the abode of U Trekirot or the Almighty (Lamar, D. 2015). While i Bneñ, is visible to the eye, i Soorkep is not, because it is the spiritual realm and remains unseen. It is believed that i Soorkep is also the dwelling place of ki Sangia ki Saret, the spirits of the dead ancestors who reside with U Tre Kirot.

Paradise without Hell

A distinct difference between the Pnar of the Hynñiew Trep belief system and the Abrahamic religions lies in the absence of a clearly defined concept of hell. While phrases such as "ka Nurok ka ksew" or "ki khyndai pateng ñamra" exist amongst the Khasis, they appear to be influenced by external cultures. Such ideas find no mention in the Pnar tradition. The term Nurok may even derive from Narak, indicating Sanskrit influence. Notably, the War and Pnar people have no equivalent terms for hell in their languages, which further supports the view that such ideas are non-native (Mohrmen, H.H. The Shillong Times, Oct. 5, 2020).

In the tradition of the Pnar of Raid Jwai, i Soorkep, is not only the dwelling place of U Tre Kirod, along with all the deities, as well as the final abode of ki Sangia ki Saret, but of the other divinities too. I Soorkep is also regarded as the universe where all ki wakhroo watri, or the divinities, such as ka 'Ngi Kyllung, the Sun, and u 'Nai Kyllung, the Moon, dwell together with U Tre Kirod, the other deities, and the celestial bodies. Clearly, i Soorkep represent the vast universe where U Tre Kirod and all His subordinate deities reside according to the Pnar belief system.

There is no concept of salvation in the Pnar belief system as understood in the Abrahamic religions. After a person dies, there is no distinction between the saved and the damned as all souls return to the divine realm. If any notion of salvation exists, it is a form of universal salvation, wherein all souls ultimately find rest at i Soorkep. The belief that, in the end, all souls dwells with U Tre Kirod and ki blai ki syiem at Soorkep, together with the absence of any notion of a place where condemned souls are punished, suggests a worldview that ultimately all souls will be in union with God. There is also no concept of Eschatology as the relationship between the ancestor and those alive continues.

In the three-layered universe, i Soorkep, is not only an invisible realm but also an eternal sphere. Perhaps, the belief that the cosmos has three layers, with the highest being the eternal realm of the spirit, aligns with the modern understanding of a possibly infinite and ever-expanding universe. The Pnar's understanding of universe is therefore simple, profound and in line with the contemporary scientific understanding of the universe.

Beyond Outrage: Why Meghalaya Must Confront Its Own Contradictions

By Satyaprakash Mehta

The public backlash against local RTI activist Disparsing Rani has been swift and unforgiving. A few words—interpreted as suggesting that sex work plays a role in preserving social stability—have ignited criticism across platforms. For many, the reaction is understandable. The idea that any group of people exists to "serve" a social function, particularly one tied to marriage or morality, feels reductive and uncomfortable. That discomfort is real, and it deserves acknowledgment.

Yet, stopping the conversation there risks missing something deeper. Public outrage often narrows its focus, isolating a single sentence and building a judgment around it while ignoring the broader context. What if the issue at hand is not merely what was said, but what it reveals? What if, however imperfectly expressed, the remarks were pointing towards an uncomfortable truth that society has long avoided confronting—its own contradictions?

In Meghalaya, as in many parts of the world, there exists a pattern of selective morality. Sex work is publicly condemned, often framed as immoral or unacceptable. Yet its persistence is not accidental. Demand exists, and it does not come solely from the margins. It often emerges from within the very fabric of what society considers respectable. Similarly, conversations around relationships are marked by inconsistency. Infidelity is condemned but widely practiced. Alternative structures such as polygamy are debated, tolerated, or criticized depending on context. Moral standards shift depending on gender, class, and convenience. What is judged harshly in one instance is quietly ignored in another.

It is within this landscape of contradiction that the controversy must be understood. The reaction, strong as it is, may reflect not just disagreement but discomfort—discomfort with having these inconsistencies brought into the open. When society is forced to confront what it would rather keep unspoken, the instinct is often to reject the messenger rather than engage with the message.

Long before this controversy, the Rot Association of Meghalaya had already started doing the difficult work of addressing these realities. Their efforts represent more than advocacy; they reflect a rare clarity in understanding how to navigate one of society's most sensitive issues. In a space often dominated by moral judgment, RAM chose a different path. It shifted the conversation from morality to human rights, from condemnation to dignity, from silence to visibility.

There is a quiet brilliance in this approach. RAM recognized that moral debates often lead to polarization, with little room for resolution. Instead of attempting to force consensus on whether sex work is right or wrong, it focused on outcomes that are harder to dispute—safety, healthcare, legal protection, and the prevention of exploitation. By doing so, it reframed the issue entirely. The question was no longer whether society approves of sex work, but how it treats those who exist within it.

This shift is not only strategic; it is transformative. It compels society to confront reality rather than hide behind abstraction. It acknowledges complexity without simplifying it into moral binaries. It recognizes that individuals within this system are neither merely victims nor mere instruments, but human beings navigating difficult circumstances with agency and vulnerability.

The significance of RAM's work extends beyond local recognition. The United Nations Human Rights Office has acknowledged the courage required to raise such stigmatized issues publicly, placing their efforts within a broader global human rights framework. Their inclusion as a permanent member of the Scotland-based Global Network of Sex Work Projects further underscores that this is not an isolated conversation, but part of an ongoing international dialogue about dignity, rights, and social responsibility.

Seen in this context, the current backlash against Disparsing Rani becomes part of a larger tension. It is no longer just about one statement or one individual, but about the difficulty society faces in confronting its own inconsistencies. His misstep, arguably, was not in raising the issue, but in how it was framed. By suggesting a functional role for sex work in preserving social structures, the focus shifted away from human dignity and towards social utility. That shift made it easier for critics to dismiss the argument entirely.

"The controversy surrounding Disparsing Rani will eventually fade, as public attention inevitably shifts. What should not fade is the opportunity it presents—the opportunity to confront uncomfortable truths, to question long-held assumptions, and to bridge the gap between what society claims to believe and how it actually behaves."

But dismissing the argument does not resolve the underlying problem. The contradictions remain. The stigma remains. The lived realities of sex workers remain. Ignoring these realities does not eliminate them; it only pushes them further into the shadows.

If this moment is to have any value, it must move beyond reaction. It must become an opportunity for reflection. This does not require agreement on every moral question. Societies are diverse, and disagreements are inevitable. What is not sustainable is inconsistency—the tendency to condemn publicly what is tolerated privately, to apply moral standards unevenly, and to deny dignity to those who exist within uncomfortable realities.

Human rights do not begin at the point of moral agreement. They begin at the point of existence. They begin with the recognition that every individual, regardless of circumstance, is entitled to dignity, safety, and respect. This is the principle that organizations like RAM have brought into focus. It is the principle that global human rights bodies continue to uphold. And it is the principle that must guide any meaningful conversation on this issue.

The controversy surrounding Disparsing Rani will eventually fade, as public attention inevitably shifts. What should not fade is the opportunity it presents—the opportunity to confront uncomfortable truths, to question long-held assumptions, and to bridge the gap between what society claims to believe and how it actually behaves.

In the end, the question is not whether every word Disparsing Rani spoke was right or wrong. The question is whether society is willing to look beyond the outrage and engage with what lies beneath it. Because in that space, however uneasy it may be, lies the possibility of a more honest and more humane conversation.

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

Letters to the Editor

Mock drill a disaster

Editor,

The Mock Drill in Shillong on April 24, 2026, was a total disaster. It is disheartening to observe the slap-dash preparation of the State Disaster Management body/Home Guards & Civil Defence, and the response and cooperation of the general public. And my observations are based on my personal experience of three major wars where India was involved – The Chinese aggression of 1962, the short Indo-Pak war of 1965, and the Indo-Pak war of 1971 leading to the liberation of then East Pakistan.

As far as the government's organisation of this mock drill is concerned, it failed miserably here in Shillong (and I'm told also in Tura). First and foremost, we in the upper regions of Nongrah never heard the siren at 7:00 pm and 7.02 pm (and we always hear it at 10 am and 5 or 4.30 pm). This in itself defeated the purpose of the drill. This being the case, it makes me wonder why the Dorbar Shnong were not involved by the government in this (as it was done in those three other major wars) - why was this planned exercise not announced through the fixed and mobile public address systems of the Dorbar Shnong, where the importance of public cooperation is stressed? And why was the church not involved? In those active wars, the church bells would also ring in a continuous rhythm different from that rung before the church services. These would cover areas where the sirens would not. Thirdly, why was there no advisory on moving cars to park their cars and switch off their lights once the first siren was sounded? All this makes me believe that this whole exercise was simply a publicity stunt so that the state government can report to the Centre that a mock drill was conducted in all major towns of the state! And don't be surprised if after a few months, Meghalaya is given a national award on Disaster Preparedness to be received in Delhi by the concerned smiling state minister!

The public too don't seem to realise the seriousness, and usefulness, of such exercises. Everything that is "mock" is taken lightly! I could see that almost all households in Nongrah, Lapalang, Mawdiangdiang, Pohkseh, Nongthymmai and Madanrynting (all that I see from my terrace) had their lights full on, including the futsals that I could identify. Do the present, all-knowledgeable generation, know what it is to live in a situation where your windows and skylights are all painted black, all car headlights are blackened on the upper half; rationing is in place where the only rice you get is almost rotten, and in any case, not enough, and therefore, has to be substituted by course ration atta? And our mothers busy knitting socks and caps for the soldiers. And the mock drills conducted in schools that we, as kids, found so exciting, and which were organised and systematic. And the trenches or underground dugout rooms made in school compounds and in houses, where dry provisions and torchlights, batteries, medicines etc. were stored. Perhaps, people don't take such government exercises seriously because they know that the government itself is not serious but only concerned about compliance reports and spending justifications!

But having said all of the above, I just wonder how much these protocols in a real war scenario would really help. Ariel targeting is, by and large, no longer visual but GPS based. Physically bombers do not come but are now guided missiles and drones, honing in on a guided trajectory. And the list goes on. Several points to ponder!

The mock drill was a total mockery!

Yours etc.,
Eugene D. Thomas,
Shillong – 6.

LPG Refill Problems Causing Hardship to Consumers

Editor,

Through this letter I wish to draw attention to the silent struggles faced by LPG consumers across our state--struggles that are slowly but surely disrupting everyday life. Many of us now receive automated messages such as: "Your last cylinder was delivered on 04-03-2026. Your next refill booking is not yet due. Please avoid repeated calls and have patience ---(Indane)."

But here lies the catch--while the system claims delivery, the cylinder is nowhere to be seen. For a household waiting to cook its next meal, this is not just an inconvenience; it is a matter that hits close to home. Instead of offering reassurance, such messages add to our anxiety and helplessness. We are often told there is no shortage of LPG. If that is indeed the case, why are consumers being left in the lurch? Clearly, the problem is not about supply, but about a system that, at times, seems out of touch with ground realities, leaving people to fend for themselves.

In today's world, LPG is no longer a luxury--it is the backbone of every kitchen. When refills are delayed or wrongly marked as delivered, kitchens go cold and daily routines are thrown off track. Families somehow make ends meet--borrowing from neighbours, cutting corners in meals, or managing against the odds. Spare a thought for students living alone, far from home, trying to keep body and soul together while focusing on their studies.

Another issue that adds insult to injury is the rigid booking system. Messages like: "Your order is delivered with invoice no. 5-106219195742. Next available booking date is May 19, 2026, leaving consumers with little choice but to wait. Instead, if bookings were automatically generated after the due period, along with a DAC (Delivery Authentication Code) and a clear delivery or collection timeline, it would save people from running from pillar to post due to network issues and repeated booking failures.

In such trying circumstances, asking consumers to "have patience," is easier said than done. What people truly need is a system that listens, responds, and stands by them in times of need. After all, in this digital age, when everything is just a click away, basic services like LPG delivery should not leave consumers in the dark.

I earnestly urge the concerned authorities to look into this matter with empathy and urgency. After all, a small step in the right direction can go a long way in easing the burden on countless households.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

Addressing the Rising Tide of Violence to Restore Public Safety

Editor,

Through this letter I express my deep concern regarding the alarming rise in violent incidents across Meghalaya. Recent reports of lives lost to senseless aggression have cast a shadow of fear over our state, unsettling the peace that has long been our hallmark.

The increasing frequency of fatalities stemming from unchecked anger, personal vendettas, and minor misunderstandings is deeply disturbing. These are not merely isolated crimes but a direct assault on the social fabric and harmony of our community. Consequently, a pervasive sense of insecurity has taken roots, making citizens hesitant to step out after dark or to stay home alone. This climate of fear hinders our daily lives and erodes the collective well-being of our society. Violence is never a constructive solution. It is imperative that we, as a society, cultivate emotional resilience, mutual respect, and the maturity to resolve conflicts through dialogue rather than force. While we must remain vigilant and look out for one another, the burden of safety should not rest solely on the shoulders of the public.

I therefore urge the concerned authorities to implement the following measures immediately:

Heightened Surveillance: Increased police patrolling in vulnerable areas and during late hours.

Stringent Law Enforcement: Ensuring t hat offenders are apprehended swiftly and face the full force of the law to act as a deterrent.

Community Engagement: Organizing awareness programs that focus on conflict resolution, peace-building, and civic responsibility.

I sincerely hope the Government and citizenry will unite to restore the safety and serenity that our state deserves.

Yours etc.,
Melaaibiang Nongsiej,
Shillong

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

"Indecision is, in essence, a decision."

— Yoav Gallant

The Shillong Times

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Manipur: Forgotten Periphery

NEWS that the Centre has sanctioned Rs 947 crores for the relief of Manipur's victims of violence might delight those in the business of governance because not all the funds will go towards the proposed project. As is the practice in India's North East development funds are not accounted for. Funds tend to leak into private pockets of ministers, bureaucrats and even militant outfits. Of the 947 crores, Rs 424 crore would go towards operating the relief camps set up after the outbreak of violence in May 2023. Another amount of Rs 523 crore is being used to rehabilitate the displaced persons. Answers to RTI queries reveal that 58,881 people are displaced. This is a huge number and the fact that it happened in the first place shows the utter incompetence of the Biren Singh government to handle the situation with alacrity the moment it happened on May 3, 2023. Before so many deaths were inflicted, women raped and homes burnt, especially in and around Imphal, the central government should have acted with speed and imposed President's Rule so that the Centre can take control of the situation. What was needed at the time to douse the fires was an independent law keeping force that would treat all trouble mongers with the same yardstick and not bend over backwards to please any single group. Unfortunately, the Central Government played politics and allowed Biren Singh to continue despite knowing that he favoured a particular valley-based militant outfit that appeared to have been trained to wreak vengeance on the Kuki-Zo people.

The outbreak of the riot is linked to the Manipur High Court's order to speed up granting of Scheduled Tribe status to the Meiteis who are largely Hindu by religion. Only later the Manipur High Court was told that it had overstepped its brief and had no locus standi to pass such an order. By then the violence had escalated and people had to literally run for their lives; more so the large number of Kuki-Zos working or staying in Imphal and the Meiteis living in Churachandpur and Moreh areas. In no other state of this country is there an example where people of the same state have drawn clear boundaries beyond which the warring parties are not to cross. Hence the Kuki-Zo were relegated to the hills and the Meiteis to the valley. Life was completely disrupted with children and youth having to give up their education and live in relief camps for years. Many babies were born and grew up in those relief camps with just the bare necessities of life provided to them. A total of 7894 homes were completely gutted, 2646 homes were partially destroyed, but, only about 3000 pre-fabricated houses have been constructed and most of them in the Imphal valley. The homes that went up in flames in Imphal valley belonged to Kuki families that have lived and grown up there for decades. They could not salvage anything including important documents.

The human rights violation during this Manipur crisis is beyond imagination. Even if Manipur was to limp back to 'normalcy' the losses suffered by many during this conflict can never be recovered. There's the economic loss but more than that the gruesome deaths inflicted by one group on the other will remain a constant reminder of people of different ethnicities being forced to live under an iniquitous rule where the government is run by the majority community with no empathy for minority groups. That's the stark reality of Manipur.

Meghalaya Getting Relatively Poorer; It Needs An Independent Think- Tank to Plan an Alternative Course

By Harsh Shrivastava

Meghalaya has much going for it. It is politically stable. It has minerals. Tourism is booming. Infrastructure is improving. More cars are on the roads of Shillong. The Union government continues to allocate money for the state through various schemes. There is a cohort of confident, young Meghalayans, educated in good schools and colleges who are poised to do much more.

Yet, shockingly, Meghalaya's getting relatively poorer, as compared to other Indian states. According, to the latest Economic Survey published by the Union Finance Ministry, in 2016-17, the national per capita income was Rs. 1,04,880. At that time, Meghalaya's per capita income was Rs. 77,585 or 74 percent of the national average. The richest of the seven sister states in the NE in 2016-17 was Manipur, whose per capita income was Rs. 1,27,107 or 121 percent of the national average.

In 2024-25, according to the Economic Survey, the average Indian had an income of Rs. 2,34,859. The average resident of Meghalaya earned Rs. 1,57,141, which was now 67 percent of the national average. That means Meghalaya is falling behind the rest of the country. In eight years, Meghalaya became seven percentage points poorer than the rest of India—from 74 to 67 percent, a very steep fall!

In contrast, Mizoram's per capita income in 2024-25 was Rs. 2,87,097 or 122 percent of the national average. That means Mizoram has done relatively better (slightly) and Meghalaya has done much worse in eight years. Today, only Manipur is poorer than Meghalaya among the seven sisters, and Manipur has had many more political and economic changes than touristy, stable Meghalaya. Mizoram's per capita income in 2015-16 was 64 percent more than Meghalaya. In 2024-25, it was 83 percent more—the gap between Mizoram and Meghalaya is widening! Bangladesh too is richer than Meghalaya; and getting richer.

Eight years is a long time to have corrected matters and changed the direction of Meghalaya, so that it starts catching up with other Indian states, including in the NE. The government has its normal, bureaucratic plans—more schemes from the Union government; more projects; and more tourists. All this isn't working as it should. The proud people of Meghalaya need to think and work in a different way. More tourism can't be the only solution. This has its own problems—more traffic to start with! Also, tourists have choices. Sikkim, for instance, is attracting more persons, and they don't have the hassle of the inner line permit. Also, folks in Delhi and Bombay tell me that they'd rather go to Thailand or Vietnam, which is cheaper.

The government is active and doing many things. I saw that Khasi and Garo have become official languages; and that only Garo tribals will be allowed to stand for the Autonomous District Council of the Garo areas. These are all politically significant, but is all this enough to reverse Meghalaya's decline? Within Meghalaya itself, I have a feeling that the gap between buzzing, booming Shillong and the Garo areas is widening.

I saw that Khasi and Garo have become official languages; and that only Garo tribals will be allowed to stand for the Autonomous District Council of the Garo areas. These are all politically significant, but is all this enough to reverse Meghalaya's decline?

Sometimes, one reads about music stars going to Shillong, which is good—Meghalaya is getting the famous singers, which even Goa, the richest state isn't. On the other hand, one also continues to reads about accidents in rathole mining. Nowhere does one read of a new factory coming up in Meghalaya or a new large call center that opened or a fashion label or a food brand or a laboratory that produced extraordinary research.

Changing Meghalaya's course cannot be left only to the government of the day. All classes of citizens must be engaged in thinking about how to improve the future ... and then contribute to that future, proactively and productively. This should be done outside the government's auspices—in an independent think-tank. Funded and housed by academia and business, it should bring together all the rich elements of Meghalaya's society to discuss, debate, and decide the future of the state and then how to get there.

Such a think-tank should have professors and editors; youth leaders; tribal leaders; women; businesses; church leaders; civil society; managers of companies that are operating in the state; and even representatives of the so-called "outsiders" who are equally citizens of Meghalaya. Yes, government folks and politicians should also be part of this think-tank's discussions, but they can never be the majority, else it will always be a place where governments will expect to be listened to rather than being equal contributors to the discussions about changing the arc of Meghalaya's development.

The focus of the think-tank should be only one, but all other factors should be considered. The goal of the think-tank isn't next year (that's the responsibility of the government) or the next two to three years (the political party), but at least five if not ten years into the future. For clarity, there should be only one goal—how quickly can Meghalaya catch up with the rest of the country. That is: what will it take and how fast will Meghalaya's per capita income be equal to India's per capita income. To go from 67 percent to 100 percent. Even then, Meghalaya will be poorer than Mizoram or Sikkim (which is far richer), but at least it will no longe be among the poorest.

This isn't easy. In eight years, the state has dropped seven percentage points. It has to stop the descent, turn around, and climb back 33 percentage points. Catching up with the rest of the country, means Meghalaya has to grow faster than the rest of India, which it hasn't managed to do for so many years. For instance, earlier data shows that in 2011-12, Meghalaya's per capita income was little over 90 percent of the national average, before falling so steeply. And even if Meghalaya does manage to do all this, it could take 33 years to equalize with the rest of India—and 33 years of growing faster than the country consistently. 33 years from 2026 is 2059!

The think-tank should be more ambitious and have this goal. How can Meghalaya become richer than the rest of India by 2047. Not only catch up, but become a little richer. This can sound almost impossible but has happened before. Meghalaya's neighbor, Bangladesh was much poorer than India, but in twenty years of sustained socio-economic growth, Bangladesh's per capita income has caught up with India and in a couple of years, it is likely to become richer than India. If Bangladesh, can do it, so can Meghalaya.

This is a long-term project—over decades, and that is why this has to be driven by outside the government, which will change in every election. Meghalaya's society must appreciate this goal, understand and contribute to the difficult choices that will have to be made, adjust itself and its expectations, and all the while deal with a world that's also changing fast. The climate is worsening. AI will eat jobs. Competition from other Indian states will increase. This think-tank needs to think about the future in a more holistic way than merely more schemes and more projects.

The think-tank must make targets and plans to deal with difficult questions of culture and attitudes and politics that need to change? Meghalaya has to do better compared to the past, but better compared to the rest of India, if it has to achieve the very difficult goal of becoming richer than the rest of the nation.

(The writer has 31 years experience in public policy and business. He has worked in companies, industry associations, think tanks, and in the Union government. He's lectured at leading Indian and foreign colleges. He's also been a director of the Meghalaya Institute of Governance and written earlier for this newspaper. He can be contacted at harsh.email@gmail.com)

From potential to power: Scaling Indigenous Peoples' Nature-Based food

By Phrang Roy

In 2021, the United Nations convened the World Food Summit to champion nature-positive food systems. As a member of one of the Summit's Preparatory Committees, The Indigenous Partnership for Agrobiodiversity and Food Sovereignty (TIP) that I lead from Rome, Italy advocated for a profound truth: Indigenous Peoples' food systems are, by definition, nature-based. Though often ignored, they are the essential drivers of the future many of us envision.

To prove this, we applied FAO's agroecology evaluation tools to a study spanning 500 households located in 16 diverse landscapes across Thailand, India, Kenya, and Mexico. The households from Meghalaya that we studied came from Dewlieh, Umsawwar, Plasha and Darechikgre.

Our findings were clear: these food systems aren't just "farms"; they are mosaics of life; these systems don't just work—they thrive. The secret isn't just technique; it is a deep, relational connection to the land and a cultural value system of "caring and sharing", Tip Briew, Tip Blei as the Khasis say.

We were fortunate to get some funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, USA and CS Fund, California, USA, to begin building "solution templates" directly with communities. Our first initiative started in Meghalaya. Working with NESFAS, our local partner, we brought together village elders, local chefs, and nutritionists.

But we did not want our findings to just sit in a report. To turn these insights into action TIP, in 2024, developed an Outcome Framework built on four development pillars: biodiversity, nutrition, nature-based livelihoods, and climate resilience.

By 2025, we started to transition from framework to implementation developing "templates of solutions" that would operationalise these pathways. We were fortunate to get some funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, USA and CS Fund, California, USA, to begin building "solution templates" directly with communities. Our first initiative started in Meghalaya. Working with NESFAS, our local partner, we brought together village elders, local chefs, and nutritionists. Together, they did something incredible. They took the "wild edibles" gathered from the local landscape and wove them into school meal programmes.

Right now in Meghalaya, 2000+ children are enjoying a lunch that features 13 different species of wild plants. The number is growing every day. These aren't just meals; they are the bounty of their ancestral lands served on a plate.

This is a living circular economy. When a local mother gathers wild edibles to sell to the school, or a grandmother teaches students how to tend the school garden, a cycle of health and wealth begins. The children grow up healthy, knowing that their landscape is their provider.

Our results also show that the model we developed is both high-impact and scalable. NESFAS is meeting FAO's 'ten food group' diversity standards, slowly strengthening village economies, and thereby ensuring social sustainability through community ownership.

What we've learned is simple but profound: the answer to our global 'development challenges' isn't always a new technology. Often, it is a return to a deep, relational connection with nature. By supporting Indigenous-led models, we aren't just conserving biodiversity—we are nourishing the next generation with the wisdom of the past.

Between 2024 and 2025, the Government of Meghalaya and NESFAS joined forces to train over 12,000 cooks. Senior IAS Officers like Swapnil Tembe and Isawanda Laloo became strong supporters of these pilot initiatives. We are slowly turning school meals into a grassroots revolution. But our work goes deeper than the kitchen.

Through partnerships with the Biodiversity Board of the Government of Meghalaya and The Nature Conservancy, NESFAS is working with communities restoring degraded landscapes using 'People's Perspective Management Plans.' We are blending Indigenous wisdom with the biocentric restoration approach of the Indigenous Peoples' Unit in FAO, Rome.

And most importantly, we are engaging the youth. Following TIP's global webinar in 2025, young fellows in Meghalaya identified ten core grassroots innovations—from honey forests to nitrogen-fixing trees—proving they are the researchers and leaders of tomorrow.

By registering 21 Agroecology Cooperatives, NESFAS is also empowering local Mei Ramew cafes and schools to buy local and keep wealth within the community. The circular economy we are promoting has also attracted the attention of global bodies such as the International School Meals Coalition and the Indigenous Peoples Food Systems Coalition. We are gradually proving that Indigenous food systems are not a relic of the past—they are the key to our future.

Three vital lessons stand out: First, evidence matters. We used the FAO's TAPE method to prove that these undervalued systems work. As AI use grows, Indigenous Peoples' advocacy must increasingly develop hard evidence but blend it with a deep commitment to the unique values and systems of Indigenous Peoples.

Second, building bridges works. Our 'Outcome Framework' allowed science and Indigenous knowledge to collaborate as equals and thereby co-create new knowledge.

Third, having an appropriate policy environment matters. This initiative succeeded because the State Government of Meghalaya and national corporate bodies such as Tata Communications, Rural Electrification Corporation, LIC HFL and others, through India's Corporate Social Responsibility regulation stepped in to provide the needed financial support. Our partners in Thailand, Kenya, and Mexico are also leading the way toward a nature-positive world. To turn their vision into action, they too need the resources to implement the Outcome Framework alongside the communities who call their lands home. Indigenous food systems are not just traditional practices; they are sophisticated, scalable blueprints for a sustainable modern world. We invite policymakers and funders to join us.

A sustainable future isn't a dream—it's a choice we must make right now, especially as we face the current fossil fuel challenges. By backing Indigenous Peoples-led solutions, we bridge the wisdom of the past with the promise of the future.

Phrang Roy is Coordinator of TIP, Rome and Founder of NESFAS. This article is based on a speech given on the 21st April 2026 at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Side Event, New York.

Letters to the Editor

We Deserve Safe & Pedestrian Friendly Footpaths

Editor,

I write to draw urgent attention to the deplorable condition of the footpath in Laitumkhrah, Shillong, which has become a serious safety concern for daily pedestrians.

At present, the footpath is in a state of neglect and disrepair, making it extremely difficult to use—especially for students, office-goers, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Widespread encroachment, uncivilised dumping of waste and debris has significantly reduced walking space, creating constant bottlenecks. As a result, pedestrians are often compelled to step onto the already narrow and congested roadway, exposing themselves to the risk of accidents.

Moreover, large stretches of the footpath are damaged, with potholes, cracks, and uneven surfaces that become slippery and hazardous during the rainy season. In several places, uncovered drains pose a serious danger, while poorly planned utility works and intrusive railings further obstruct movement. Certain sections are so narrow that even two pedestrians cannot pass comfortably.

Considering the high volume of foot traffic in Laitumkhrah locality—particularly students—the current condition is not only inconvenient but also unsafe. I therefore urge the concerned authorities to take immediate corrective measures, including repairing the footpath, removing encroachments, covering open drains, and ensuring a safe, accessible, and pedestrian-friendly walkway in the so-called Smart City of Meghalaya.

I sincerely hope this issue will receive prompt attention in the interest of public safety and urban accountability.

Yours etc.,
Bubli Brahma
Shillong

NH-62 — The Crumbling Lifeline of South Garo Hills

Editor,

Roads are more than stretches of tar and gravel—they are arteries of development, connecting people to healthcare, education, markets, and opportunities. In the case of NH-62 from Dalu to Baghmara, this highway is not merely a road; it is the lifeline of the people of South Garo Hills. Sadly, this lifeline today lies in a state of shocking neglect and disrepair.

For years, commuters, transporters, students, patients, and daily wage earners have been forced to endure the miserable condition of NH-62. Large potholes, broken stretches, poor drainage, landslide-prone sections, and muddy surfaces during the monsoon have turned travel into a dangerous and exhausting ordeal. What should be a smooth journey has become a test of endurance, often taking hours longer than necessary and causing frequent vehicle breakdowns and accidents.

The impact of this dilapidated highway extends far beyond inconvenience. Farmers struggle to transport their produce to markets in time, leading to losses and discouragement. Patients needing urgent medical attention face delays that can cost lives. Students traveling for education face uncertainty and hardship. Businesses suffer from high transportation costs, slowing economic activity in an already underserved region. Tourism potential, blessed by the natural beauty of South Garo Hills, remains largely untapped because of poor connectivity.

The neglect of NH-62 also reflects a deeper issue—the marginalization of remote border regions. South Garo Hills shares an important international boundary with Bangladesh, making connectivity not only an economic necessity but also a strategic concern. A functional national highway in such a region should be a priority for both the National Highways Authority of India and the Government of Meghalaya. Yet, repeated promises of repair and upgrading have often remained confined to announcements, with little visible progress on the ground.

The people of South Garo Hills have shown patience and resilience, but patience cannot fill potholes, nor can resilience replace proper infrastructure. What is urgently needed is not temporary patchwork repairs but a comprehensive reconstruction of NH-62 with modern engineering standards, proper drainage systems, regular maintenance, and strict monitoring of project execution. Transparency in road contracts and accountability for delays must also become part of the solution.

A road that connects lives should not become a road that destroys them. The condition of NH-62 from Dalu to Baghmara is not merely an infrastructure issue—it is a question of dignity, development, and equal attention to every citizen, regardless of geography.

The voice of South Garo Hills is clear: Repair NH-62 now, before neglect turns into irreversible loss.

Yours etc.,
Bishwambhar Banai,
Via email

Lumpongdeng Island Is For Nature Lovers

Editor,

Lumpongdeng was a quiet and peaceful island, until recently when the Government planned to invade its tranquility, by setting up the Taj Umiam Luxury Resort and Spa. However it was done away with due to protests from concerned sections of the society. Through this letter I wish to express my desire to see Lumpongdeng as a Botanical Garden Island. This island could serve the nature loving people and tourists, to experience and enjoy the scenic beauty of Umiam Lake also known as Umiam Khwan.

In this connection, I would suggest to the Government to develop this place into a Botanical Garden, where footpaths can be constructed around the Island after planting more trees, like flowering trees, wild fruit bearing trees for birds and small animals to thrive, deciduous and evergreen tree species etc. and even some ficus variety trees can be planted. I am sure the Botanical Survey of India will assist in developing this project if required.

Thus, Lumpongdeng Island should be well preserved as a natural beauty spot of the Glamorous Umiam Lake and no other activities of any kind should be allowed to be held on this island. Once trees are grown they will attract birds from nearby areas as well as migratory birds from distant places and small animals to visit and make the Island their habitat. This will benefit nature lovers, animal lovers and bird watchers. This island can be reached by boat and if possible it can also be connected with the mainland by a Ropeway.

As far as the plan to bring up the proposed Taj Umiam Luxury Resort and Spa, I have nothing to say but I feel the proposed site is too small and too near the lake. Unlike the existing Orchid Lake Resort, it is understood that the Taj resort and Spa is a huge project. Its waste discharge will be ten times more than the existing Orchid Resort, which can pollute the lake and affect the quality of water. Further, the Taj Resort Project requires very good facilities, like better road communication and efficient air connectivity hence an International Airport is essential to cater to the needs of high class travelers and foreign tourists visiting our State. The Shillong Airport at Umroi until now is a substandard domestic airport raised from an abandoned airfield. There must be a very strong and valid reason for abandoning it.

It may be mentioned here that the Cantonment Area of the Military at Rangmen has been drawing drinking water from the other side of the lake opposite Nehru Park. This aspect also must be taken into consideration by the Government. Taking up such developmental project is always welcome but it should not fail. I remember many years ago, the Tourism Department introduced a floating Restaurant at Umiam Lake, called "The Flying Duck," but this Duck never took off. Later on it became a non-functional sitting duck and within a short period of time it finally became a shut down duck and disappeared into the deep of Umiam Lake and the entire investment on it has gone to waste.

I hope the Government will give a thought to this humble suggestion so that ultimately this island will become a valuable asset of the people and our future generations.

Yours etc.,
N Hynniewta,
Shillong-1

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

"Decision is a risk rooted in the courage of being free."

— Paul Tillich

The Shillong Times

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War, elusive peace

TWO months past the Iran War, there's no end in sight. Iran is no easy walkover, as President Donald Trump has learned to his dismay. Instead of the US, it is Iran that keeps putting conditions for an end to the war. The US, having caused huge destruction to vital Iranian installations before the fortnight's ceasefire, has no way but to continue with the pause and negotiate matters for more time. The Trump administration sees no clear way out of the impasse. It imposed a blockade on Iran and its ports to prevent the Islamic nation's sale of its oil, which could hurt its economic interests seriously. With less storage facilities, Iran will have to stop production too. At the same time, the blockade and Iran's closure of a sea route through which one-fifth of the world's oil movement takes place have resulted in a skyrocketing of the global oil prices and hurt the Gulf states in different ways -- this being the sea route through which they export their oil and gas. The tiny Gulf states, being the traditional allies of the US with which they have military and security ties, are caught in a quagmire. Oil is their bread and butter; its export stands hugely disrupted now. Trump is caught between the pressures from within the US against the long-drawn military engagement and from these allies. All are feeling the pinch of war.

The three conditions put forward by the Iranians at the negotiating table guided by Oman and Pakistan are prima facie unacceptable to the US. Iran is willing to accept the demand for reopening of the Strait of Hormuz only if the US lifts its blockade on their country and its ports, ends the war, and agrees to postpone the nuclear talks. The US started the war with a claim to go and abort Iran's nuclear programme. Iran, Trump feels, is closer to making the bomb. Nuclear talks cannot be wished away. But Iran keeps resisting the US pressure as the Americans are hesitant about taking the war to the next decisive level – of a land war involving soldiers. American lives, it is reckoned, are "more precious" than the lives of the Iranians. On the ground, the Iranian army, strong-willed that it still is, is well-equipped for a fight on its native turf. It is important for Americans to also save the face of their president. As of now, Trump appears reticent about resuming the war. An escape route has to be laid open through talks. In the interim, the world is put to more trouble. Oil prices have increased sharply and so are the prices of most items across the board. Traders are the main beneficiaries of any war. They pass on the burden to the consumers; and, greedy as they are, they engage in the games of hoarding and profiteering. In countries like India, it is increasingly evident yet again that no governmental mechanism is serious enough to control such situations. Almost every sector is bearing the brunt of the war. The US cannot escape the cumulative impact of the present global disruptions in multiple sectors as a result of this military engagement.

When Women Ruled? Reclaiming Khasi Political Traditions

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A few weeks ago, I took part in a three-day workshop on 'The Cambridge Companion to the Indigenous Peoples of India' at Shiv Nadar University. The discussion ranged from how indigenous peoples were viewed in ancient India to their status in modern times. While there was agreement on many of the points presented, there was one issue on which participants held divergent views: the issue of gender among indigenous communities and the need for reform in customary norms. Everyone agreed that while the status of women in indigenous communities is comparatively more favourable, certain cultural practices disproportionately affect them negatively, such as witch-hunting. However, some were not very open to the idea of changes in customary norms for the reason that any dilution of them could weaken their status as Scheduled Tribes, who are distinguished from the mainstream community because of this important aspect. The paradoxical case of the Khasi community, which despite being matrilineal has kept women away from political life, was also discussed.

In the 2025 book 'Understanding Social Sustainability in a Hill Town: Water Governance in Shillong', Bankerlang Kharmylliem looked into the functioning of the Dorbar Shnong in order to assess whether they had been able to bring about social equity in water access. He found the performance of the Dorbar Shnong to be mixed, but there were some themes that were common across all of them: the lack of inclusion of non-Khasi voices and absence of women. In some Dorbar Shnong, women have started taking part in the proceedings, but it is still a long way before someone can contest for the position of Rangbah Shnong, which, as informed by H. H. Mohrmen, has taken place in Jaintia Hills. Therefore, it would appear that the political participation of Khasi women is moving forward at a faster pace among the Pnar compared to the other Khasi subgroups.

Bankerlang collected quite a few phrases that try to explain the lack of political participation of women. Two stand out in particular: "*ka said ka thew, ka saiñ ka tiah, kiba khia kiba shon ka jong u rangbah,*" which emphasises that deliberations, decisions, planning, administration, policies, and the responsibilities of management fall under the purview of men; and "ka wait, u sum, ka sang, ka barshi, ka kñia ka khriam baroh ka jong u rangbah," which highlights that aspects such as the instruments of war and sacerdotal rituals belong to men. The gist is that women are not meant to be involved in political matters, which are the domain of men. However, neither recorded history nor oral folklore confirms such a position.

In his 1835 'Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India', R. Boileau Pemberton devoted a couple of sections to the Khasi, with one on Hima Jaintiapur. In it, he noted that "in conducting the affairs of Government, the Rajahs of Jynteeah (Khasi Syiems of Hima Jaintiapur) are under the necessity of consulting on all important occasions the queen mother (Syiem Sad), and the chief (Doloi) of districts, and officers (Myntri, etc.) of state." This clearly demonstrates that the role of the Syiem Sad was very important in making political decisions for the realm. In no way was politics a realm specifically reserved only for men. In fact, on occasions, women could also inherit the throne.

In 1878 W.S. Clarke, the Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, was tasked with holding official inquiries into issues of succession to the position of Syiem. After extensive consultation with the Himas, he concluded that "females are eligible for the office of Syiem." This was also mentioned in Hamlet Bareh's book 'The History and Culture of the Khasi People', which discusses in detail eligibility to the office of the Syiem: women could become Syiem. So, it would appear that based on tradition there was no bar on women holding political offices, including the highest in the land. But were there any female Syiems in the past? Here folklore reveals that indeed there were female Syiems in the past.

Based on folklore, Hima Shillong along with Madur Maskut appears to be among the earliest Khasi Himas. There is mention of Hima Sutnga as well, but it is clear that in the initial stage, the Pnar living in Nangbah, Nartiang, Jowai, and Maskut were under the rule of the Syiem Malngiang. It was only after his assassination that the dominion of Hima Sutnga took final shape, with the population made up of the Pnar and the War (especially War Amwi, who founded Hima Sutnga), along with other non-Khasi groups such as the Karbi, Tiwa, and Biate. But before these Himas came into being, there was the Raid, which according to Fabian Lyngdoh in his PhD thesis 'A Study on the Nature and Roles of Traditional Governance Institutions among the Khasis in Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya' emerged from the ancient Nongbah, or first settlement. The earliest was Raid Iapngar, which comes from Ka Ngar, a woman who died at the site of the Raid's first settlement, the Nongbah.

According to tradition, Raid Iapngar was ruled by a woman called Ka Iong Saring, who was very arrogant and contemptuous of the poor. However, another woman, Ka Luh Shadap (a Pnar), deposed her in an eating competition (involving pork and a sour fruit called sohnairiang, or local lemon) administered by the Basans. Having defeated Ka Iong Saring, Ka Luh Shadap took over as leader and Lyngdoh of the Raid. Ka Iong Saring and her family led a wandering life for a while and eventually settled at Raid Nongtung. Today her clan is one of the Jait Basan clans of Raid Nongtung. Another version states that Ka Iong Saring's family wandered to Raid Nonglyngdoh in Nongpoh, where they were inducted as the Jait Syiem of Raid Nonglyngdoh under the name Ki Syiem Mariñ. So, women held leadership roles in the very early days of Khasi state formation. But perhaps the most remarkable story of a woman Syiem is connected with the founding of Hima Shillong. This version is found in the 2003 book 'Ka Jingiathuh-Khana-Pateng Shaphang Ka Hima, Shillong', by Shortimai Syiem.

It is believed that Hima Shillong traces its origin to Ka Pahsyntiew, who is considered a divine being discovered by Bambteng Mylliemngap near Krem (cave) Marai while he was farming. He was able to entice her out of the cave with a handful of tiew Jalyng-kteng, or the flower of the Khasi pumpkin. She was then adopted into the Kur Mylliemngap, with Bambteng acting as her uncle and taking great care of her in the belief that she was the daughter of Lei Shillong (deity of Shillong peak). Soon, he convened a meeting of the ki Bakhraw, where he expressed his wish to appoint her as "ka nongsynshar-ka nongsumar, ka nongri-ka nongda, ka nongkhroh-ka nongkjor, ka nongmai-ka nongsneng, ka nonglum-ka nonglang ia ki khun ki hajar, kum ka kmie ka syiem"—that is, as the Syiem. The Dorbar agreed with his proposal and resolved that from that day onward there would be only one Hima, and that the girl would be the Syiem who would rule over all. She came to be known as Syiem Pahsyntiew and, eventually, when she married, became the first ancestress of the Syiem clan of Hima Shillong.

All these folklores make it abundantly clear that whether it was the early-state formation period, i.e., Raid, or the final state formation period, i.e., Hima, among the Khasi, the first rulers were women. This corresponds with the written records, which also make it very clear that women could become Syiem. This is not very surprising considering the matrilineal traditions of the Khasi. In fact, it would have been shocking if women did not have a major political role in Khasi society.

This has similarities with another group with whom the Khasi share ancestry: the Vietnamese. Known simply as the Trung Sisters, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị raised an army and went to battle against the Chinese in order to protect their ancestral homeland 2,000 years ago. Trưng Trắc later became the female monarch of Vietnam, as well as the first queen in Vietnamese history. This clearly shows that women have always occupied important political positions in Austro-Asiatic societies, with the matrilineal tradition providing the foundation and logic for it.

Should customary law be transformed to make it more egalitarian? I believe so, but it also carries political risks that have to be considered. In the case of the Khasi, however, at least regarding women's participation in the political sphere, there is no need to change customary norms, only to revive them. I think it is high time women are given their rightful position in society, as Syiem, Lyngdoh, and Rangbah Shnong.

(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)

All Talk, No Progress? The Numbers & Reality Suggest Otherwise

By Jack Syiemlieh

Public debate is essential in any democracy. It sharpens policy, strengthens accountability and provides space for diverse perspectives. However, for such debate to be meaningful, it must remain grounded in evidence, balance and a clear understanding of governance. While recent commentary on development in Meghalaya raises important concerns, it also presents a largely one-sided view that calls for a more measured and comprehensive response.

At the outset, it is important to recognise a fundamental truth: development is not the sole responsibility of government. It is a shared endeavour between the State and its people. Citizens shape outcomes through participation, feedback and cooperation, while governments must navigate complex decisions involving multiple stakeholders, technical inputs and long-term considerations. Such decisions cannot always be reduced to simple binaries of right and wrong.

The argument that all meaningful decision-making must occur through fully open processes, and that any closed-door deliberation is inherently undemocratic, does not reflect how modern democracies function. Across the world, including in India, governments routinely undertake internal consultations, expert discussions and strategic negotiations before arriving at decisions. Transparency and accountability remain essential, but they must coexist with administrative efficiency and informed judgement.

Concerns about economic development, inequality and sustainability in Meghalaya are valid and deserve serious attention. The State continues to face structural challenges, including unemployment, infrastructure gaps and disparities between rural and urban areas. These are not unique to Meghalaya but are characteristic of many emerging regions, where progress is often gradual and uneven.

At the same time, available data presents a more encouraging picture than is often acknowledged. In the financial year 2024–25, Meghalaya recorded a real Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) growth rate of 9.66 per cent, the second highest among all Indian states. Importantly, this is not an isolated occurrence. The State has sustained high growth for three consecutive years from FY23 to FY25, indicating that this momentum is structural rather than temporary. During this period, per capita income has risen significantly, increasing from roughly Rs 90,000 a few years ago to around Rs 1.5 lakh.

Public expenditure, which serves as a key driver of growth in regions where private investment has historically been limited, has also expanded substantially. Total government expenditure has more than doubled over the past several years, while capital expenditure, critical for infrastructure and long-term productivity, has increased more than fourfold. The most meaningful measure of development, however, lies in its impact on people's lives. In this regard, Meghalaya has generated approximately 3.5 to 4 lakh livelihood opportunities over the past six years. Within the agricultural sector alone, close to two lakh farmers have directly benefited from targeted government programmes in horticulture, organic farming, spice cultivation — including ginger, black pepper, cardamom and Lakadong turmeric, as well as livestock and fisheries. These initiatives have enabled many farmers to move beyond subsistence towards more market-oriented and sustainable livelihoods.

Wage growth further reinforces this trend. In recent years, minimum wages for unskilled workers have increased by nearly 30 per cent. Meghalaya now ranks among the higher-performing states nationally in terms of wage levels and remains among the leading states in the Northeast, reflecting a tangible improvement in income conditions. It is therefore important to avoid broad generalisations that dismiss all development efforts as superficial or ineffective. Meghalaya has witnessed measurable advancements in connectivity, tourism, social welfare delivery and institutional capacity. To suggest that progress exists only on paper overlooks these tangible gains.

A particularly noteworthy area of progress has been the State's emphasis on entrepreneurship and tourism-led rural development. By promoting homestays, eco-tourism ventures, guided experiences and small hospitality businesses, Meghalaya has enabled communities to directly benefit from tourism. Villages such as Mawlynnong, Dawki and Mawsynram have emerged as community-driven tourism hubs, generating supplementary income for households, especially for youth and women. The homestay model, in particular, has allowed families to convert existing assets into sustainable livelihoods without requiring significant capital investment. This reflects a broader shift towards inclusive, bottom-up development.

The role of experts, advisers and consultants must also be viewed with nuance. In an increasingly complex policy environment, governments rely on specialised knowledge to design and implement effective programmes. Economists, engineers, environmental planners and sectoral experts contribute essential technical expertise that strengthens governance. The presence of such professionals should not be viewed with automatic suspicion; rather, emphasis should be placed on transparency, accountability and alignment with public interest.

Similarly, engagement with private sector actors and external partners is a standard feature of contemporary development. Public–private collaboration, when properly regulated, can bring investment, innovation and efficiency. The challenge lies not in rejecting such partnerships, but in ensuring robust regulatory frameworks that protect environmental sustainability, community interests and long-term outcomes.

The concept of development itself must be understood in its full complexity. It encompasses economic growth, employment generation, infrastructure development, human capital formation and environmental sustainability. While it is important to guard against an overreliance on short-term indicators, growth and investment remain essential components of broader progress. Policymakers must therefore balance immediate needs with long-term priorities. There is also considerable value in strengthening grassroots participation and integrating local knowledge systems. Meghalaya's cultural heritage, ecological richness and indigenous practices are significant assets that should inform development planning. Sustainable progress lies in blending tradition with modern innovation, rather than treating them as opposing choices.

Criticism plays an indispensable role in a democratic society, but it must be accompanied by constructive alternatives. Broad assertions of systemic failure, without clearly articulated solutions, risk limiting the depth and effectiveness of public discourse. Meaningful engagement requires addressing practical questions around decentralisation, resource mobilisation and the balancing of competing priorities.

Meghalaya's development journey is complex and ongoing. While challenges persist, the broader evidence does not support sweeping claims of stagnation.

A state that is among the fastest-growing in the country, has generated several lakh livelihood opportunities, significantly expanded public investment and improved wage levels is a state in motion. Democratic vigilance and civic engagement remain essential, but so too does a fair and evidence-based assessment of progress. Moving forward, the focus must be on strengthening institutions, deepening public participation and ensuring that development remains inclusive and sustainable. Only through such a balanced and informed approach can Meghalaya achieve meaningful and lasting progress.

Letters to the Editor

Urgent STEMS decline, safety and irregularities

Editor,

Through your newspaper, I wish to bring to the attention of the management of STEMS, as well as the concerned authorities and the public, the noticeable deterioration in the quality of services provided by this once dependable platform.

I have been a regular user of STEMS since its inception. In its early phase, the service provided exceptional convenience to parents. It enabled seamless registration, secure in-app payments, live tracking of school buses, and personalized updates regarding our wards—such as boarding the bus from home, reaching school, departing from school, and safely deboarding at home. These features ensured transparency and provided much-needed peace of mind to parents.

However, over time, the quality of service has declined significantly. Despite registering for the service in January this year, there was no communication until late April regarding whether my ward would be able to avail of the facility. The application, which was once the backbone of the service, now appears ineffective and is not in use. Parents are unable to log in, make payments, or track their children. Instead, this has been replaced with WhatsApp live location sharing, which raises serious concerns about privacy and safety. The shift from a secure, individualized tracking system to a widely shared location method compromises the confidentiality of children's movements and exposes them to unnecessary risks.

Furthermore, the previously designated pickup point at Red Cross Point has been discontinued without adequate prior notice or explanation. The discontinuation of bus routes through Red Cross, despite the presence of a large number of users in that area, raises serious concerns about route planning and operational efficiency unlike the initial stage. Stopping a service that caters to a significant number of clients appears to indicate inadequate planning and poor allocation of buses. Such decisions inconvenience parents and students and create unnecessary disruption to established routines.

Another concern that has added to the growing confusion among parents is the constant and frequent change of buses and caretakers assigned to the children. The lack of consistency in bus allocation and caretaker personnel creates uncertainty for parents and students alike, making it difficult to establish familiarity, trust, and a sense of security. Stability in transportation staff and vehicles is essential, particularly when young students are involved. The tidiness of the buses also seem to have deteriorated with time. Caretakers are not well-groomed with basic etiquette and a caring attitude towards students.

The payment system has also undergone changes. Payments that were once securely processed through the official application are now being requested via direct transfers to an individual account. This raises serious questions regarding transparency, accountability, and financial security. Parents deserve assurance that payments are made through official and verifiable channels.

Equally troubling is the decline in customer service standards. When concerns were raised regarding communication gaps and service quality, the response received was dismissive, suggesting that dissatisfied users should discontinue using the service. Parents were also advised to visit the office personally for issue resolution. In today's fast-paced environment, it is unreasonable to expect working parents to make repeated physical visits for routine concerns, especially when customer care services are advertised as available.

Additionally, reports from customer care representatives indicating that caretakers have "more important work" than updating parents about their children's whereabouts reflect an unacceptable attitude, particularly when child safety is involved.

I would also like to highlight a very serious safety concern. My daughter has reported that at times the school bus smells of smoke and occasionally even alcohol from the driver. Such observations raise grave concerns about the safety and well-being of children using this service. Despite bringing this matter to the attention of the concerned authorities, no visible corrective action appears to have been taken.

It appears that STEMS may have expanded its operations beyond its current capacity to maintain consistent service standards. The stark contrast between the high-quality services offered during its initial phase and the present situation is deeply disappointing. What once began as a promising and modern solution now appears to be losing the reliability and trust it once commanded.

I sincerely urge the management of STEMS to address these concerns with urgency, restore transparency, improve customer service standards, ensure proper route planning, maintain consistency in bus and caretaker assignments, and most importantly, safeguard the safety, security, and privacy of students relying on this service.

Yours etc.,
Name Withheld on Request
Via email

A Cautious but Welcome Dawn for Meghalaya Cricket

Editor,

The inauguration of the Indoor Cricket Academy at Kurkalang, presided over by the Prime Minister, is a welcome infrastructure milestone for Meghalaya Cricket Association under the aegis of its new President, James Sangma.

Given that Meghalaya cricket has seen rampant decline over the years, such a step signals the dawn of hopeful development. The next step therefore should be to now focus on strengthening player identification, training and fair selection procedures.

The state has produced men and women of genuine athletic potential, yet the structures to nurture that talent have either been absent or deliberately undermined over the years. The result has been an association that, by most objective measures, has gone from bad to worse, most seemingly a result of internal politics and power play which became larger than the game itself.

It is against this backdrop that the early actions of Sangma deserve measured but genuine commendation.

Recent media reports suggest that under the previous administration, the Indoor Cricket Academy in Meghalaya sat unfinished for months, which is frankly disappointing though not surprising, given that many other Northeastern state cricket associations had already completed their facilities months ago. Securing electrical power to a facility in record twelve days, which should have ideally been given unsaid priority, is precisely the kind of decisive administrative follow-through that has been conspicuously absent.

A welcome step that has also come out in media reports is the engagement of the Cricket Advisory Sub-Committee, composed of senior former players of the state, to plan activities at the new facility. This signals, however tentatively, a return to the principle that Meghalaya cricket should be guided by those who have actually played and bled for it. These are not earth-shattering achievements in isolation. But they are real, they are verifiable, and they are a departure from the inertia that preceded them.

Another concern is that for years, there have been persistent concerns that players from outside the state have found their way into the Meghalaya squad through processes that were, at best, opaque and skewed. If the new administration is serious about change, it must address this directly, identifying those who have unfairly displaced homegrown talent and ensuring selection is anchored firmly to merit developed within the state.

The MCA need look no further than Shillong Lajong FC for a blueprint. Lajong did not simply succeed by importing ready-made players. It built patiently from the grassroots up and the results have spoken for themselves.

The MCA, with BCCI support, the new Kurkalang facility, and a Cricket Advisory Sub-Committee of senior former players, now has the platform to do exactly the same.

While it seems like Sangma has made a promising start, if he builds Meghalaya cricket the way Lajong built its football, Kurkalang may one day be remembered not as a ribbon-cutting ceremony, but as the moment things genuinely turned.

Meghalaya deserves nothing less.

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah,
Via email

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"Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change."

—Stephen Hawking

The Shillong Times

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Of Misleading Data

ON April 28, the Meghalaya High Court observed that the Commissioner of Transport may have misled the Court with data and statements in the number of heavy vehicles transporting boulders and other minerals to Bangladesh through NH-206 between Jowai-Amlarem towards Dawki. which in gross violation of the law. Anyone travelling along the That Meghalaya is selling at between 300-400 of truckloads of boulders, sand, limestone and other minor minerals to Bangladesh every day is a no brainer. And that the Transport Department should provide wrong data is also not surprising since most trucks pass through and cross the borders without the necessary papers. The system is well-oiled to provide for free flow of goods without the mandatory checks and balances either from the Indian side or the Bangladesh side.

The Border Security Force stationed at the border is not mandated to check all documents that the Customs in charge are mandated to strictly carry out. But even there, laxity cannot be ruled out. The then Commissioner of Customs had in 2015 travelled all the way to Ichamati to find out whether the trucks moving from the Meghalaya side towards Bangladesh were put through the mandatory weighbridge to determine the exact weight carried by each truck and the total load sent per day and therefore the customs fees accruing to the Department. When a truck was told to pass through the weighbridge, the Customs Commissioner was told that it was not working. When asked since when it was not working, the person in charge said it was not working for a long while. This means there is no record of the quantum of goods passing through the Indian (Meghalaya) border towards Bangladesh.

In August 2024, the State Forest Department under the Meghalaya Mines and Mineral rules, had stated that truck owners and drivers transporting boulders and sand require to have a challan issued by the Department. At the time the Truckers' Association had sought clarification on the provisions of the Meghalaya Mineral (Prevention of Illegal Mining, Transportation, and Storage) Rules, 2022. This is because most quarries in Meghalaya are run arbitrarily without permission from the District Councils and environmental clearance from the Forest Department. For instance, a quarry operating above the River Wahniangleng – a river that provides water to the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme, had no permission to operate the quarry that was carrying several truckloads of boulders daily to Bangladesh through the Pynursla -Dawki route. When this matter was brought to light, the KHADC stepped in and found that the quarry operated without any permission. This is just one instance. There are several operating in a similar manner. Hence the number of quarries from where boulders are extracted and transported to Bangladesh are not strictly recorded. Systems operated by humans have to be constantly monitored because there is corruption and maladministration at every level, especially in places located at a distance from government supervision – such as district headquarters. The High Court may issues orders but it is the same Government machinery that has to implement the orders. This is where the problem lies and things remain unresolved despite Court rulings.

Badminton and Beyond

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Last week the Badminton Promotional Group, Shillong, conducted the Shillong Open Badminton 2026 on April 24-25 at the J. N Indoor Sports hall, Polo. Star shuttlers (both veterans and current) from Aizawl, Imphal, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Diphu and Guwahati, apart from Jowai, Garo Hills and Shillong, converged in Shillong to compete.

The major highlight of the Shillong Open Badminton 2026 was the participation of Assam's No. 1, Tanmoy Bikash Baruah; Bijoy Barman, silver medalist at the 47th Indian Masters National Badminton Championship; former Mizoram star shuttler Lamuanoma, also known as Monti; and Meghalaya's prominent and promising shuttlers, Goldenstar Kharbuli, Mebanker Shullai, Sixthbirth Marak, Gitchiak Sangma, the Kharbuki brothers, Elsa Umdor and others.

Badminton is very much a part of the sports culture in Meghalaya, particularly in places like Shillong and Jowai. However, Garo Hills has also emerged as the new hub for badminton and it is no longer a pastime game, but a significant sport discipline in the State. If one peruses Meghalaya's State Sports Policy 2019, one will find Badminton recognised by the State as a sport discipline for nurturing and development.

What is the Badminton Promotional Group?

The Badminton Promotional Group, Shillong, is a nascent registered society whose core objective is the promotion of sports, physical and mental well-being. It is currently networking with several Badminton Academies and coaches in the City in its endeavour to groom budding shuttlers. The Group comprises a collective of sports enthusiasts whose aim is to promote the sport of badminton in particular, provide a platform for young talents and shape them into professionals in the field. Since its inception the group, without governmental or corporate support but with the kindred spirit of sports lovers and well-wishers, was able to organize several tournaments, including the recently concluded Shillong Open Badminton 2026, with a high degree of proficiency and professionalism. It also has in its calendar the most crucial tournament, the Badminton Promotional Tourney, slated to be held on July 23-25, 2026. This promotional tournament is specifically designed to provide space for young players under the age of 11, 13, 15, 17 and 19 years old, respectively, to compete and display their skills.

Organising Sports Championship for North East: Challenges and Opportunities

A common trait ingrained in the psyche of many ethnic groups in the North East is that we are not overly fussy about our surroundings. We have the resilience to survive anywhere with just basic needs and as a result, North East athletes often go wherever they are sent, never complaining or grumbling, even if the facilities are poor. However, times have changed and this mindset must evolve. Athletes are not garbage to be dumped in one room; they are vital citizens and deserve access to better facilities at all levels: local, regional or national. They must be able to compete in improved environments that support their potential and growth.

North East India is a subcontinent by itself and is home to thousands of ethnic/indigenous communities with each having its own language. Thus, one of the major challenges in organising sports tournaments for the North East is the language barrier and the organisers of the Shillong Open Badminton 2026 faced a similar issue communicating with the participants. Communication, both off-court and on-court, was challenging for the organizers. A couple of instances of miscommunication occurred before and during the commencement of the Shillong Badminton Open 2026 which nearly led to a few breakdowns and serious hiccups. It began with a group of young shuttlers who came all the way from Diphu in Assam. These youngsters had converged at the stadium a day before the Championship only to find that their names were not included in the schedule of play and fixtures. In fact, these young shuttlers had submitted their entries before the due date and the fixtures for a particular event had to be redrawn to include them in the playing schedule. However, communicating to them that the matter was resolved and that they must report at the Umpires' table on the day of the tournament became an arduous exercise.

The organizers of the Shillong Open Badminton 2026 faced constraints due to limited facilities and a major drawback of the tournament was poor communication, with the language barrier being a contributing factor. This poor communication nearly caused star shuttlers from Assam to lose by a walkover, potentially jeopardizing the tournament. Similarly, during the final match of men's doubles in the 80+ category, an intense rally led to verbal and physical abuse between players. The scuffle was triggered when a shuttle fell on the sidelines and the subsequent point was awarded by the umpire to the winning pair, which the opposing pair vehemently objected to. While the local umpire politely explained her decision in English, which was a foreign language to all parties involved, the language barrier caused the shuttlers to vent their frustration and direct their anger at each other instead.

On the other hand, the opportunities provided by the Shillong Open Badminton 2026, especially, for the local budding talents are huge. It was a platform for them to learn from experienced shuttlers and to compete with the best. Moreover, sports has a big role to play in uniting people and propagating the concept of peaceful co-existence amidst diversity in cultures, languages, food habits, religious affiliations et al. In his speech at the opening of the Shillong Open Badminton 2026, the Chief Guest and MLA of Mawsynram, Bah Olan Suin, aptly stated that the Shillong Open Badminton 2026 provided the platform for the shuttlers from different North Eastern states to come together not only to exhibit their skills but also to build friendship and bridge the gap among different communities through sports.

North East India is not one single entity, rather it is the home of multi lingual, multi cultural, multi ethnic groups and identities. Politically, these diverse community groups were brought together via treaties and agreements into the Indian Union. However, on the socio-cultural aspect the various communities of North East are suffering from stigmatization and stereotyping by the majority community in the plains of India. The region is isolated and still suffers from economic underdevelopment and underrepresentation in the field of sports, etc. Across the region, especially in Meghalaya, sports development is still a distant dream as the State is lacking in infrastructure and state-of-the-art facilities to train and equip athletes of various sports disciplines. However, there is no dearth of talent in Meghalaya and these talents have put the State on the National Map by their achievements, but these achievements are not the product of a well-built system. Rather, their achievements were due to their sheer grit and determination and they excelled despite many shortfalls. It is purely the love for sports and the enthusiasm among private citizens across the State that Meghalaya is still witnessing football leagues, sports tourneys, and championships organized by various sports associations and groups of individuals at different seasons annually.

The Diminishing Role of English as the Lingua Franca:

For more than a century, the various regions within North East India were colonized by the British, who brought the English language with them. As a result, English became the medium of instruction and communication at every level. Undoubtedly, English has served as a unifying force among the diverse ethnic and indigenous communities in North-East India, helping to ease tensions and conflicts that might otherwise have turned the region into an ethnic minefield.

English remains the lingua franca for the people of North East India. However, in recent times, the usage and standard of communication in English have been rapidly declining due to various socio-political reasons. This decline has led to misunderstandings and fostered suspicion among communities. Such trends are unhealthy and threaten to undermine the peaceful co-existence among North East India's diverse populations.

The communities of North East India must decide whether to enhance their English communication skills and retain English as their lingua franca or to explore alternative options such as searching for a new common language or should they allow the Hindi language to replace English?

Despite the challenges and miscommunications largely caused by language barriers, the Shillong Open Badminton Tournament 2026 was a grand success. The organizers would like to express their gratitude to all participants, supporters, and well-wishers who contributed to this achievement.

(The writer is a member of the Organizing Committee, Shillong Open Badminton 2026)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Crying Wolf Too Often..!

We all know the old fable of the shepherd boy, and perhaps because it is so simple we dismiss it too easily. Yet some of the deepest political truths are often hidden in children's stories. A boy runs into town crying that wolves are attacking his sheep.

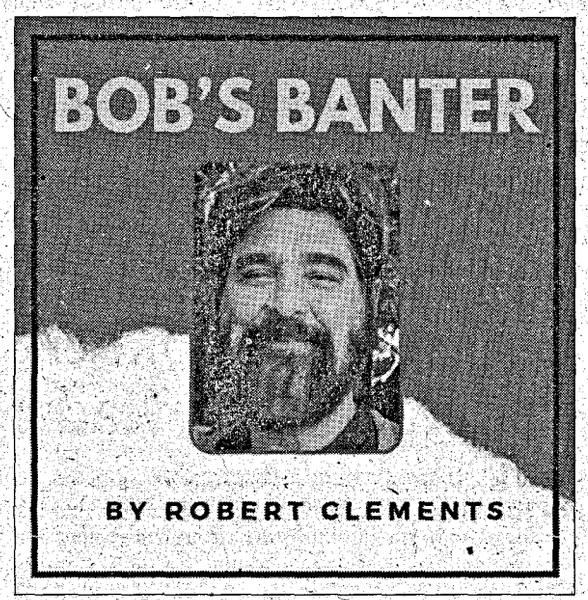
Villagers abandon work, rush to help, and discover they have been fooled.

He repeats the deception. The villagers run again. Then one day the wolf actually comes. The boy screams, the sheep scatter, but nobody comes. Trust had died before the sheep did. And that old fable came back to me as I heard the Prime Minister address the nation after the Women's Reservation Bill was defeated.

Let us be honest, the Opposition was not opposing women's representation. Their objection was to what many believed was hidden behind the bill, the delimitation issue tucked inside like a Trojan horse.

And when a Trojan horse is detected, should one go before the country sounding wounded as though some noble effort had been sabotaged, or should one admit the strategy was seen through and move on?

That was where the shepherd boy entered my thoughts.



Because if people begin to feel they are being outwitted too often, if every dramatic gesture hides some political calculation, then even sincere appeals begin to sound theatrical. And that is dangerous, because leadership does not run on speeches. It runs on credibility. A leader may command attention through rhetoric, but trust is another matter. Trust is earned slowly and squandered quickly.

I sometimes think politics resembles those old medicine sellers who used to board trains. They would wave little bottles and shout that their tonic cured everything from stomach pain to heartbreak.

The first time passengers listened.

The second time they smiled indulgently.

By the tenth station nobody looked up from their newspaper. Even if the medicine worked, exaggeration had destroyed belief. It is the same when leaders cry wolf too often. When every issue is painted as a grand betrayal or every setback as a national wound, people ow weary.

There will be real wolves one day. Security crises. National emergencies.

Moments when a leader genuinely needs a people united behind him. But unity cannot be switched on like election lights. It cannot be manufactured in a speech. It is built over years through trust, and trust comes when citizens feel they are not constantly being manipulated for votes.

That speech, let us admit it, was also aimed at women voters in West Bengal before an election. Citizens may not use terms like constitutional strategy or Trojan horse politics, but they sense when a horse carries more than cavalry. Usually before it enters the gate.

What amused me, though perhaps amused is the wrong word, was the wounded tone after the bill was blocked.

As though the nation had missed some magnificent act of generosity.

But the ordinary citizen is often much shrewder than politicians imagine. I have found the common voter frequently wiser than television panellists. Outside the shouting debates, people quietly observe.

They know when they are being persuaded and they know when they are being played.

That is why the shepherd boy story survives. It is not really about wolves. It is about what happens when credibility is spent too cheaply.

A leader must be believed when he speaks, not merely applauded. Applause can be manufactured. We have become experts at that. Crowds can be assembled, slogans choreographed, emotion stirred.

But belief cannot be staged. It has to be deserved. And if one keeps crying wolf for political effect, then one day in some real emergency, when a rallying call is genuinely needed, the people may fold their arms and say, there he goes again. That would be a tragedy, not for a leader, but for a nation.

I have seen this even in ordinary life. In a housing society there is always one gentleman who predicts disaster every month. "The building will collapse," he warns, because he is interested in redeveloping his colony and getting an extra room for his married son.

Residents panic. Nothing happens.

Next month another alarm. Nothing again. Then one monsoon a real crack appears in his house, and he shouts in genuine fear, but nobody attends the meeting.

They assume it is his hobby. That is how trust dies. Quietly. With folded arms and raised eyebrows. And once dead, trust does not rise easily.

Sometimes I think statesmanship lies not in how often a leader addresses the nation but in how carefully he guards the value of speaking. If every trumpet blast is called war, who will march when war actually comes?

If every disagreement is portrayed as catastrophe, how will people respond when catastrophe truly arrives? This is why crying wolf is not just a fable. It is political wisdom.

My prayer is that we do not reach a day when the real wolf stands at the door and the nation shrugs. Because countries can survive policy errors. They can survive even poor politics. What they struggle to survive is the slow erosion of trust between ruler and ruled. Once that goes, even the loudest call for unity becomes an echo.

And so that old shepherd boy still warns us. Not about wolves, but about credibility. About the danger of using alarm too cheaply. About the folly of confusing applause with belief.

Because when the real wolf comes, and one day it always does, only trust will bring the villagers running. And if trust has been squandered, the joke, as in all bad politics, will finally be on us...!

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

Letters to the Editor

Are women employees safe in the corporate world?

Editor,

Parenting a daughter is undoubtedly a lifelong labour of love. Parents pour their heart and soul into their children, believing that every milestone is a hard-won victory born of years of sacrifice. Once their studies are completed, parents send their daughters into the professional world with pride. They trust that the towering glass offices of corporate India will be safe harbours for talent and dignity. But let's be real, what happened at the TCS office in Nashik has completely knocked down that hope for countless parents across the country.

What unfolded in Nashik was a horrifying betrayal of the human spirit. When eight women finally gathered the courage to file nine FIRs, they revealed a rot that had been festering for four long years. Behind the shiny facade of a global giant, a predatory culture was allowed to flex its muscles! These unsuspecting woman employees fell prey to perverted seniors who operated like they could get away with anything. From stalking and lewd comments to the monstrous act of rape and torture under false promises of marriage, the workplace turned into a total hunting ground.

Team leads allegedly isolated victims on rooftops and snatched away their phones to block their cries for help. The most unforgivable part is the role of the HR department, headed by a woman herself. Shockingly, she was allegedly among the masterminds, luring women into relationships.

Allegations of forced religious conversion reveal an evil motive. It aims not just to break a woman's body, but to crush her very identity and character. Well, it took a forty-day undercover operation by the Nashik police to expose the depth of this filth.

Now, every parent must ask how much they are really willing to tolerate. It is heartbreaking to think of a mother or father praying for their daughter's career while she was actually fighting for survival in a den of wolves. The million-dollar question is why a company with that much goodwill and integrity cannot actually "assure the safety" of its employees. The government needs to take a serious note of this. Exemplary action must be taken against such companies immediately. Their license to operate should be cancelled forthwith. I believe, until a woman can go to work without fearing for her life or dignity, our talk of a "civilized" society is a total lie. We are living in an illusory civilization if we cannot protect the daughters we claim to cherish!

Incidentally, there is an even more shocking incident. A 19-year-old boy from Amravati, Maharashtra, sexually exploited 180 girls, including minors, and recorded over 350 obscene videos. Instead of focusing on his studies, he had the brazen guts to outrage the modesty of so many innocent girls. Reports indicate that he even coerced them financially, and in some cases forced them into prostitution. Is this what we now call "youth empowerment" in modern times? Moreover, why has it become so easy for a predator to exploit young girls these days? This is a serious concern.

In the end, the pressing question is where our new generation is heading. Is the government no longer "accountable" to society and its well-being? Why are the concerned authorities so incapable of addressing the roots of this increasing and glaring moral bankruptcy? It is difficult to trust a government that seems to value "Wi-Fi" more than the dignity and safety of women. I daresay, if we remain silent in this and do not raise our voice for the safety of female employees, we certainly become "silent partners" in the crime.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Breaking the Silence: The Urgent Need for Menstrual Health Reform

Editor,

Through the columns of your newspaper, I wish to draw public and administrative attention to a critical yet chronically neglected issue: the pervasive lack of menstrual health awareness and the substandard state of hygiene facilities in educational institutions within Meghalaya.

While menstruation is a fundamental biological process, it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. It is particularly disheartening to note that even forward-looking frameworks like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 lack a robust, dedicated focus on menstrual health education. This omission suggests that, despite our societal "progress," the health and dignity of menstruating individuals remain a low priority in our national discourse.

This is indeed the national issues, where as of now the Nine Judge Constitution Bench led by CJI Surya Kant of Supreme Court of India is hearing the Sabrimala Temple case regarding women's entry, particularly during Menstrual and religious freedom.

The infrastructure on the ground tells a similarly disappointing story. In most educational institutions, sanitary napkin dispensers—where they exist at all—are frequently empty, broken, or neglected. This is not merely a logistical failure; it is a form of institutional negligence that disrupts a student's right to an uninterrupted education and basic physical comfort.

Furthermore, the deep-seated social stigma continues to manifest in our daily interactions. The common practice of shopkeepers wrapping sanitary products in black plastic or old newspapers as if they were contraband is a stark reminder that menstruation is still viewed through a lens of shame.

It is high time we transition from "hiding" menstruation to highlighting it as a matter of public health, gender equality, and human dignity. I urge the concerned authorities to:

- Mandate comprehensive menstrual health education in the school curriculum, more so in the Co-educational institutions.
- Ensure the consistent supply and maintenance of hygiene products in all public and educational buildings.
- Launch community-driven campaigns to dismantle the social taboos that hinder progress.

I hope your publication will serve as a catalyst for this necessary change, prompting the authorities to move beyond policy gaps and toward meaningful action.

Yours sincerely,
Amanika Bhusal
Shillong

An Insightful Discourse

Editor,

I wish to sincerely commend the thought-provoking article titled "When Women Ruled? Reclaiming Khasi Political Traditions" by Bhogtoram Mawroh, published on 29th April, 2026, in your esteemed daily.

It was truly interesting to go through the write-up, which is both informative and engaging. The author has beautifully brought together history and folklore, giving readers much to think about. What impressed me most was the discussion on women's participation in politics, clearly showing that women have long held important positions in Khasi society.

The reference to the 1835 Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India by R. Boileau Pemberton adds strong support to the argument. It shows that women were not just silent observers but active participants, even eligible for the post of Syiem. The account of women's role in the early formation of Hima Shillong further makes it clear that leadership was not limited to men.

The article also gently highlights certain cultural practices that may have affected women negatively over time. At the same time, it rightly suggests that these practices may not reflect the true spirit of Khasi traditions, which originally gave women respect and an important place in society.

What makes this article stand out is its balanced approach. It does not call for sudden changes that may disturb traditions, but instead suggests going back to the roots and reviving the positive values that already existed. This thoughtful approach respects cultural sentiments while also encouraging progress.

In today's time, when discussions on gender often create confusion between tradition and modern ideas, this article reminds us that sometimes the best way forward is to learn from our own past.

I appreciate the author for this meaningful contribution and thank your publication for sharing such valuable perspectives with readers.

Yours etc.,
Jairaj,
Via email

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