

# BOUNDARIES OF DREAMS

The 1947 Partition  
impacted both  
indigenous & non-tribal  
communities that once  
flourished in the  
contiguous landmass



Preserving & promoting  
Pnar language  
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It's wrong to  
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EDITOR EM Jose  
FEATURES EDITOR Nabamita Mitra  
WEBSITE ADMIN David Thubru  
DESIGN CONSULTANT Jeetu Pradhan  
PRINTING CONSULTANT Tapan Chanda  
OFFICE Mawbynna, Madan Laban  
Shillong: 793004  
PHONE 9436706986  
EMAIL meghalaya.monitor@gmail.com



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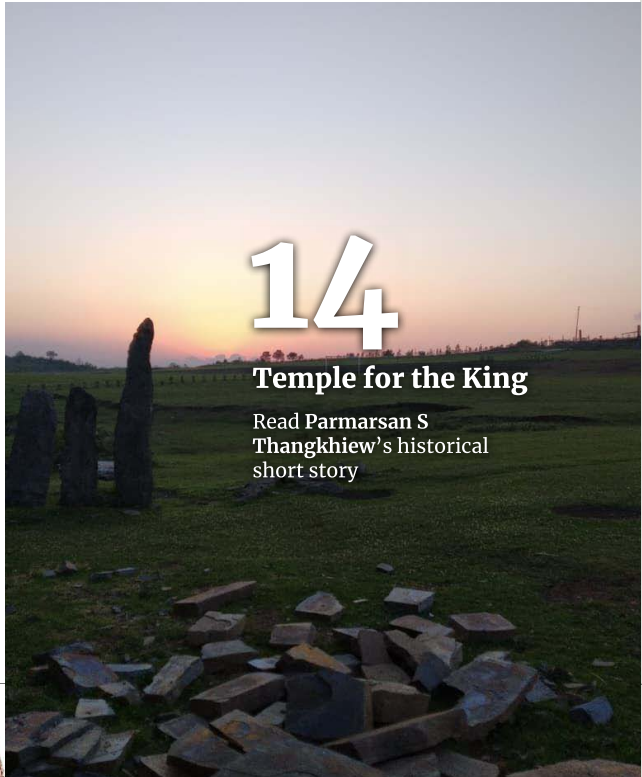
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Dear readers,

After a short but arduous journey, we have come to a point where we feel it is important to further strengthen our association. And, what is a better way to expand our horizons than launching a yearly magazine?

Yes, this December edition of the *Meghalaya Monitor* magazine is the premiere issue. After all your support, we owed this to you. I co-founded *Meghalaya Monitor* with Nabamita Mitra, an old colleague and friend, in May 2021. It was not an easy step to take, especially after being cocooned inside a restrictive environment that barely offered a chance or appreciation for blue sky thinking. But it was a necessary step. Our resources included all our savings in the EPFO, a sackful of confidence and a dream to make a difference.

Four years on, we are still a small editorial team of two, a group of contributors who are also our well-wishers, and freelancers. Our struggles have not ended, but our confidence has also not eroded. Challenges are there, and they will remain. But there is also encouragement, which comes from your overwhelming support. And, there is our allegiance to honest and meaningful journalism.

Since our inception, we have integrated, upgraded, introduced and improved several features to make ourselves relevant amid cut-throat competition. We have raised tough questions in the power corridor of the state, ensured the administration’s accountability, demanded transparency in governance and made public representatives answerable to you, the electors. At the same time, we have led the way to responsible journalism. We are the only media organisation in the state, and probably in the North East, which gives equal traction to literature as politics and other issues. We have a dedicated *Book Review* section. We have also introduced *Insights*, an analytical session on urgent topics, on YouTube.

We are also open to ideas from you, our readers and viewers, on how we can live up to your expectations.

Being a journopreneur is a juggling task. You have to be the editor, reporter, salesman, social media manager, etc. This means that we have to learn many new skills to keep up with the fast-evolving digital media platform. We have to unlearn many old-school methods and adopt new ways of doing business. We also have to keep ourselves updated about new tools and technology, and learn to be agile and alert against unknown enemies. All this is besides the regular journalism. It is exhausting, to say the least. Nonetheless, the learning experience is exhilarating. At times, we pat our own backs and tell ourselves what a great job we have been doing. It becomes important to avoid getting crushed under stress.

When we decided to bring out the magazine, it seemed like a mammoth task given our existing bandwidth. But we knew we had to do this. So, we took up the gauntlet and strode ahead without much ado. We brainstormed for days about how to structure the magazine and how to blend various flavours to reach out to all our readers. After a lot of discussion, we decided to make this yearly magazine in a way that it unburdens you from the rigours of daily politics and other pressing issues. Of course, there is a dash of politics, a pinch of mainstream issues and a splash of socio-economic analysis. But everything is in the right proportion to whet your appetite.

I would like to end by reiterating that this magazine is not only an effort to add another facet to our journalistic endeavour but also a way to acknowledge your support and reach out to many more readers like yourself. Also, it would not have been possible without our web admin, design consultant and printing consultant.

The magazine will be available both in physical and digital versions. We would look forward to hearing from you on this. Keep reading and support independent and honest journalism.

Thank you.  
EM Jose  
Editor



# CAN PUBLICITY BLITZ HELP CONRAD & CO. SURVIVE?

NPP's PR stunts won't be enough to keep MDA afloat; now's time for some solid action, writes Philip Marwein

**A**s the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) prepares to enter its eighth year in 2026, an assessment of its performance becomes imperative, especially when the state crossed the 50th milestone three years back.

The state's performance over five decades is, of course, a reflection of the earlier governments and their performance, and a palimpsest of past policies that have shaped the present. So, in assessing the MDA, it will be unjustified to prepare a scorecard based solely on the state's performance over the years. Again, it will be nothing short of parti pris if the MDA's performance is not linked to the various maladies the state witnessed in the last seven years.

The MDA, led by the National People's Party, must be congratulated for bringing in stability — a necessary condition in the state's politics for taking any developmental measures — in less than a decade of its being in the government. In this aspect, it overshadowed its predecessors of the last 25 years, who made Meghalaya infamous for political volatility.

The ruling NPP has gained numerical strength from just 26 legislators in 2023 to 33 MLAs today through mergers and by-elections, in the house of 60. The party was able to garner seven more MLAs at the cost of the Opposition (five of Congress and two of PDF) and got the support of two Independents. The five Trinamool Congress MLAs and four from VPP remained committed to their respective parties, at least for now.

The Meghalaya Assembly elections are slated

for 2028, and it will be difficult to predict how many legislators on the Opposition bench will withstand the political tug-of-war.

However, judging by the trend, one can confidently guess that the existing leadership will have a safe passage in the next power play. And this is despite the disappointments that the MDA meted out to its electors.

## Buried under mining mishaps

The burden of illegal mining on the state has been insurmountable, and it has equally weighed on the MDA government. With reported connections of the former NPP minister and the CM's big brother, James Sangma, with coal mining and miners, the repeated allegations of rampant illegal coal extraction and transportation despite a ban by the National Green Tribunal have dented the NPP's credibility to a great extent. While the party's media propaganda and communications skills have tried to offset the impact, the efforts so far have not been too convincing.

The first year of the MDA government was shaken by the near-fatal attack on two activists, who were independently investigating illegal mining in East Jaintia Hills, and the Ksan mine mishap, in which 13 workers were buried alive inside a rat-hole mine. This followed another accident in 2021, this time too in East Jaintia Hills.

As the NPP and its allies recovered from the double whammy in just three years, the government changed its coal mining narrative. This time, it was all about safeguarding livelihood through scientific mining. Conrad



The MDA, led by Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, must be congratulated for bringing in stability — a necessary condition in the state's politics for taking any developmental measures — in less than a decade of its being in the government. Photo by MM



Conrad Sangma addresses the National People's Party members on the occasion of Lambor Malngiang's joining the party on November 13 at the NPP office in Shillong. Photo by MM

Sangma came back to power in 2023 as the prodigal son.

The chief minister and his MDA government have taken the credit for starting scientific mining in the state after over a decade. But that feels more like a ruse than a real achievement. While the opening of the scientific mines was done in the presence of a chosen media house, nothing much is known about how the mines are running and whether they are complying with all the environmental guidelines.

Add to this was the allegation by the Hynniewtrep Integrated Territorial Organisation (HITO) that said the state government flouted the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, by bringing in the incidental limestone approval. HITO said that only through this approval, the government enabled seven cement plants to escape payment of approximately Rs 400 crore to the government coffers.

## Should we read between the lines?

Over the decades, the education system in Meghalaya has suffered the brunt of poor policies, corruption and a lack of political will to reinvigorate the system that was once the best in the North East. It is in a shambles despite several measures taken under the MDA government. The ground reality does not match the efforts, and the numerous programmes with fancy names barely show improvement. Is there anything in the policies crafted by the new government that requires reading between the lines? If so, then that too is illegible to understand the intention of the disposition.

A severe lack of infrastructure in rural and

remote areas, a poor foundation of the system, a lack of accountability and transparency, rampant subcontracting of the teaching job and even too many officiating of the teaching job, proxy school teachers, defective and unreasonable fee structures for students and pay structures for teachers, and gross irregularities have marred the quality of education, and it reflects on the state board examination results.

It must be pointed out that education is highly politicised and commercialised, which has done a lot of damage to the sector. Are politicians and bureaucrats experts in laying down education policies? Education must be the responsibility of real educators, who must be the main stakeholders in creating a blueprint for the education system. Besides, there should be short, mid and long-term plans for the system to gradually find vigour and become dynamic. Policies that cater to only long-term goals or measures serving short-term requirements will not yield results in solidarity.

## Ailing for a long time

Another sector that has become a bone of contention is healthcare. There are two categories of healthcare services — public and private. The private sector, which is free from red tape and political interference, can deliver much better and faster services. But in the government healthcare system, the chain of command has several layers, which jeopardise services. Hence, it takes a lot of time to deliver healthcare to the needy. The hundreds of poor patients, especially those from the rural pockets of the state, who are depending on public healthcare, have much to be disappointed.

## Education has suffered the brunt of poor policies, corruption

These woes do not end in healthcare and are widespread in other sectors, too. One stark failure is the Smart City project. Other than periodic deception behind the façade of beautification, we have barely witnessed any concrete Smart City Project come to life. This is true even in Shillong, the most prominent town in the state and the nerve-centre of tourism and economy.

Lastly, the primary sector has been neglected for years now. The farmers are left to suffer. Despite the tall claims by the leader of the present dispensation, little has been done for the farming community. The sector demands drastic steps to alleviate farmers' plight and make agriculture a blossoming sector.

The NPP's social media engagement and fine publicity campaigns aside, the MDA government's slips can barely be missed. It would be a fallacy on the part of the NPP leadership to think that only publicity stunts can help it keep the citadel of power in the state. Though two years is too short a time to right the wrongs, the current government must still try to correct its course instead of choking in its own hubris. ■

*(Philip Marwein is a veteran roving journalist who has reported on Meghalaya's politics and the socio-economic churning in the state's remote and rural pockets. Views are personal)*



**W**hen India was partitioned in 1947, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo people found themselves forcefully trans-national, severed from all ties.

They found themselves away from their homes and hearth, kinsmen and their cultivable lands. The story of these communities with their experiences with boundary-making between India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), deprivation and anxiety over a space that they have traditionally cohabited from the pre-colonial to the contemporary times has escaped the attention of policymakers and academics alike. But bordered lives were a lived reality, and therefore, when 20 years ago, the Government of India and Bangladesh decided to undertake a joint survey, the leaders of these local organisations operating in the Indo-Bangla border also resolved to make physical verification of the Main Pillars of Indo-Bangla border, hold meetings, conduct awareness campaigns among people and their Dorbars in the Indo-Bangla areas.

These communities, indigenous to Meghalaya, a state born in 1972, were victims of continuous harassment and trauma, like the displaced from the plains of Sylhet and Bengal, with whom they cohabited a shared geography. While the partition of 1947 did not deal with Meghalaya per se, it had a disruptive role in the geography that formed the southern boundary of Meghalaya, once the state was born and the people who resided there.

#### Boundary Commission & concomitant tension

When the focus shifted to the Boundary Commission after the Sylhet referendum, to complete the process of partition and boundary demarcation, the Khasi-Jaintias agitated before it, but to no avail. It is interesting to note that the Dewan of Cherra State, David Roy, pointed out in his memo that the Khasi State, Cherra, would have to take necessary steps if this Commission were to deal with the boundary with the Khasi States, and Bholaganj and Cherra State in particular.

The first task that the Government of India had was the challenge of completing the accession of the Khasi Chiefdoms, more than two score in number, and to deal with the proper demarcation of the boundaries on the ground. While the Government was able to complete the accession of the 25 Khasi States into the Indian Union by 1948 — the last being the Syiem of Nongstoin, a chiefdom located on the India-Pakistan border — who signed it on the 19th of March, 1948, the completion of boundary demarcation was a far cry and could only be accomplished by 2016 when India and Bangladesh signed the Land-Boundary Agreement.

But as records and news reports from the grassroots would inform, the demarcation had been followed by a series of protests and obstructions by local communities to border fencing.

While the partition of Assam and the loss of Sylhet made the northeastern region landlocked, it also disrupted the traditional links that the tribal communities, such as the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos had with the East Pakistani districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh, respectively. These tribes were settled not only in the hill districts of Assam but also in the plains of Sylhet and

#### COVER STORY

# DIVIDED LIVES

The 1947 partition has impacted history & the progress of Meghalaya in recent years, & deformed the lives of both indigenous & non-tribal populace, writes **Binayak Dutta**







Mymensingh. At the stroke of a pen, these people were internally split into Indians and Pakistanis depending on their residence. The traditional inter-community linkages in the area were so strong that these hill tribes “for ages depended on their trade with the plains...”. A centuries-old, prosperous border-trade-based economy was killed by closing the borders and the erection of check-posts. This had an indelible mark on their life, livelihood and socialisation.

Many persons belonging to the indigenous community lost their livelihood and their homes, and were forced to relocate to other parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Census Report of 1951 says that, ‘... after partition, the Khasis near the Sylhet border have lost the facilities for marketing of their produce,

especially their oranges, pan leaves and potatoes in the *hats* (local markets) on the Sylhet border and buying rice and poultry in exchange. The action of the Pakistan authorities in often stopping the export of eggs, fish, apart from the usual ban on the export of rice, has caused the people on the border many hardships after August 1947...’

While the Khasis faced the utmost hardship, they could never reconcile to their loss of livelihood and the hardship of life because of partition. This hardship had an imprint on the Khasi and Jaintia people living in Shillong and coloured their attitude to life and administrative changes that came about after partition. Writing a *Note on Relief and Economic Rehabilitation Programme Of The Border People of United K-J Hills*, Nichols Roy

pointed out that, “It has all along been recognised both by the State Government as well as the Government of India that before partition, the economy of the border people of United Khasi-Jaintia Hills was linked up with the adjoining areas of Sylhet now falling in Pakistan...Due to trade restrictions imposed by the Pakistan authority the border produce has lost its market in East Pakistan and the border people have now not only to depend on alternative market in the Indian Union for their border produce but also for supply of foodstuff and other essential commodities...”

This hardship had a major impact on the Khasi-Jaintia psyche as they felt a sense of betrayal. Partition, therefore, had a much deeper impact on the common people and also coloured their attitudes in post-colonial politics.

#### The refugee imbroglio

But the greatest impact of partition on Assam was through the migration of refugees and demographic transformation of Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo Hills. Partition also made life difficult for non-tribal plainsmen communities who shared space with the indigenous. When the displacement of people and continuous flow of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan came about since 1948, the Census of 1951 revealed that as many as 14,509 persons moved into the hill areas, mostly to Shillong, as it was the capital of the composite state of Assam, born after the partition of the province in 1947.

This decision of the displaced from East Pakistan to settle down in Shillong was informed by the fact that it was a popular and familiar destination, as they were not only acquainted with the town as the provincial capital. The Census Report for 1951 informs that “displaced persons have contributed an increase of 5,990 to the total increase of the district i.e., United Khasi-Jaintia Hills, most of them, 4,698 having settled down in the capital i.e., Shillong. Only 1,292 having gone to the other areas of the interior.”

But one of the most difficult fallouts of partition in the areas that constituted Meghalaya was inter-ethnic social tensions, which ran very high with the migration of refugees to Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills district.

Shillong was a witness to a big cleavage in social relations in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills between the communities since the 1950s, when social tension subsisted at subterranean levels. Partition had an indelible effect on indigenous life, livelihood and socialisation as many persons belonging to the indigenous community also lost their livelihood and their homes in the border areas and were forced to relocate, but never really received any attention or support from the Indian state, which was otherwise available to the refugees from East Bengal and Sylhet.

Therefore, when the new Constitution of India was drafted, constitutional protectionism came to be popularly perceived by emerging tribal leaders as the only opportunity to convert these tribal areas into exclusive zones of tribal hegemony to regain prosperity lost to the Khasi and Jaintia, post-partition.

But parallel to the constitutional transition and unrest was the inflow and settlement of minority communities from East Pakistan into areas that would constitute Meghalaya. In Shillong, in the Khasi Hills district, about 66 acres of land were requisitioned by the Government of Assam in two blocks of

Bhagyakul estate and Umpling village for the settlement of 351 families on August 14, 1953. The population of Shillong subdivision had increased by 28.39%, from 295,968 in 1951 to 380,005 in 1961.

Over a period of time, displaced persons/refugees came to be settled in different localities of Shillong, such as Umpling, Laitumkhrach, (Bhagyakul), Malki, Dhankheti, Kench’s Trace, Rilbong, Laban, Mawprem, Bara Bazar, Thana Road, Quinton Road, Umsohsun, Riatsimthiah and Jaiaw, spread across Shillong where they lived amicably with the indigenous communities and accentuated the cosmopolitan character of the capital town of the composite state of Assam.

Post-partition displacement of people from East Pakistan brought many people to Shillong. Bengalis had a deep bond with Shillong as the capital of colonial Assam and with the Khasi and Jaintia Hills because of the geographical adjacency and commercial contacts over hundreds of years. As the displaced Bengali-speaking people relocated to Shillong, they set up educational institutions for the education of their children, but never made those institutions exclusive. One such institution is Laitumkhrach New Colony School, which was initially set up in 1940. It was relocated to New Colony in 1948 and upgraded to a government-aided school in 1959 under the inspiration of Sushila Sen, Subarna Prava Sen and Prava Dutta, and teachers like Shanti Lata Dutta and Bijali Dasgupta.

#### Influential and public-spirited persons

Those who were at the forefront of the institution in the initial years since 1947 were Arabinda Prasad Dutta, Amulya Bhushan Choudhury, Dhiren Chandra Dutta, Prava Dutta, PS Guha and his wife, Nishi Bhattacharjee and Ganendra Choudhury. The inflow of Bengali displaced gave a boost to these institutions at a difficult juncture of history, as students and teachers relocated themselves and rededicated themselves to public service in their new location of Shillong. Prabha Dutta, the secretary of the school, in her letter to the Government of Assam, pointed out that, “practically all the guardians whose children or wards are reading in the school are very poor children of displaced persons... I therefore approached the Relief and Rehabilitation Department with the request that they may be please (sic) to sanction necessary grant...”

Similar is the case of many other educational institutions. Another institution was the Lumparing Vidyapith, which was established with the initiative of Nripendra Chandra Dey and Rajendra Kumar Bhattacharjee, who was a teacher and had relocated from Panchakhanda in Sylhet to Shillong. Rasamoy Bhattacharjee, Rashendra Das, Gopesh Das, Provash Deb and Sitangshu Sekhar Das were at the forefront of the construction of the school in the initial years. While Rajendra Kumar Bhattacharjee was its first headmaster, Swaati Dey and Prithi Prabha Das were its first teachers.

Besides the school at Lumparing, the other educational institutes set up by the Bengalis were Rilbong PN Choudhuri Higher Secondary School, Tagore Memorial School, Rynjah, Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan High School, Rynjah, Smt. Sarojini Naidu Girls High School Rynjah, The Shillong Academy, The Polo Ground Buddha Bidya Niketan and The Hindu Mission Schools that became the nurturing ground for hundreds of refugee children and by default the transformatory platform for the refugee families that had migrated to the Khasi Hills.



(Left page) An aerial view of Pyrdiwah border village in East Khasi Hills and the Surma valley in Bangladesh; (below) a jawan from the women’s wing of the border forces on patrolling duty. Photos sourced

“  
Post-partition, the Khasis near the Sylhet border lost the facilities for marketing their produce, such as *pan* leaves, oranges and potatoes

The Shillong College was another major institution that came to be established on public initiative. The proposal for the college came in 1950, and a steering committee was formed with Rohini Kr. Choudhury as the chairman, Dr PK Gupta and Prof DP Chakraborty as joint secretaries. AC Roy, KN Dutta, AB Choudhury, KR Bhattacharjee and PG Mazumdar as members. The formal public meeting for the opening of the college was organised at the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Jail Road, in 1956 at the initiative of Satyen Kr. Kar and Subhash Chatterjee, and Binode Behari Ghosh as president. Sudhindra Chandra Dutta was the founder Principal.





The Indo-Bangladesh border fence in East Khasi Hills  
File photo by MM

## One of the most difficult fallouts of partition in the areas that constituted Meghalaya was inter-ethnic social tensions

The Women's College was established by the initiative of public-spirited individuals such as Bidhu Bhushan Dutta, Bishnu Pada Dutta, a lawyer by profession, and Basudeb Dutta Roy, a retired teacher of Political Economy from St Edmund's College.

Public-spirited Bengali lawyers such as Dharendra Nath Dutta, JN Deb Choudhury, Nripendra Mohan Palit and Prabin Kr. Choudhury played an important role in establishing the Shillong Law College, the first law college in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, in 1964 — an initiative that was carried forward by the next generation of lawyers, such as Bishnu Pada Dutta, who played an important role in streamlining the teaching programme since the inception of the college.

It is interesting to note that most of the public-spirited people traced their roots to East Bengal and Sylhet and who had lost their homes and hearths to the political vastitudes of partition. But this process has almost come to a standstill since anti-outsider agitations shook the state, primarily around the major towns like Shillong and Jowai, since 1979. Now, exodus of the non-tribal populace is the only reality here.

### The dark cloud of partition

In recent years, the shadow of partition appears to have resurfaced with the debates surrounding the project of border fencing along the Indo-Bangladesh border and the outbreak of protests by the indigenous communities of Meghalaya. The gradual out-migration of the Bengali middle-class population from Meghalaya to other cities of India due to political disturbances has only contributed to the erasure of the history of post-partition institution-building in Meghalaya.

While there was no doubt that the partition transformed the political and social situation in areas that constituted Meghalaya, its greatest impact was on the way the history of the state and its progress came to be perceived and represented in recent years. The shifting of central government offices to Assam and the criticism of the local organisations against the recruitment of non-tribals in public offices led

to a steady exodus of non-tribal government servants, many of whom were second-generation partition refugees, to the plains of Assam.

Non-tribal settlers, especially the partition-displaced who had descended to Shillong, sold their properties and relocated outside the new state. Small business holdings closed their businesses. Three major communal conflagrations and many small inter-community skirmishes since 1979 remind that despite the passage of more than seven decades since partition and 53 years since the statehood of Meghalaya, partition still resonates in the lives of the people who were displaced from East Pakistan.

For the indigenous population living in the border areas and who traced their origin to the War-Khasi and War Jaintia areas, the recent proposal of border fencing dashed all their hopes of recovering their lost control over lands that they originally owned and were now permanently part of Bangladesh, despite their claims of adverse possession. It was evident that both the plains people and the indigenous hill people of Meghalaya were affected by the dark clouds of partition. This is a reality that scholars are gradually coming to terms with. ■

(Binayak Dutta is a professor in the Department of History at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong)

## WESTSIDE STORY

# LAND OF THE BRAVEHEARTS

WKH shaped Meghalaya's socio-political history through great leaders, writes Daniel Stone Lyngdoh

**T**he term 'West Khasi Hills' is a westernised concept aligned with the British ideology, which started taking root in the region through Christian schools run by missionaries.

By the end of British rule, the concept had already taken root in the minds of the indigenous people, who adopted the West Khasi Hills in 1976, four years after Meghalaya's statehood. People from West Khasi Hills called themselves *ngi dei ki nong west*. For years following statehood, West Khasi Hills was considered a backward district, and people from the region were seen as illiterate and impoverished. And this was the bitter truth, for the region barely had any semblance of development.

However, the region's contribution to the state's history is extraordinary. Over the last two centuries, the area has produced some of the bravest leaders who shaped the politico-social history of Meghalaya and steered the state's present progress.

### Bravehearts of West Khasi Hills

Since the formation of the West Khasi Hills district in 1976, two more districts have been carved out of it. These are the South West Khasi Hills in 2012 and the Eastern West Khasi Hills in 2021. Nevertheless, all these areas come under one umbrella of the *district Jong Ki Nong West*. To understand the significance of this western part of the Khasi Hills, one has to delve into history and go back in time when tribal chiefs and kings reigned.

The West Khasi Hills area produced some of the indomitable spirits — like Tirot Sing Syiemlieh, a Khasi king during the colonial period, Monbhut Wahlang, Tirot Sing's confidant, and freedom fighters Lorshon Jarain



and Khein Kongor — who braved all adversities to uphold the tribe's rights.

The region also had leaders like Sngap Singh Syiemlieh, the last Khasi king, who fought against British tyranny at a time when other Khasi chiefs retreated.

An abandoned jeep along the road in Nongstoin, the district headquarters of West Khasi Hills.  
Photo by MM



# As Meghalaya marks 53 years of statehood, the West Khasi Hills region stands as a testament to progress and perseverance. Over the decades, this region has bridged the gaps that once set it apart

A glimpse of a wild stream flowing through the western part of the Khasi Hills, photographed at sunset. The region — which includes the West Khasi Hills, the Eastern West Khasi Hills and the South West Khasi Hills districts — has a unique craggy landscape



And who could forget the contributions of Phan Nonglait, the illustrious woman freedom fighter from Nongrmai village in Hima Nongkhlaw, who also fought against the British. She was the first female leader to spearhead a resistance movement against the colonial power.

### Modern-day heroes

In modern times, too, the West Khasi Hills had birthed rebels who stood their ground against the high-handedness of the governance system of an independent India. Among them was Deputy Syiem (Syiem Khynnah) Wickliffe Syiem of Hima Nongstoin, who envisioned an

independent Khasi land and refused to sign the Instrument of Accession Act. However, other Khasi Syiems betrayed him. He was forced to leave his homeland and take refuge in erstwhile East Pakistan.

Later, during the Hill State Movement, Hoping Stone Lyngdoh of West Khasi Hills was instrumental in organising volunteers in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. He was steadfast in his demand for a full-fledged hill state and rejected any piecemeal offer from the central government. It was his strong opposition and black-flag resistance that finally prompted the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to relent to the demand and declare Meghalaya as a separate state.

Hoping Stone Lyngdoh left behind a legacy as the father of the Hill State Movement. He never shied away from speaking the truth, and his courage inspired many modern-day leaders.

### Bridging gaps

As Meghalaya marks 53 years of statehood, the West Khasi Hills region stands as a testament to progress and perseverance. Over the decades, this region has bridged the gaps that once set it apart, rising to be on par with other districts of Meghalaya in the political, educational and social spheres. In doing so, it has played a pivotal role in strengthening and empowering the state as a whole.

### ‘Ki Nong West’: Defenders of the *jaitbynriew*

It is often said that truth needs no defence, yet no one can deny that the people of the West Khasi Hills have long been the defenders of the *jaitbynriew* — the Khasi community. Time and again, leaders from this region, particularly student leaders, have stood tall in the face of adversity. They have spoken the truth fearlessly, never bowed to pressure and upheld the virtues of honesty, courage and integrity.

The ‘Ki Nong West’, as they are fondly called, have earned a reputation as men and women of principle — those who never sell their conscience for convenience and who remain steadfast in protecting the collective rights and identity of their people. Their actions echo the age-old saying: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

### A legacy carved in resilience

Looking back at Meghalaya’s political history — from its formative years to the present—it is evident that the people of West Khasi Hills have always carried the torch of diligence and integrity. Though it may sound like a bold claim, it is one rooted in truth: the spirit of hard work and moral steadfastness has long defined this region.

Today, the united identity of the West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills and Eastern West Khasi Hills stands as an embodiment of Meghalaya’s enduring values. Their contribution, stretching back to time immemorial, continues to hold a vital place in the state’s journey towards unity, progress and self-determination. ■

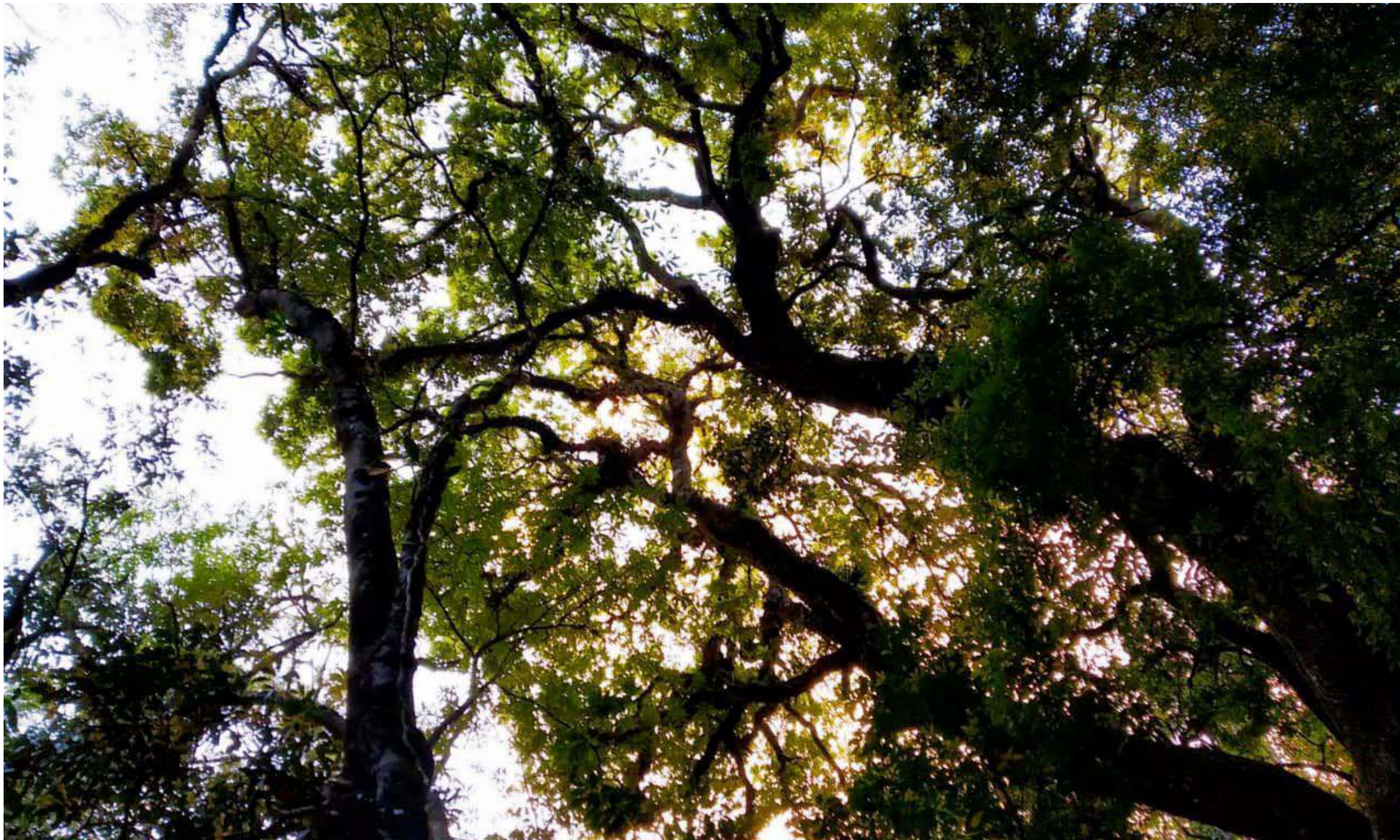
*(Daniel Stone Lyngdoh is an advocate of the Government of Meghalaya in the Supreme Court. He has authored multiple books in Khasi and English)*



## SHORT STORY

# TEMPLE FOR THE KING

For the *Syiem Khyinnah*, loyalty to the king & respect for mother's decision trump the love of his life. PS Thangkhiew narrates the young prince's story



The following events unfolded in the early part of the 19th century (circa 1830 AD) in the Nongsawli settlement in the Khasi Hills region. Nongsawli was the capital of the 'Hima' (kingdom).

The place was also the seat of the throne of Khiro Singh, the 'Syiem', or the King. It was the post-harvest month (U Risaw) preceding the onset of the cold season. It was early evening, and the air already had a wintry hint about it. The monsoon rains were less intense as compared to previous years, and it was becoming increasingly evident that cultivation of rice and other crops would be adversely affected. It was indeed fortunate that the ancestors of the Khasi tribe, in their innate wisdom, had decreed certain rainforests as being 'sacred' to protect them for the perennial supply from major water springs located near vast settlements.

The Syiem was presiding over an emergent meeting which had begun in the early hours of the morning in the Grand Council (Dorbar Hima) of the kingdom. Normally, such meetings were not scheduled just after standing crops were harvested. But certain serious developments, which could affect the stability of the Hima, had arisen, which called for urgent deliberations by the Dorbar Hima.

The meeting was being held in a big hall located about a mile or so from the King's palace.

The hall itself was basic in amenities and design. The round pillars were made out of roughly hewed sal logs, and the roof beams were of the local oak. The walls were made of planks of local pine timber, and the roof was woven out of a wild thatch which was impervious to even the heaviest of monsoon rain. Windows were built at regular intervals, but even so, the lighting was inadequate. With the meeting continuing in the late hours of the afternoon, lengthening shadows were slowly creeping into the meeting place, and dong musas (brush bundles soaked in animal fat) were brought in and lit to illuminate the big hall.

In attendance at the Dorbar Hima, were the myntris (Ministers) representing the major clans who, by customary tradition, accorded their approval for any major decision taken by the Syiem. For a Khasi Syiem was not an absolute monarch as per Khasi custom and convention, but could only make decisions with the consent of his subjects, who were represented by the 'Myntris'. Consensual decisions taken at respective village councils were again articulated at the meetings of the Grand Council. Thereafter, all decisions on issues taken up at the forum were endorsed by the myntris and approved by the Syiem.

Of the two agendas for the day, the first was an arrangement for permitting the British to build a road connecting the Brahmaputra valley from Rani town to Sylhet, lying in the Surma valley.

Essentially, the route would pass through the territory of the Hima. This was the core issue which disturbed most of the chiefs in the hall because of exposure to foreigners who would journey on the road. And though the proposal sent by one Captain David Scott had come with verbal assurances that there would be no interference in the affairs of the Hima, an air of apprehension was palpable in the gathering. But for the Khasi, the spoken word was inviolable (*ka ktien kaba tam*), and so the motion was carried.



# The religion of the Khasis of the time was based on a core belief of the existence of *U Blei* to whom all mankind owed their material and spiritual well-being

Little did anyone know about the insidious intent and ambition of the British Empire.

Besides, the Syiem and his myntris acknowledged the fact that for the Hima to consolidate its recent conquests of the land formerly ruled by the Ahoms, comprising the areas adjacent to the Brahmaputra River, some alliance with the white people was essential. As a result, the above proposal was endorsed by the myntris with U Khirot according to the final approval.

Directions were given to communicate the above decision to Captain David Scott. And the responsibility for this was given to U Khirot's trusted nephew, U Da Nang, the prince (Syiem Khyannah) and the next heir to the throne, who was present at the meeting. He was ordered to leave at the crack of dawn for Sohra, the seat of the Syiem of Hima Sohra and inform Captain Scott, who maintained a camp there. Da Nang was secretly pleased with the given task because it provided him with an opportunity to meet his lady love, who resided at Mawmluh village, close to the main village of Sohra though he kept this relationship a secret from his family and friends for a reason.

Thereafter, discussion continued on to the second agenda, which was regarding the information from the myntri from the Wahlang Clan that certain white men were propagating their religious teachings and beliefs, which were seen to be contrary to the faith and values of Khasi society. In fact, U Khirot had already been made aware of this issue for quite some time; since one of his spies, whom he had embedded in the inner circle of the Syiem of Sohra had some months ago informed him that the same white people had obtained a hearing with the Syiem himself.

Equally concerning was the information that they had been able to convince a number of people there to follow the teachings laid down in some holy book and worship a 'Son' of God who had died a long time ago in some foreign land and which they called the Holy Land.

Overall, the religion of the Khasis of that time was based on a core belief of the existence of a Supreme Creator (U Blei) to whom all mankind owed their material and spiritual well-being. All ceremonies, birth, death and unions could not be conducted without invoking his name. In fact, the common greeting with which all interactions began and ended was the word (Khublei) and which literally translates to 'God bless'. Even though the Khasis' neighbours in the plains of Assam and East Bengal were all adherents to the Hindu faith, and no doubt, some of their names and practices had been adopted in Khasi society, to date, there had never been a record of their religious leaders attempting to proselytise people of the hills.

It was again widely accepted that the religious beliefs and value systems followed by the Khasi tribe were the foundation for their socioeconomic and governance structure. The clans were the fulcrum of the tribe, and every ceremony was conducted within their respective ambit. Shamans, known as 'Lyngdohs', with a knowledge of augury and conversant with chanting invocations to U Blei or God, conducted the rituals. The system of governance and administration rested on this balance of power and a belief in a shared faith in one God. Thistime-tested hierarchy with the Syiem at its head could be disturbed if there was another parallel hierarchy, albeit only a religious one.

These issues dominated the discussion, and

with hardly any consensus emerging, the final decision was left to the king. U Khirot, after considering all the inputs, in his wisdom, suggested that a system of worship could be initiated wherein the Syiem could function as a flag bearer for the Khasi faith in addition to his other responsibilities. In fact, since hearing about the conversion of some of his tribesmen, albeit in the neighbouring kingdom, he recognised the potential threat to his people's way of life and to the authority of the Syiemship. He realised the need to come up with some measures to neutralise such threats. For this, he had sought the advice of his trusted Ahom advisor, Bor Phukan, who was a direct descendant of Lachit Phukan, the great Ahom general.

Bor Phukan was, in fact, a royal exile from the Ahom Kingdom, driven out several years earlier by palace intrigue set in motion by another prince who was his first cousin and hence his rival as a successor to the Ahom throne. In fact, this cousin had convinced the Ahom Raja that Bor Phukan was planning to overthrow him. The Raja gave orders for his immediate execution. Bor Phukan, who was alerted about this by another royal cousin, escaped by the skin of his teeth and fled in the dead of night towards the West Khasi Hills with only one of his trusted companions, known as Bor Dolo, who was also his bodyguard. However, along the way near a village known as Jirang, they were caught by their enemies, and Bor Dolo gave up his life protecting his lord. Ultimately, Bor Phukan reached Nongkhlaw ahead of his pursuers and saved himself from their swords by pledging his fealty to U Khirot.

Over the years, he became indispensable in advising the Syiem and Council, especially in strategies in martial and business dealings with the Ahom kingdom. In the process, he also would narrate many stories to U Khirot, who had an insatiable thirst for knowledge pertaining to other lands. One of them, about the evolution of the Ahom Empire from being tribesmen ruling a small area of Upper Assam in the 12th century to dominating major portions of Eastern India, was of special interest to U Khirot as he perceived the relevance to the idea he had in mind. In short, he came to the conclusion that the Ahom rulers adopted the religion of Hinduism not primarily for spiritual but rather for imperial purposes. Through this paradigm shift, they were able to harness resources and tap synergies required to fulfil their imperial ambition.

The transition from being adherents of an animistic to an organised religion necessitated the centralisation of places of worship, which could unite the people in faith and patriotism.

For Khirot, this concept was attractive for it would be akin to killing two birds with one stone; namely transition of the existing governance system to one in which religious practices would be synergised to counter the evangelical threat posed by the white men, and at the same time serve as a springboard for expanding the power and influence of his kingdom. So, without going into much detail, the king proposed the construction of a grand temple for worshipping U Blei, the supreme creator. This temple, he went on to suggest, would also have a complex which would serve as the permanent residence for the king and his family, and some prominent Lyngdohs to be nominated by their respective clans. So, apart from the religious ceremonies being held respectively by the clans, there could also be a common forum where all citizens could pray and worship U Blei.

The assembly pondered over these suggestions, and it was entirely possible that





the majority of them did not understand the long-term implications. However, the novel idea must have appealed to their sense of curiosity and perhaps the need for a change in the system, and it was approved in principle as harnessing the resources for the construction and other details was yet to be finalised. The discussion then shifted to the location and construction of the grand temple. Many sites were suggested, with each Myntri recognising the economic and strategic advantages of having such an establishment within its respective domain. Eventually, it was suggested that the temple could be constructed at the top of the majestic Kyllang Peak. This choice of the location itself entailed long and serious debate, as it was a subject in unknown territory.

In the meantime, Da Nang, who was hanging on to every word, reluctantly left the hall as the final decision had as yet not been pronounced. He was somewhat critical of the above plan as he sensed that somehow the balance between king and clans in the temporal as well as the spiritual sphere could change the Khasi way of life. To add to his concern, he was not permitted to voice his opinion as he had been invited only to observe the process of governance in the kingdom and also to assess the character and dispositions of the *myntris*. As he exited the hall, his eagerness for meeting his lady lover at Mawmluh was somewhat tempered by the fact that he could not partake in the grand feast being prepared for the meeting and in particular the tasty *tungrymbai*, a unique Khasi dish made with fermented soyabeans brought all the way from a place called Nartiang in the Pnar Hills. The strong aroma stoked his hunger pangs. In the smoky kitchen area, he could see big black iron pots in which wild boar, venison and other dishes were being cooked.



He could also smell the flavours of the steaming giant pots containing the *jadoh snam* (Rice cooked in the blood of boars). Buxom girls dressed in their best but protected by the *jainkyrsnah* (apron) were gossiping and humming as they went about their tasks. His appetite was further whetted by the heady aroma of the *Kiad Um*, a beer made with fermented red rice and rare forest herbs. And to add to his sense of deprivation, he could hear the musicians rehearsing for the evening near the kitchen area. The deep thump of the big drums, interspersed with the tapping of the small drums and counterpointed by the wail of a *tangmuri* flute, was intoxicating to say the very least.

Da Nang was well above average in stature, muscular and with a light brown complexion. He had slanted dark brown eyes and a prominent jawline, which indicated a strong character. A scar above his left eyebrow made him look older than his years. But he could break into a smile, and his expression would soften depending on the situation. Such as when he was in female company. Though phlegmatic by nature, he had been frequently advised by his uncle to control his impulsive nature, which could influence his decision-making. He looked young for his age but had experienced many a battle when he accompanied General Mon Bhut and the Khasi army on raids on villages in the plains. His tunic of blue and gold, worn by him for formal occasions such as the one worn today, was short-sleeved, and his left bicep revealed a healed cut wound inflicted by an Ahom warrior who did not live to tell the tale.

But though young in age, Da Nang was already a close confidante and advisor to the king in matters concerning governance and

identifying potential threats to the throne and his future. More importantly, he was a thinker. He knew that he was being groomed for the time when he would take over the reins of the kingdom. It was his assessment of the myntri from Mawyong, U Tharsingh, which further cemented his stature in his uncle's circle. U Thar till the other day had been considered to be a close aide to the King, but his broad smile and silver tongue masked a mind and concealed plans for usurping the King in favour of his cousin from the Mawyong area. Men who concealed naked ambition and greed behind a facade of sincerity existed in every country, and indeed, the Syiem of Sohra, U Kawang Singh, had already displayed his true colours by subjecting himself to the white men's bidding. And if Da Lang could foretell the future, he would have been shocked if he knew that even the great General Mon Bhut would one day betray his king due to his ambition.

Sitting together around campfires after a day of battle, he got to learn about the origin of the name of Mon Bhut, who revealed that his parents belonged to the Mon-pa tribe residing in a village somewhere in Eastern Bhutan in the Makashang mountains. (Himalayas). They were originally traders and travelled to the Khasi Hills to trade in mountain coral, which was prized by the Khasis for their ornamental value and yak tail which was used for ceremonial dances. Due to some unavoidable circumstances, they never returned to their home in the mountains and raised their family in the Khasi Hills. Mon Bhut would also tell stories about an uncle who was an oracle residing in the monastery at Bomdilla. Though he was a simple farmer, the uncle could transform himself into three monks who existed in previous centuries; since he possessed the ability to function as a medium

for the spirits who, through him, could foretell the future and recount incidents from the past. Da Lang would shiver upon hearing these tales despite sitting next to a big log fire.

So, Da Nang made his way home to prepare for the next day's journey and wondered what the outcome would be regarding the decision about the temple. Being preoccupied with his thoughts, he was quite unaware of his surroundings, of thick forests of cypress and oak and the sounds of the crystal-clear streams gushing in the distance.

Only when he approached his castle did he catch the odour of fresh tiger droppings and become alert. People had been informed through the system of *pyrta shnong*, (village news bearers) that a giant tiger (U Khla) had carried off a full-grown man from near the village and whose half-eaten body was found quite a distance away near Manai.

This was indeed unnatural, as the forests abounded in natural prey such as the wild boar and the sambar deer. Perhaps the tiger had been injured in a territorial fight with a fellow tiger. On the other hand, the stories of a giant dragon (*U Thlen*) who frequented the Pynursla area and who preyed on human flesh and who ranged far and wide were said to be factual. Hence, it could be very well possible that the tiger was not the actual culprit. These thoughts made the oak forests appear to be darker and more foreboding to Da Nang, and gripped his stabbing spear even tighter and loosened his sword in its scabbard. However, he passed through the forest without incident and started the long climb to the castle located just below the top of the ridge.

Just at the beginning of the climb was a memorial *mawbyinna* (monolith) of about thirty feet in height and five feet in width, erected in memory of his great-granduncle, the famous U Kissor Singh, who was responsible for laying down the foundation for the prosperity of the Hima. He bent and folded his hands in deference to his ancestor, as was the habit of a tribe which followed a system of ancestor worship. He never ceased to marvel at the sheer size of the monolith. He and others had been told that after the stone had been extracted from a quarry located near the Kyllang Peak, and made ready, a giant man from Nongkrem, whose name was U Mor Nongbri, had been engaged to lift the monolith and erect it in its present location. Tales of a giant named Mar Phalangki and living in earlier times in faraway Nartiang, and performing impossible physical tasks were equally well known, and there was no reason to disbelieve them either. For it was impossible in the present day for even a dozen of the strongest men in the Hima to repeat the above feat.

As he approached his residence, he glanced at its structure covered by a separate big hull-shaped roof and constructed with the hardy *dienglieng* timber used by the tribe for making boats. Smaller huts of similar shape surrounded the big house. Sometimes he wondered at the origins of the design of the houses and huts which resembled that of boats which had capsized full turtle. If one were to have a bird's-eye view of the settlement, the resemblance to a flotilla of boats with bottoms up would have immediately come to mind. But how was it possible that boats could be present so far inland?

Perhaps the answers could be found in those stories about the migration of his ancestors from somewhere in the East, by making their way over the seas. These stories were handed down by the elders as they sat in front of the 'Tyngiers' (hearths) in winter and they talked



## Only when he approached his castle did he catch the odour of tiger droppings. He became alert

about some vast temple complex where the king had his court and ruled only through the pleasure of his subjects. It was said that the Khasi race was one of the major clans who had a voice in the King's inner council. Other tales about the decline of this mighty kingdom and its eventual collapse were recounted. The elders narrated about the disconnect between king and his clans caused by his dependence on his coterie of advisers who were mainly comprised of priests residing in the temple.

So, the flight of his tribe a few hundred years ago to these hills may have really happened. It could be conjectured that they entered the Khasi foothills from the sea over a major tributary and then beached their vessels. And the Syiem at the time may have thought that after some years, they would return to their homeland and the boats would again be turned upright and launched onto the waters. But as time passed, the overturned boat design of the construction of houses may have simply served as a reminder of things past.

Dragging his mind back to the present, Da Nang realised that the subject raised at the meeting of the grand council was indeed relevant for the future development of his people. But he also realised that the durability and strength of the Khasi race was all about 'balance' of ruler and subjects. Spiritual matters were deliberately kept outside the domain of the king and were relevant only if brought up as an agenda at the Council meeting.

A temple would certainly upset that balance and consequences could not be foretold. The creation of a centre of worship with the Syiem as the flag bearer of faith and governance who would be advised by a coterie of priests would be a natural outcome. The fall of the above empire and the present decline of the Ahom kingdom could very well have been an outcome of earlier and similar circumstances.

As mentioned earlier, he had been secretly pleased when he was instructed to travel to Sohra, though he hid his feelings then at the meeting hall.

The reason is that he would have an opportunity to spend time with Ka Rupa Ksiar, his muse and secret lover, who resided at Mawmluh village. Translated to English, her name meant Silver Gold. She had translucent skin, and her eyes were almond-shaped. She had a frequent, shy half smile, which further

accentuated her cupid-bow-shaped lips. And when she smiled, he was at a loss to comprehend her true feelings for him at that moment. Sometimes, he had the feeling of being possessed totally by her.

It was said that her ancestress had been a princess from the East and had stowed away in a ship to avoid being married off as the fifth wife of an old king. It was further told that she had escaped detection by hiding in a big cane basket known as 'Loola' and eventually reached a seaport on the coast of the peninsula. Thereafter, she made her way towards the Pnar Hills and married a prominent local chief. In view of her background, the clan she began was known as the Loola clan, of which Rupa was one of the descendants. Economic and other circumstances may have compelled many members of the clan to migrate to the Mawmluh region near Sohra. Looking at Rupa, it certainly supported the theory that she was descended from some other race. Her facial structure was different from other women he knew, and her slim ankles were not common in Khasi damsels who possessed sturdy legs and limbs for obvious reasons.

It was whispered by Mon Bhut, amongst others, that Rupa was also an oracle as she possessed powers similar to those of his uncle at Bomdilla. Come to think of it, she did often mention in passing about a mighty king and a



great temple complex and the events which unfolded then, which were similar to the stories and legends he had heard. Perhaps these stories were handed down in her family through generation after generation. Maybe her ancestress could have been a princess in that grand temple. But he was deeply in love and did not care about all the whispers and rumours about her or her antecedents.

No matter that his mother, the domineering Risimon Syiem, had already identified a bride for him. He would tackle that problem when the right time came along. His future bride was named Lasubon Syiem, and she was the favourite niece of Kawang Singh, the Syiem of Sohra. A marriage would repair the relationship between the two kings who had recently become suspicious of each other due to recent developments. Lasubon was very attractive, and it was known that when she had participated in the recently held Nongkrem Dance for virgin damsels at Smit Village, which was the seat of the Syiem of Shillong, a record number of male dancers had turned out hoping to catch her eye.

In Khasi custom, there is no bar on marital union between royals and commoners. As is the case in the organisation of villages, where the king's house was surrounded by the huts of his subjects. But it was equally well known that she had been chosen for Da Nang. It was indeed a dilemma for him, torn between loyalty to his king and love for his woman. He needed to shut

**It was said her  
ancestress had  
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out these problems from his mind as he began to prepare for his journey. He had sent word to his close friend and companion, U Lurshai for they would make the trip together.

The route would take them over the rolling hills of the area and then a descent into the steep slopes of the Laitrngew valley before the ascent to Sohra. He marvelled at the foresight and ingenuity of his forefathers, who had erected root bridges over previously impassable rivers and which cut his journey time almost in half. He would try to reach Sohra by late evening, provided there were no incidents on the way. He would communicate U Khirot's decision to David Scott, which was the easier task.

Though Rupa had never stated that Da Nang should commit to her, he could recognise the subtle hints, and he realised that he would have to decide on this matter on the following day. He also realised that going against the wishes of his mother and the family would jeopardise his succession to the throne. And once he had decided, he knew that there would be no turning back for him one way or the other. ■

*(Parmarsan S Thangkhiew is Chairman,  
Meghalaya Farmers' Empowerment Commission)*

Footnote: Events, situations and individuals appearing here are fictional except for a couple of characters and some events which have been depicted to provide a historical context.

Photos by MM



**Meghalaya Farmers'  
(Empowerment) Commission**

The Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission was constituted through an Act of the State of Meghalaya vide Notification No.LL(B).18/2019/42.—The Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission Act, 2019 (Act No. 22 of 2019) Dated the 16th October, 2019.

**VISION**  
Empowering Farmers of Meghalaya

**MISSION**  
The Commission shall engage itself in the formulation of long-term and short-term policy measures for the benefit of farmers and devise ways and means for better implementation of Government policies relating to agriculture, allied sectors, food processing and value chain development in the State of Meghalaya.  
The Commission shall examine various facets of farming activities including but not limited to climate change, sustainable farming practices, implementation of various commodity specific Missions, markets and international agreements, and their impact on farmers and farming activities and would assist the Government in formulating appropriate policies and programmes for mitigation as well as adaptation.

**CONTACT DETAILS:**  
To know more about Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission:  
You can login to: [info@mfec.in](mailto:info@mfec.in)  
You can follow us in Social media (Instagram, Facebook and twitter)  
Contact No: 0364-3573470/9863978972



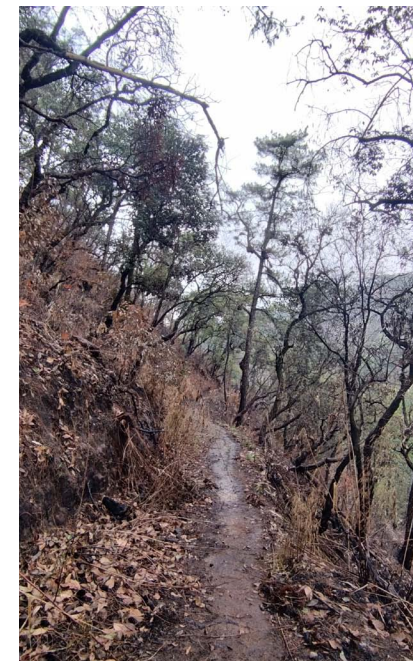
# HOW TO CATCH THE RAIN

While fire ravages our hills every year, we keep wondering how we can capture all that rain that our hills are famous for. The answer is quite simple, says Ezra Lawanker Rynjah

**T**he Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills that make up Meghalaya can boast of having some of the most species-rich landscapes in the region, and beyond. These hills are a part of the Northeastern-Indian region.

The hills are at a very crucial juncture of biodiversity, where plants and animals from the west, meaning drier and much more arid peninsular India, meet those of tropical south-east Asia. For example, the lowland rainforests around the southern slopes of these hills, such as near Mawsynram and Sohra, have been documented to host the greatest number of plant species of any rainforests north of the Tropic of Cancer, that is, outside of equatorial rainforests.

Apart from these rainforests, we also have broadleaved forests of the lower elevations, towards the Garo Hills and Ri Bhoi, and the pine-broadleaved mixed forests of the plateau tops, which are all equally important. These forests are host to several animal species, ranging from humble, but ecologically important, cicadas, bats and rodents to large forest gardeners such as elephants and hornbills.



(Above) A burnt patch of forest near Shillong.  
(left page) Forest fire in Mawsynram, East Khasi Hills. Photos by author

Furthermore, forests provide us with a range of benefits that many of us who reside in these hills have availed of, such as local herbs and medicines, forest fruits, and, crucially, the water that literally springs from their sponge-like soil.

This relationship between forests and water has given us the association we make between Shillong and the pine tree that was first described here in the Khasi Hills – *Pinus kesiya* or Khasi pine.

The pine forests that we see around Shillong, the 'pine city', do not actually grow as clustered naturally; they were planted in an effort to arrest erosion and protect important water sources around the city. This is true about Lum Shyllong or Shillong Peak, which was afforested when British colonists were here in the early 1900s.

Now known as the Upper Shillong Protected Forest, it is the source of multiple major rivers and the lifeblood to many of our localities, even beyond Shillong city limits. This is true of other forests too, like the one extending from Shyiaip to Mawpat, the Itshyrwat Reserve Forest, the



## SAVE THE WILDLIFE

Meghalaya is blessed with rich biodiversity, its dense forests is home to several endangered species like elephants, Clouded leopard, red panda, hoolock gibbons etc.



Illegal wildlife trade and habitat loss are the leading causes of decline in wildlife species.

Trade and trafficking of any wildlife is punishable under the provision of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 3 years but which may extend to 7 years or with fine which may extend to ₹ 1 lakh or with both.





Riat Khwan Forest along the old Guwahati-Shillong Road, and the plantation at Mawlynrei.

A telling feature of this history of plantation is how you have trees that are all the same height and girth within these localities; something worth noting the next time one is in these forests. Another notable feature of these plantations is the fact that almost all of them will have pockets where broadleaved trees such as *dieng ngan* (*Schima wallichii*), *soh phie* (*Myrica esculenta*) or a Khasi oak (*Quercus griffithii*), are growing underneath the trees and start reaching the canopy, while there will be patches which are completely devoid of small trees, only showing an even-height shrub layer. This evenness of the forest understorey is evidence of how the forest is “stuck”; it can’t change from a plantation to the richer broadleaved forest that it potentially could be.

Now, this is true for many forests around these hills of ours. In fact, in places where such stands have not been planted, such as at Laitlum, we don’t even have trees — one can notice how our grasslands are also very even in stature, like there’s been someone going around with a lawn mower, clipping the grass to size.

If one were to start seeing this, a reasonable

question that follows is, “why?” Why do we have this strange even height and size of our trees, or our grasslands? Why do they seem stuck, when some places don’t seem to be — such as the Risa Colony section of the Upper Shillong reserve forest, or the trail head at the Rhododendron Trek near Shillong Peak?

A general answer to this would be some form of disturbance, like a lawn mower or livestock, or a severe frost, or, more importantly in our case in the Khasi-Jaintia hills, repeated ground fires that occur every single year in the driest months with the strongest winds, from February to April.

Pine plantations are particularly prone to these fire events because of the fuel load provided by dry pine needles. I have personally observed up to four fire events in the Shyiap-Mawpat forest in a single fire season because, after every fire, the wind would cause more needles to fall from the trees and add more fuel to the forest floor.

Grasslands or denuded hills are also susceptible to fire events because of how dry they get.

There can be severe frost events in December and January, which completely dry up the grasslands, coupled with a long dry winter, creating ripe conditions for a creeping ground fire that consumes everything in its path,

including any tree saplings.

While there are other uses of these forests that cause us to lose them slowly but surely, like unsystematic logging for timber or charcoal, or lopping for firewood, these fires are particularly pernicious because they not only destroy all chances for a forest to recover from the aforementioned pressures, but also physically change the soil on which such forests could potentially grow.

Fire, at any intensity, makes soil more hydrophobic. What this means is that soil is unable to absorb water, so it’s easily carried away, leading to more erosion. This also implies that there is less water retention in an area, leading to an increase in runoff and a decrease in groundwater recharge.

Armed with this knowledge, we can now see this spiral of forest loss that pervades our hills. Firstly, a patch of land is degraded or deforested through logging and lopping. Then there are yearly fires that prevent it from regenerating. These fires make the soil hold less water and make it more prone to being eroded by water.

The fire season is immediately followed by the heaviest rainfall in the world, causing the *umsaw* or red water we see in our rivers — soil simply being washed away downstream. What

this implies is that we have less soil for vegetation and forests, which actually increases the porosity of soil so that it can hold more water, and keep the land moist over a longer period, even through the dry season. Having soil that retains moisture would give rise to the perennial streams that we desperately need in our Khasi-Jaintia hills.

We can see such soil in the Lawkyntang at Mawphlang. The forest is a wonderful example of customary protection of forests by people in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills for the sake of the greater good — water security even through the driest winters. However, it pains me to say that despite multiple romantic claims of the closeness of the Khasi or Jaintia tribals, like myself, with nature, we have abandoned that relationship for short-term material gains.

We are currently clearing parts of the Upper Shillong Protected Forest for money in the form of tourism, while people in Shillong have to purchase water for their daily needs. No new Lawkyntang are being made despite the desperation for water we have every dry season. Fire ravages our hills every year, but we keep wondering how we can capture all that rain that our hills are famous for.

The answer is quite simple — tend to the land, protect it from fire and grazing animals, and let the vegetation that comes up do the rest. It is known that vegetated soils become like

**Pine plantations are particularly prone to these fire events because of the fuel load provided by dry pine needles. Grasslands or denuded hills are also susceptible to fire events**

sponges, arresting erosion and slowing down the release of water. It would do us well to remember the wisdom of our ancestors and work with nature rather than against it. ■

(Ezra Rynjah is a scientist working at Conservation Initiatives)

Image: Photo by Matthis Volquardsen on Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/brown-open-field-2305169/>)



# THE MELODY OF MY JOURNEY

From Jowai to the centre stage; from a band singer to a musical sensation in the North East and across the country, this talented singer from Meghalaya is an inspiration. **Gracyl Ropmay** writes about her journey

“  
Let your roots  
ground you,  
and your  
dreams lift  
you higher.  
Let failure  
guide you, not  
stop you!”

Gracyl Ropmay's every performance is packed with energy, and the audience feels every bit of it.





## MUSIC

# IT'S HERE THAT I BELONG

I was born in Shillong and spent my earliest years in the beautiful village of Nongtalang, where my parents were posted. I lived there until I was three before moving to Panaliar in Jowai to live with my grandparents.

The gentle rhythm of the breeze on the hills of Nongtalang, the sound of cicadas at dusk and the folk songs of the villagers became the first music I ever experienced. At Panaliar, I enrolled at St. Mary Mazzarello Higher Secondary School.

My love for singing began when I was barely six. My grandfather would often take out his old guitar, sit me beside him, and strum songs like *Edelweiss*, *Amazing Grace* and *Love Me Tender* by Elvis Presley. I would sing along shyly at first until one day he smiled and said, "Oh, this little girl can sing!" From that moment on, singing became a part of my daily routine after my homework.

Even in school, my voice found its way to the classroom. During our S.U.P.W. periods, my teacher would always ask me to sing, and I would happily do so because that meant I'd gain marks for it! Those small moments shaped my love for performing. Later, when I moved to Shillong for higher studies, my attention shifted to martial arts and cricket, and music took a backseat for a while. Honestly, I never imagined I would one day take it up as a career. Life, however, had a tune of its own waiting for me.

### A chance encounter

In 2001, I decided to take part in a singing competition organised by the Young Christian Students (YCS). My dear friend Angelica Kahit Dympep was supposed to play the guitar for me. We practised at her house, and while I was singing, her brother Nangkhraw Kahit Dympep overheard me. He liked my voice and mentioned that his band was looking for a lead vocalist.

The next day, Angelica asked if I'd be interested, and I agreed without a second thought! We named the band The Gracious, and from that moment on, music became my heartbeat. We practised every day — no breaks, no excuses. That year, while waiting for my matric results, I had all the time in the world to dive deeper into music.

### The turning point

Then came my turning point. I auditioned for the Miss Shillong Beauty Pageant 2002, organised by the Fashion Society, Shillong, and was selected to perform. Standing on that stage before a huge crowd was both terrifying and exhilarating, but once the music started, I felt completely at home. And guess the song I sang? *Whenever, Wherever* by Shakira. I gained popularity through her song. All thanks to Shakira for that breathtaking song! That moment marked the official beginning of my musical journey. I was just 15. From there, things moved quickly. Our band started performing in and outside Shillong. For the first time, I felt what it meant to truly live my dream.

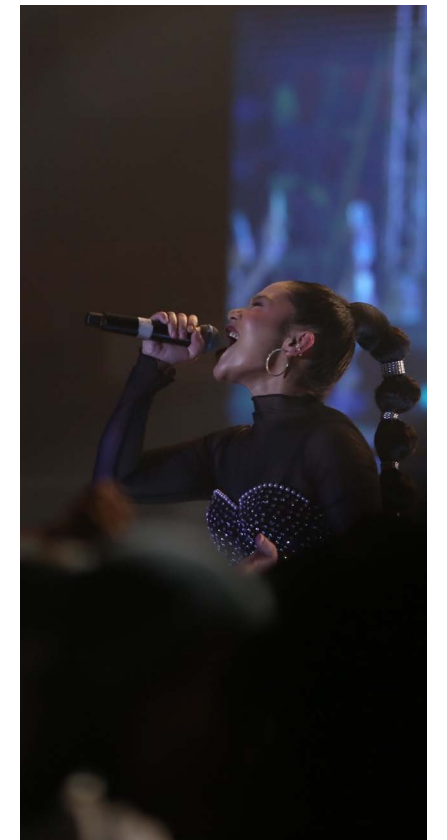
But in 2003, The Gracious disbanded when some members left for higher studies. Later that year, I joined the legendary Shillong band 'Snow White' as their lead vocalist. Performing with them was an incredible experience. It taught me so much about discipline, professionalism and stage presence. I was just a young girl among them, but they treated me with warmth and respect, just like their little sister.

For a while, I truly felt like little Snow White surrounded by her big brothers. I'm forever grateful for the lessons and memories I shared with them. In 2005, I decided to go solo, and since then, I've been performing across the state and beyond, representing Meghalaya at cultural festivals and sharing the stage with many amazing artists.

Over the years, I've sung in several Khasi and Jaintia albums. My first Khasi song, *Uff Ka jingieid*, a duo with (L) Tyngkai Kharlukhi, written by Edward Pakma and composed by Pradip Kurbah from the album *Mynsiem* (2002), and my first Jaintia song, *To Myllin*, written and composed by Arwotki Sumer from the album *Rikune* (2002), remained close to my heart even today.

### Challenges along the way

The journey wasn't easy. Back then, the music scene was far from what it is today. We didn't have YouTube, smartphones or online tutorials. To learn lyrics, we'd keep rewinding cassette tapes until they nearly wore out, and when they got stuck, we'd fix them with pencils! Sometimes, just to get the lyrics of a song, we'd have to request the *Mawphor*



Known for her soulful voice and vibrant stage presence, Gracyl has represented Meghalaya across numerous platforms, both in the North East and across the country. Gracyl's upcoming English and Khasi-Jaintia albums promise to bridge cultures, celebrate heritage and redefine the sound of contemporary Meghalaya.

newspaper to publish them, and even then, we might still end up singing the wrong lyrics on stage! But that was the beauty of those times — the effort, the laughter and the love for music that kept us going. Piracy was rampant, too, and that hurt local musicians deeply. But through every struggle, patience, perseverance and passion for music kept me moving forward.

### Gratitude and inspirations

First, I want to thank God for bestowing upon me this beautiful talent, a gift that would mark my identity and guide my purpose. Without His grace, none of this would have been possible. My greatest inspiration in life has always been my father — my pillar of strength and my biggest supporter. My family and friends have always believed in me, even when I doubted myself. And to my little sister Joicyl Ropmay, thank you for always being there, for dolling me up before shows, managing my daily chaos, and filling my days with laughter. You've been my backbone, my quiet strength behind the spotlight, and honestly, I don't know how life would be without you.





## “ The new generation is innovative & bold, experimenting with both language and sound

Musically, my inspirations are a mix of power, emotion and edge. From Shakira, Pink, Beyonce, Rihanna, Adele and Dua Lipa, to bands like Metallica, Guns N’ Roses, Dream Theatre and Linkin Park, each one of them has influenced my sound and performance in some way. They’ve taught me to be bold, fearless and authentic both on and off the stage.

### Looking ahead

My dream now is to complete my two albums — one in English and the other in Khasi-Jaintia. The English album will reflect a modern sound, blending different musical styles and genres that I’ve grown to love over the years. It will be contemporary yet deeply personal — an honest expression of who I am as an artiste today.

The Khasi-Jaintia album, on the other hand, will carry the rhythm and heartbeat of Meghalaya — the beauty of our hills, our people and our heritage. Through it, I hope to preserve our traditional sounds while giving them a new identity that resonates with audiences both local and global. Ultimately, I want my music to tell stories — stories of where I come from and what I’ve learned along the way. And beyond that, I dream of mentoring and collaborating with young artistes, helping them navigate this

ever-evolving musical landscape and inspiring them to chase their dreams.

### The music scene in Meghalaya

Today, Meghalaya stands proudly as one of the most musically rich states in India. Shillong, fondly called the ‘Rock Capital of India’, is home to countless talented musicians and bands. The sounds of rock, blues, jazz, gospel, pop and fusion echo through its streets. The new generation is innovative and bold, experimenting with both language and sound, blending traditional rhythms with modern beats, and inventing new sounds and genres. Festivals, musical concerts and events have given our local talents maximum exposure, opening doors for them to showcase their artistry to the world.

Government initiatives like the Chief Minister’s Grassroots Music Programme (CMGMP) have also played a vital role in nurturing local talent. They’ve provided platforms for emerging artistes to perform, collaborate and be heard, giving birth to many inspiring young musicians who now carry the torch of Meghalaya’s music forward. Yet, despite these positive strides, much remains to be done. There is still a need for more professional recording studios, music academies, funding opportunities and digital

promotion channels. Our musicians deserve platforms that support them not just creatively but also professionally through fair pay, training and exposure at both national and international levels.

If nurtured with the right vision and support, Meghalaya’s music can become a global cultural brand — a blend of heritage and innovation that the world will celebrate.

### A note to my fans and the youth

“Wherever I go, I will never forget my roots— I will always strive to uplift our culture and heritage through my music.” To my beloved Khasi and Jaintia fans — thank you from the bottom of my heart for your unwavering support since the beginning of my musical journey in 2002. Your love, your energy and the enthusiasm you show every time you come to watch me perform mean more than words can express. Wherever I am today is all because of your love and support. And to the youth— you are the future, the heartbeat of tomorrow’s melody. Be bold, be humble and never stop believing in your dreams.

No journey is easy, but every challenge shapes you into who you’re meant to be. Let your roots ground you, and your dreams lift you higher. Keep learning, keep creating and never let fear silence your passion. Let failure guide you, not stop you! And, remember, if a girl from a small village once found her voice and made it heard, so can you. Music changed my life! It can change yours, too. ■

(Gracyl Ropmay is an award-winning singer, songwriter and performer from Meghalaya)

All photos contributed by author



**G**aro music band NOKPANTE recently released its album *A•bri Mandi*, a tribute to the Garo tribe, its culture, tradition and the ingenious people. **Mikhail Marak** tells the story of each song in the album.

*A•bri Mandi* — Man from the Hills is a heartfelt homage to my homeland — a musical tribute to the hills, people and culture that shaped who I am. The album carries my love, admiration and deep connection to my A•chik roots, expressed through seven songs that capture the essence of our life, land and traditions. The tribe, who resides in the beautiful Garo Hills of Meghalaya, and parts of Assam and Bangladesh, celebrates life in a unique way.

### Each track tells a story:

**Ahoea** paints the life of a humble villager — simple, grounded and full of warmth.

**Krimkro** celebrates unity, festival, dance and the spirit of community that defines the hills.

**Dimdimchong** expresses love for one’s land, marvelling at its beauty and the bond shared with nature.

**NanggoreGoserong** (A Tribute) is a heartfelt homage to an old folk song I grew up listening to — a bridge between memory and melody, honouring the songs that shaped my musical roots.

**Mai Jingjing** revives the playful innocence of

childhood through rhymes inspired by old Garo games.

**Me•gong Bibal** (Reprise) welcomes the joy of winter, when the Me•gong blossoms bring a season of love and renewal.

**Jakgitel** (Revisit) closes the album with a prayer — a yearning for peace, harmony and the enduring love of the land.

Through *Man from the Hills*, I return to where it all began — to the stories, sounds and spirit of home. ■

(Mikhail Marak is a singer, songwriter, music producer and sound technician. He received international acclaim for his work in the Sikkimese film, Shape of Momo)





## SHORT STORY

# A MINI ANTHOLOGY

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih narrates the ordeal of two editors in finding litterateurs for a book focusing on NE

Recently, my colleague and I completed the editing of *Deluge: Stories from Northeast India*. It was a challenging task, to say the least, but also enormously fulfilling.

This was especially when a multi-national publisher accepted the manuscript and decided to publish it in two volumes.

Relaxing, after we had finally submitted the edited manuscript, strangely, I kept thinking not about the many wonderful stories and charming characters in it but about the many writers we had encountered who were not a part of it. Some of them, in particular, still make me laugh out loud now and then. Wouldn't they make a diverting mini anthology if I were to tell their stories? Let's see.

The first person to give me a rude shock was Fadiba (obviously not her real name), a woman writer who had just brought out her debut novel. The novel did not receive much critical attention, and the few reviews that I read had only shredded it with the iron claws of mockery and scorn. Yet, oddly, it was also shortlisted for a major national award. Thankfully, it did not win. It would have been a bad joke. Having read the disparaging reviews, we were not too keen on including anything by the author, but since she is from the region, we thought we might as well give her a chance to prove her calibre. I called her, introducing myself, explaining our project, and politely requesting a short story. I put her on speakerphone so my colleague would also hear.

Without so much as a word of greeting, she asked, 'How much are you paying?'

I said, 'Umm... This is actually a labour of love for us. It's not a contracted project. No publisher has asked us to do this. We are doing it on our own, although two of the biggest publishers in the country have already shown very keen interest ...'

'How much can you pay?'

'As I said, this is a labour of love ... We don't have any money to pay anyone right now. We thought ...'

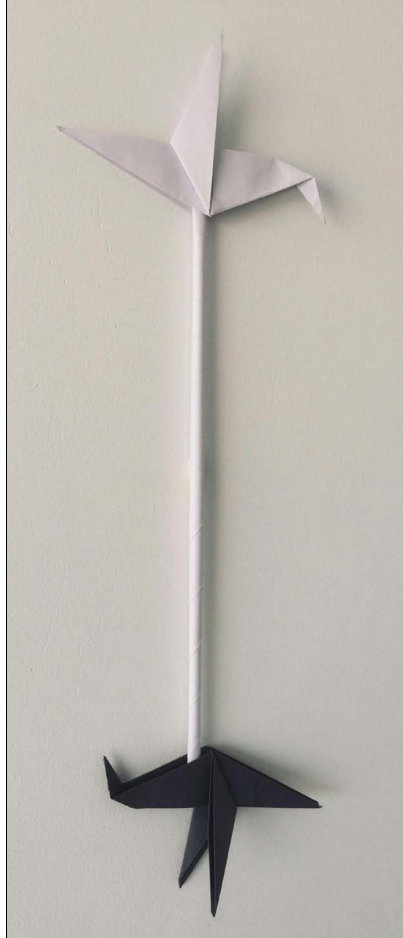
But she was not concerned with what we thought. In a tone that clearly told me what a presumptuous pest I was, she said, 'Then I cannot give you any story! I don't contribute without payment! Sorry!' And she disconnected.

My colleague was shocked. She could only repeat, 'What?! What?!' 'God!' I exclaimed, too surprised to say anything more. My colleague became quite hot. 'Who is she to behave like that?' she demanded. 'She has brought out only a single book, and she thinks of herself as what? One of the greatest in India?' 'God, but what if everybody demands money from us?' I asked. 'We might have hatched the idea, but without the wings of goodwill, how will it fly?' My colleague was still upset. 'How can people behave like that?' she repeated. 'That's what a shortlist can do to a bad writer,' I replied. 'But say, why should she measure her importance with money? Should a writer be so mercenary? And that too, for a pittance?'

Then, the lighter side of the incident struck us, and we began laughing, genuinely enjoying the opportunity to have found someone like her. 'This is very interesting,' I said, recovering my spirits. 'Let's call another.'

Another was a writer, writing in a regional language. He was a big man in the small world of his literature but hardly known outside that world. But I suppose he didn't know that. We only came to know about him because one of his translated stories was published in an anthology.

We thought the story was not too bad and decided to sample more of his stuff. He had a deep, booming voice. A real macho man, I thought. Putting him on speakerphone, I introduced myself, telling him my name.



“ I have also published a collection of short stories... It will be released by a very famous writer — Mr Ruskin Bond! Do you know Mr Ruskin Bond? ”

'Hmm!' he responded. I explained our project to him. He said, 'I'm in Russia now. Call me again after I have come back!' 'When will that be?' I asked. Ignoring me, he enquired, 'What book is this? Again?' 'Oh, it's an anthology of short stories from the Northeast ...' 'Hmm. Publisher?' 'We don't know yet, but Penguin and HarperCollins have shown keen interest in it. It will be the most comprehensive anthology of short stories from the region so far ...' 'Hmm,' he interrupted me. 'I have also published a collection of short stories... in English... by a famous publisher...'

'What famous publisher?' I asked innocently. Ignoring my question, he said, 'It will be released by a very famous writer — Mr Ruskin Bond! Do you know Mr Ruskin Bond?'

Amazed, he said, 'You don't know of Mr Ruskin Bond?! He is the most famous novelist and writer in India! In the world even! He will release my book! In Mussoorie! You call me back when I return to Guwahati!'

With that, he disconnected, and we laughed and laughed and did not stop laughing till we parted in the evening.

My colleague once told me about a writer friend she met at a literary function in Delhi. After being ignored by a few luminaries at the function, her friend loudly said, 'People don't know what a big writer I am. When they come to know, they feel humbled and try to fawn over me.' We never called him back. We did not want to fawn over him.

There was one more character as mercenary as Fadiba, the first one. She was not a creative writer but had translated a few well-known authors from her community. We'll call her Thena. When I called her, Thena was very excited about the project. 'Gosh! Just the thing I need!' she gushed. 'You know, I have translated scores of the best short stories by the best writers of my community. How many can you publish? I will send you eight! Now, now, I will send.'

'Good, good!' she gushed. 'And how much will you pay me?' 'Haa? What's that?' I asked, stupefied. 'Payment! How much will you pay me?' 'Oh, I thought ...' 'How can you think anything like that? Translators have to get paid, no?'

As with Fadiba, I started talking about how the anthology is a labour of love, but she cut me short. 'No, no, no! This will not do! Writers, translators, editors, all of us have to be paid! And a good sum, too! Publishers are behaving like extortionists...'

'That's it, you see? We don't have a publisher yet. What if we share our editors' fee with you? Will that...?'

'No, no, no! I don't want your money! I want the publisher to pay me and pay me well!' 'What to do? We don't have a publisher yet.' 'In that case, I will withdraw all my stories! Except one, since you said I would get a contributor's copy!'

For the second time, I said, 'Haa? Withdraw?' 'I'm taking back all my stories except one.'

When I was a kid, I was given a fistful of marbles by a much older boy for giving his love letter to a girl whom he fancied. Later, feeling his loss too acutely, the boy came with some of his friends to ask me to return the marbles. When I refused, his friends held my arms while he tried to retrieve the marbles from my pockets. I kicked and bit and struggled, but finally, the

boy got his marbles back. But not the girl, because I told her about his real intention towards her. One day, I even taunted the boy, from a distance, 'No marbles, no girl, Rubberman!'

What Thena was doing reminded me of that childhood incident. She had given me a fistful of stories only to take them back. However, this time I did not struggle. I only said, 'Take if you must. What to do?'

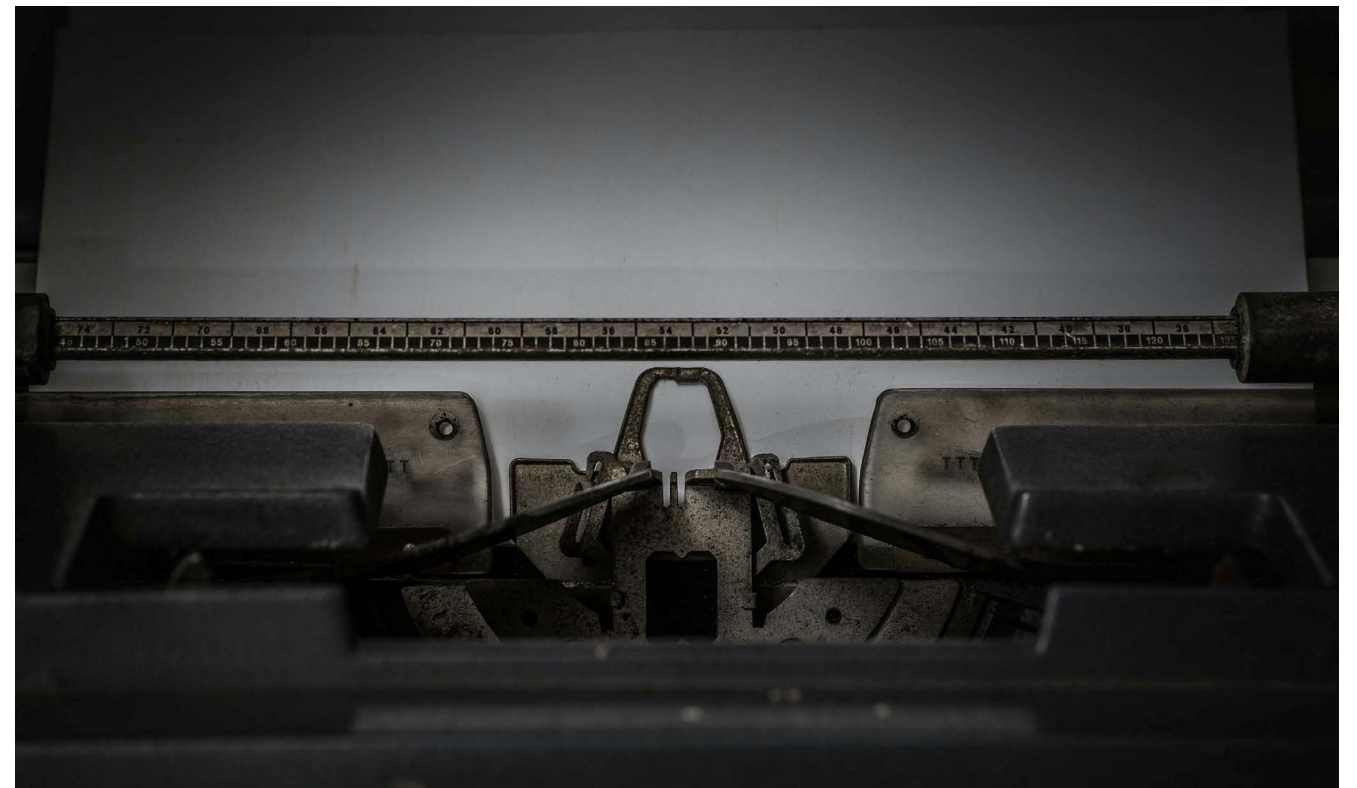
My colleague said, 'God! And I thought she was so generous!' 'Perhaps I should blame myself for not clarifying things.' 'No! She is the one who should have clarified! She should have told us they were not for free!' 'Anyway,' I soothed her, 'she is still giving us one.'

Much later, I wrote to inform her that a multi-national publisher had accepted our manuscript. I requested her to formally send us a written permission for the story she had allowed us to use. To my utter surprise, she raged and ranted by return mail and ended by saying, 'I told you I would withdraw all my stories! Why are you still pestering me?'

When I reminded her that she had given us one of the stories, she said, 'I'm taking it back also! Anthology of stories from the Northeast, indeed! I despise the word Northeast!'

When my colleague read the email, she was livid with rage. 'What kind of behaviour is this? She gave and then took back everything except one! And now, she is taking back even that! What will we do? We have no stories from her state! And all because she doesn't like the word "Northeast"? What's wrong with it?'

The Northeast is, of course, a much-misunderstood and much-abused word! For instance, 'it is not the homogeneous province it is made out to be by many. Its seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya,





Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, are inhabited by such an assorted conglomeration of peoples, with such a melange of cultures, languages and religions that it would be simply an injustice to make any generalised statement about them.’ And yet, if we are in a region called the Northeast and write from it and about it, I don’t see what else we can do apart from explaining as I have just done.

‘What a lousy person!’ my colleague was saying again. ‘Write, write something cutting, will you?’

I thought for a while. I found her whimsical arbitrariness detestable, too, but what cutting remark would I write to a woman? Finally, I decided to send her this brief note: ‘Dear Thena, I’m so sorry to have lost your stories. Working with you has been an enlightening and rewarding experience. Enlightening because we have learnt so much more about human nature, and rewarding because your withdrawal made us look harder for another translator. I’m happy to tell you that now we have found a better one, indeed, an excellent one, whose English is impeccable, whose motives are altruistic and whose manners are much more ladylike...’

And we did find such a translator. How lucky that monopoly cannot have a stranglehold on things literary.

Another translator, whom we shall call Gretma, was also the cause of much trouble for us. We were frantically looking for good stories and translators from a particular community when someone recommended Gretma to us. Like Thena, Gretma also readily sent us two stories, which she had translated earlier. Because the stories were previously published elsewhere, they were well enough edited. My colleague and I gave each other the thumbs up.

Then, one day, Gretma called us and said, ‘Hi, can I also send you my own story?’

‘Oh, you also write?’ I asked happily. ‘Please do, please do! We are so happy to get more stories from your state. When are you sending?’

‘I’m still giving it the finishing touches,’ she replied. ‘I’ll send it as soon as I’m done.’ My colleague and I high-fived each other. Things were proceeding so smoothly, finally. Gretma sent us her story a few days after that. I asked my colleague to read as I shut my eyes tight to rest them for a while. After reading to herself for some time, I suddenly heard her utter, ‘What?!’

Opening my eyes, I also cried, ‘What?’ ‘Is this a story or what? And what kind of language is this? She is a teacher, isn’t she?’ I started reading. It was not a story at all. I would say an ill-written school essay if I were considerate.

With a heavy heart, I called Gretma. ‘Hi,’ I said. ‘I’m calling about your story...’ ‘Ah! Did you like it?’ ‘Ehh, ehh, it still needs to mature, you know?’ ‘What do you mean?’ she asked, her tone becoming aggressive.

‘Umm, I mean, it still needs some time to be ready... our publisher will not agree...’ ‘So you are rejecting it? In that case, I’m withdrawing my translations as well!’ Because I had put Gretma on speakerphone, my colleague heard everything and uttered her, by now familiar, ‘What?!’ Gretma heard and said, ‘Yes, I’m withdrawing my translations! If my story is not good, then how, how can my translations be good?’

I felt like saying, ‘Because they are not yours,’ but only said, ‘What to do? We need to exercise strict quality control. We are answerable to our publisher.’

‘And how can you insinuate that I, a professor, cannot write? Anyway, it has been nice working with you! Goodbye!’

I have come across many professors who cannot even speak. But why quarrel with her? ‘It has been nice for us too,’ I said, although it was anything but.

‘God!’ my colleague cried. ‘Such funny people!’ For a time, we were quite disheartened. But people have told me I can be as resistant as a weed. My colleague, too, is a strong woman. There and then, we started calling people from Gretma’s state and happily found a first-rate translator after a few days.

A friend from Gretma’s community nicely summed up Gretma’s behaviour. She said, ‘Who would do a shameless thing like that, na, Ap?’

After Gretma, we encountered another odd character. He was actually a very close friend of mine. Earlier, he used to help me quite a lot with this and that. This time, too, he promised me many translated stories from his state. But he never did. Every time I called him, he kept promising to help soon. Fed up, I said to my colleague, ‘Let’s forget him.’

‘But why does he keep promising if he is not helping?’ she wondered. To that, I said, ‘He’s a person who can never say no but can never do yes!’ We had a good laugh and immediately tried to get in touch with the wife of a famous author, whose works have been converted into movie hits, and so on. The friend who gave us her number told us that she was the only surviving relative of the author.

I called the lady, putting her on speakerphone as always. When she said, ‘Ello!’ I began speaking to her in English, trying to introduce myself. But she cut me short, saying, ‘Hindi me bolol!’ ‘Hindi?’ I yelped. ‘Haa!’

I don’t know much Hindi; how could I discuss copyright permission with her in Hindi? I asked my colleague to speak to her in Hindi or Assamese. She refused. ‘No, no,’ she said, laughing, ‘you talk. I want to hear you speak in Hindi.’ I began speaking to the lady very slowly. ‘*Mei, Professor Ap, hu. North-Eastern Hill University se ... Mere Hindi samaste hai?*’ ‘Haa!’

I breathed a sigh of relief. She understood. I ploughed on. ‘*Hamlog, kahania ka kitab, Northeast se, compile karte hai ... Samaste, na?*’ ‘Haa!’ ‘*Aap ka husband ki kahani bhi, use karte hai, hamlog ...*’ Suddenly, she interrupted me, her voice quite aggressive, ‘*Toh?*’ ‘*Toh, is kahani keliye, aap ke publication permission chahiye...*’ ‘*Mei kui kahani, fahani, malum nehi! Meine phone aur mat karo!*’

Saying that, she disconnected, and we were left crying, ‘What?! What?! What was that?’ And we burst into resounding laughter, holding our stomachs and running onto the terrace because we felt our laughter would suffocate us otherwise.

A long time after that, I began feeling quite sorrowful. There is a story in our anthology about a wife taking revenge on her dead

husband, a writer, by making a bonfire of all his manuscripts. What if the same fate awaits us? I began to feel pity for ourselves. I voiced my fear to my colleague. ‘What if our spouses also do the same to us?’ But that only sent her into another long fit of laughter.

The next day, we had a look at our contents page. ‘We need one or two more Khasi stories,’ my colleague observed. I agreed. I said, ‘Apart from the writers we have chosen, there is another whose short stories, I think, are passable in English.’

‘Call him.’ I called, putting him on speakerphone. When he said, ‘Hello!’ I introduced myself: ‘Hi, Bah So and So! Bah Ap here!’

‘Ap, Who?’ ‘Ap Jutang ...’ ‘Who?’

The line was absolutely clear. I said again, ‘Ap Jutang Shadap.’

‘Who?’ Feeling insulted, I decided to ring off before I exploded. ‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ I said and disconnected.

My colleague stared at me open-mouthed. This time, she could not even say, ‘What?!’ Later, she asked me, ‘Why did that fellow behave like that? Doesn’t he know you or what? But who would not know you in Shillong?’ It would be impossible for him not to know me. We belong to the same society of Khasi authors. We have met several times and have participated in many literary programmes together.

‘He knows me,’ I replied. ‘And to the best of my knowledge, he has no reason to hold a grudge against me.’ ‘Then why did he say, “Ap, who?”’ We have a phawar limerick in Khasi that says: Ooooo! *U langtylli langteh, Uba teh hu mawbyinna, Nga phah kylli pham treh, Pha duh ei ka deng khoila, Hoooi kiw! ... Hoooi kiw! (Sturdy grass, grass to bind, Bound to a monolith, I sent an offer, you turned it down, To wear the earrings, you lost your chance.)*

These are indeed cases of missed opportunities, and all because of what? One day, an acquaintance told me at a funeral gathering, ‘I’m sorry, Bah Ap, please don’t mind! But I don’t like writers, especially famous writers...’ ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Swollen heads! Like jackfruits!’

Unfortunately, this seems to be true of some of the friends we have encountered. Our labour was sweetened, however, by the courteousness of some of the best-known writers from the region. When we wrote to them, they were only too happy to contribute. They even said they were ‘honoured and delighted’ to be a part of the book. Theirs was the sweetness of oranges: *golden oranges sweetness to the pith.*

We will remember them with gratefulness. The others, we will remember with great delight. ■

(Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a renowned poet, author and academician)

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Photo by NEOSIAM 2024+ (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/empty-printer-paper-in-typewriter-592675/>)

## ALL THINGS DIGITAL

# AI: REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE

Meghalaya government’s commitment to using AI strategically has made an impact, writes Dr Annapoorna Ravichander

The term Artificial Intelligence (AI) was coined in 1956 by John McCarthy, an American scientist. AI is defined as the “simulation of human intelligence in machines to think, learn and solve problems”.

In India, institutes like IIT Kanpur and IISC Bangalore began working on this between the 1960s and 1980s. The first AI programme was initiated in 1986 by the Knowledge Based Computer Systems (KBCS) system. Thereafter, it was enhanced by supercomputing in the 1990s, followed by software companies like TCS, Wipro and Infosys picking it up and expanding AI and Machine Learning programmes in the 2000s.



Illustration designed by Freepik

The concept of Digital India hit the market when NITI Aayog launched the National Strategy for AI in 2018. It focused on economic growth and social inclusion, which resulted in several start-ups being established.

Today, AI has become the norm of the time and a priority for the government and industries to scale India to be the AI hub through the initiative titled ‘AI for All’, where varied sectors like healthcare, education and agriculture form an important part.

AI can be a powerful enabler to ensure sustainability if the government uses it well and strategically in the areas of governance, development and while designing policies.

To ensure this, the government must understand how this can be done.

### Agriculture sustainability

- Reduce food waste by optimising the supply chain
- Gain advanced knowledge through AI predictions of crop disease
- Optimise irrigation, farming and soil testing by precision farming

### Smart cities and urban planning

- Introduce AI-enabled waste segregation
- Control traffic movement and save use of fuel and control emissions
- Promote renewable energy integration and reduce the waste of electricity

### Protect environment

- Track poaching of wildlife and illegal activities in the forest using drones
- Detect pollution by using sensors
- Analyse forewarning of floods, droughts and cyclones through AI-driven satellite data
- Policy and Governance
- Create awareness and engage with communities using AI platforms
- Use AI tools to evaluate outcomes of government initiatives and programmes
- Analyse and use data to formulate and design policies

### Reduce risks in disaster

- Use AI simulations to design disaster-proof urban structures
- Allocate resources by optimising re-settlements and evacuation exercise

### Challenges in using AI for governance

**Ethical and Social Concerns:** One of the key aspects is lack of transparency where the decision-making process becomes unclear. Added to these errors made by using AI lacks ownership and in turn communities begin to distrust AI driven decisions.

**Unavailability of data:** No reliable or updated data, lack of privacy and security and increase in using biased data which leads to incorrect analysis.





Illustration created with Dall-e AI

**Legal barriers:** Problems in tackling Intellectual Property as to who has generated the AI insights. Lack of comprehensive AI regulations and inefficiency in managing international alliances with reference to AI governance.

**Lack in interdepartmental management:** Due to unskilled and inexperienced workforce and old-age bureaucratic system (in some cases), adopting AI tools becomes difficult. A report published by NITI Aayog in 2018 titled ‘National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence’ clearly defines some of the challenges faced by the government. Broadly, the report cites the following challenges based on their analyses of five key sectors — Healthcare, Agriculture, Education, Smart Cities and Infrastructure, and Smart Mobility and Transport:

- Lack of enabling data ecosystems
- Low intensity of AI research
- Inadequate availability of AI expertise, manpower and skilling opportunities
- High resource cost and low awareness for adopting AI in business processes
- Unclear privacy, security and ethical regulations

#### Advantages of Using AI in Governance

- Reduces delays, paperwork and bureaucratic inefficiencies
- Helps governments identify trends, predict risks and design evidence-based policies
- Track service delivery in real time to improve accountability and transparency
- Allocate resources effectively and smartly
- Evaluate programmes and policies by using data and improve policy evaluation

#### Case of the Government of Meghalaya

The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly reportedly began using AI to transcribe assembly proceedings under the National e-Vidhans project, enhancing accuracy and speeding up turnaround for official records. It elaborated that “the implementation of Artificial Intelligence as a tool in the Reporter’s Branch is expected to significantly expedite the reporting process, reduce errors and provide legislators with more timely and accurate information.

This invariably serves as a testament to Meghalaya’s dedication to embrace technological advancements for the betterment of its legislative functions”.

In doing so, the government has consistently

### AI INTERVENTIONS

#### Environment

**Use of AI:** Cleaning lakes using robotic boats  
**Impact:** Improved waste management and eco-tourism

#### Governance and Inclusion

**Use of AI:** MEGHA voice agent  
**Impact:** Increased access to programmes

#### Education

**Use of AI:** Developed the VSK analytics platform  
**Impact:** Improved learning outcomes and governance in schools

#### Administration of Pensions

**Use of AI:** Introduced facial verification for submission of pension  
**Impact:** Streamlined benefit delivery

#### Governmental Practices

**Use of AI:** Transcribing assembly proceedings using AI  
**Impact:** Increased efficiency and accuracy

#### Access to Languages

**Use of AI:** Integrated Bhashini with Garo and Khasi  
**Impact:** Encouraged inclusive policy communication

used AI in an effective manner, which has made a significant impact.

The Government of Meghalaya’s commitment to using AI strategically has made an impact on various sectors. It has also made policies and programmes more efficient, transparent, inclusive and citizen-friendly.

By incorporating AI, the Government has made significant opportunities in administrative procedures and improved services to citizens. ■

(Dr Annapoorna Ravichander is a freelance consultant)

## CRIME & WOMEN

# THE HORROR WELCOMES HER

Sonam’s agonising social media trial is not as much for her crime as it is for her gender, writes Swati Shaiwal

Between May and October this year, the Raja Raghuvanshi murder case — or the Honeymoon murder case, a moniker given by the Shillong police — saw several twists in the plot.

With every piece of the jigsaw puzzle that the investigating team found, the case kept changing at different levels. The one thing that did not change was people’s perception of the prime accused — Sonam Raghuvanshi.

Sonam became a sensation, albeit for the wrong reasons. She became the reason men started suspecting their girlfriends, fiancées and wives. She became the worst nightmare of in-laws and a curse for ‘good girls’ whose prospects of getting perfect grooms seemed bleak now. She became synonymous with betrayal and diabolical.

“It has made the image of women more complicated... I can no longer blindly trust a girl... Even my parents are affected. Whenever the topic of my marriage comes up, their faces reflect fear and worry,” says 23-year-old footballer and coach Karan Dixit.

The irony of patriarchy, one must conclude. More than 80 rape cases were reported in our country every day in 2023, according to the statistics of the National Crime Records Bureau. According to another report, 4-5 women become victims of rape every hour in India — and in over 90% of these cases, the perpetrators are men known to the victims. Beyond this, countless girls across cities, towns and villages face harassment, stalking, online abuse, or blackmail daily — most of which never even get reported.

However, these statistics were lost on our citizens. This information was not terrifying enough to make women suspicious of their boyfriends, fiancés or husbands. The crime numbers did not alert parents who have daughters. It was life as usual, because rape is a usual phenomenon. But a woman killing her husband? Unprecedented, maybe.

“People have this mindset that marriage is a lifelong bond and a woman’s role is predetermined. There are rituals like Karva Chauth for the husband’s long life, but none

for the wife’s longevity. So, when a woman deviates from these prescribed norms, people don’t try to understand her circumstances — they harbour negativity and anger toward her. That’s what happened with Sonam,” senior consultant psychiatrist Dr Satyakant Trivedi explained why the prime accused in the Raja murder case became the centre of hatred on social media as well as in the real world.

What’s more surprising is how society views the four men accused of helping Sonam. They are “helpless victims”, who were victims of manipulation by Sonam. Social media and the mainstream media sensationalised the case to an extent that it created an ersatz sense of trepidation even among children.

There is a deeper psychological explanation to the Sonam case. Elucidating this, Trivedi says neither Sonam nor the other four accused were habitual criminals. And, it was probably family pressure and a lack of communication that forced her to do what she did.

The District and Sessions Court in Shillong has just started hearing the case, and the court has not yet convicted her. However, considering the police statements so far, we assume that Sonam masterminded the crime, which is unpardonable. But will this crime be viewed through the lens of gender? “In a patriarchal society, men have long held the monopoly on extramarital affairs, domestic violence, murder, or multiple partners,” says Trivedi.

So, when a woman exhibits the same behaviour, she is considered ominous, and the vilification campaign begins. But “it’s a fact that human behaviour is similar in similar situations, regardless of gender”, clarifies Trivedi.

#### Changing fabric of relationships

A major twist in the case came when Ujala Yadav, a college student from Uttar Pradesh, claimed that Sonam was her co-passenger on a bus from Varanasi. Even without the slightest inkling about Raja or Sonam’s families, a garrulous Yadav did not waste a moment to share her views with the media.

“Raja was such a good man, and she destroyed everything — his family, his future. She could have given Raja to me instead! I would have

“People have this mindset that marriage is a lifelong bond and a woman’s role is predetermined

Dr Satyakant Trivedi, Psychiatrist



“  
Taking  
someone’s life  
shows a  
disturbed  
mindset — and  
that has  
nothing to do  
with gender  
*Satanand Chaubey,  
HC Advocate*

married him and kept everyone happy,” she told the media on more than one occasion.

Sonam’s parents were also not spared in this vilification campaign. Indore’s Cabinet minister Kailash Vijayvargiya said, “Sonam lacked values. If her parents had instilled good values in her, such an incident would not have happened.”

Ketan Vishnar, a High Court advocate, explains the situation on a broader canvas. “... we can’t blame family upbringing alone. In the Sonam Raghuvanshi case, too, that’s true. Divorce and alimony cases have rapidly increased in recent years. There isn’t just one reason — expectations and ambitions in relationships have grown so high that people no longer think about staying together. Many of the cases I have handled involve women whose demands are excessive, causing conflict. Some even file false complaints or misuse laws, which are meant to protect women. This creates problems for women who are genuine victims of abuse,” he says.

“The misuse of women’s protection laws — many of which are non-bailable — is increasing... With 30–40% of cases already pending in Indian courts, this rising trend raises serious questions about human thinking and the fabric of relationships,” he adds.

Riya Jain, a 24-year-old professional, echoes Vishnar’s views. According to her, relationships in today’s world are more like “situationships”. “Things have worsened. As a girl, I always felt it was hard to trust men — but now, after Sonam’s case, it’s not easy to trust women either... I just don’t know what’s right anymore,” says Riya.

Dr Neelam Hingorani, a retired professor of Sociology, blames the communication gap and transparency in relationships for an increase in divorce cases, fraudulent court cases and commitment phobia.

#### Moral policing on social media

Social media became a platform for ‘convicting’ Sonam even before the case reached court. Posts, memes and outrageous comments not only disparaged Sonam as a woman but also belittled the legal system of the country by blatantly giving a verdict in a case that is still in the lower court.

“Taking someone’s life shows a disturbed mindset — and that has nothing to do with gender. But the way Sonam’s name spread reflects the powerful role of social and mainstream media. Before courts even reach a verdict, the media and public often form strong opinions about the accused. Later, when the actual judgment comes, the public finds it hard to accept. The Supreme Court has repeatedly warned that media trials are a bad practice, yet the trend continues. Sonam Raghuvanshi, too, became a victim of it,” says High Court advocate Satanand Chaubey.

According to the Indian legal system, any person is innocent unless proven guilty. Even in the most heinous crimes, such as the rape and murder of children or women, an accused is given a chance to defend himself. In this case, not only were Sonam and her family humiliated on social media, but smear campaigners took the opportunity to run gender-specific castigation, making the situation worse for women.

Chaubey rightly points out that, statistically, crimes by men against women are still far higher. However, “women too are now becoming participants in heinous crimes, which poses a challenge for both society and justice,” he adds.

#### All that glitters can spell doom

The influence of the virtual world has a deep impact on youths and the way relationships are perceived. People are blinded by the

“  
The biggest  
problem  
lies in the  
imbalance  
between  
communication  
and freedom  
*Dr Neelam Hingorani,  
Sociologist*

razzmatazz of the glitzy world of the internet, which in many ways has replaced Bollywood dreams.

“The middle class — once known for its principles, restraint, balance and contentment — has especially fallen prey to it. As a result, a race has begun to buy expensive clothes, dine in costly restaurants and hotels, and purchase luxurious goods. This trend has completely captured the younger generation,” points out Hingorani.

She observes that a skewed system of communication and modernity in a family can adversely affect children’s mental growth.

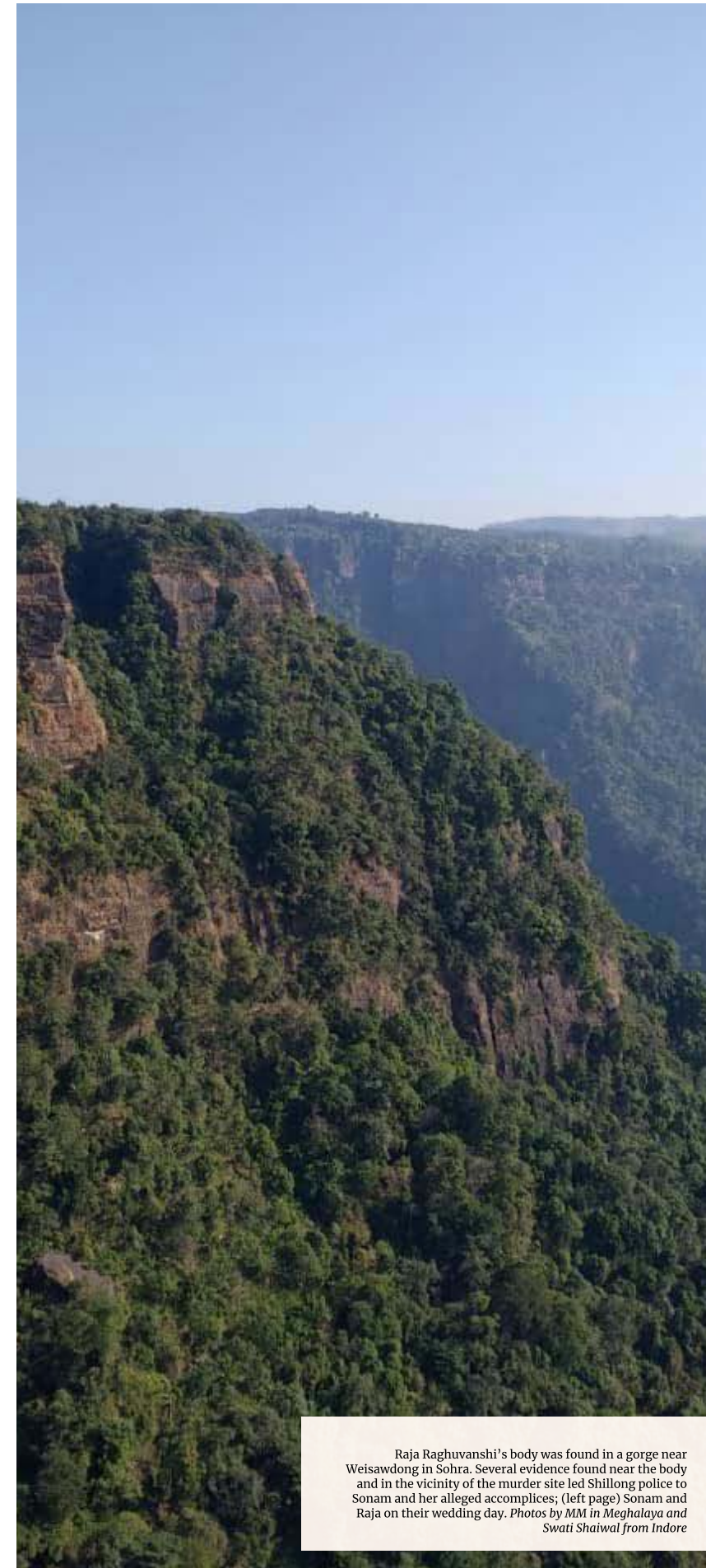
“The biggest problem lies in the imbalance between communication and freedom. In families where children’s mistakes are either ignored or where there is excessive strictness, problems are more likely to arise. From what I have read and seen about Sonam, it seems clear that she lacked communication with her mother ... Transparency in relationships is essential, and its absence is visible at every level in this case,” she says.

The jury is still out on whether a lack of communication led to mental distress for Sonam and ultimately compelled her to commit the crime. But the Sonam Raghuvanshi case has established a few points.

First, we need to look at crime objectively without caste, creed or gender bias. Second, there is an urgent need to vet social media communications to stop virtual trials of any accused. Last, though there is no way to stop or eradicate crime but conversations may help stop a potential crime. And that conversation must start at home.

Apart from that, times are changing, and we need to embrace the fact and change our mindset. As Tanmay Neema, a chartered accountant, says, “Every generation brings social change. In my parents’ time, women were groomed to adjust. In my generation, we’ve realised that both partners must compromise and maintain balance. If either side clings to ego, the relationship won’t last. Balance is crucial — and I try to maintain it.” ■

*(Swati Shaiwal is an Indore-based independent journalist)*



Raja Raghuvanshi’s body was found in a gorge near Weisawdong in Sohra. Several evidence found near the body and in the vicinity of the murder site led Shillong police to Sonam and her alleged accomplices; (left page) Sonam and Raja on their wedding day. Photos by MM in Meghalaya and Swati Shaiwal from Indore



POETRY

# MEGHALAYA ECHOES

## Marbamonlang Rani

This ordinary pen and I,  
on paper planes begin the flight;  
*u Putharo, shisong u Kwai*,  
should first acquaint your appetite.  
We by the name of Khasi, sing.  
We by the name of Garo, dance.  
We by the name of Jaiñtia, dress;  
three sisters in one holy land.

I, by my best poetic throat,  
replay old lores that Khasi men  
by oral wealth in time, denote:  
*Ramhah, u Klew, u Khla-u Thlen*.

*U Sier*, a stag whose mother spoiled  
till faced he death, where she forbade  
his sporty feet, on godly hills;  
one shot, he then was lifeless made.

The monarch ordered in its name  
that *Raitong* should on pyre die;  
together in that blazing flame,  
an ailing queen, untimely lie.  
Of lovers’ unfairly fate,  
his flute endures till present date.

Then of our warrior ‘Tirof Sing’,  
the ruler fought in purity;  
he lived and died a noble king,  
though foes deceived their loyalty.

If all in pride and greatness I,  
should burden on these pages more;  
it is our matriarchal trait,  
I boast of with the tales afore.

The larger crown to her belongs,  
well-clothed under love and care,  
the youngest female cub of all;  
the queen of every Lion’s share.

The cleanest place, the heavy rain,  
the faith of Christians, that of saints;  
*Ka Tungrymbai* and *U Sohphlang*,  
the Likai Falls or *Wah Simsang*  
are wonders by design.  
In Him, designer of it all,  
we liberally confine.  
And may He bless you overall,  
as gently rests the nib;  
while I, in humble Khasi tone,  
extend my thanks, *Khublei Shibun*.

(Marbamonlang Rani is a poet based in Shillong and a familiar voice in Meghalaya’s literary scene)

# ONLY A DISTANCE AWAY

## Ananya S Guha

Stoking the fire  
Catapulting into dark  
Embers glow  
Winds blow  
Stalking my dreams  
Is a hyacinth woman,  
Walking my dreams  
Is a mad lust, perforating  
The mind is a blackish devil;  
All in the wind’s blow  
Of cacophonous jackals  
And mad wolves  
Even sharks eat fish  
You were right Hemingway  
For you fought the war  
Four score years away  
If you saw it now you wouldn’t  
Say hello, for it to go  
The 21st century has come to stay  
With wars and bombs  
Only a distance away  
And Blake’s Lamb is out to be  
slaughtered  
With a malfeasant Tyger, baying for blood  
Unmask the Devil, hood wink the good  
For this century has come to stay  
In a barbed hood  
With sabre-rattling jets,  
Only a distance away...

(Ananya S Guha is a renowned poet and academician who lives in Shillong)

### GLOSSARY:

*u putharo*: steamed pancakes made of rice powder

*shisong u kwai*: also *paan*, is a mixture of betel nut, betel leaf and lime

Khasi, Garo, Jaintia: the three tribes of Meghalaya

*ramhah*: a giant in Khasi folktales

*u klew*: a peacock

*u khla-u thlen*: an evil spirit that takes the form of a serpent

*u sier*: a stag

*raitong*: an ordinary an ill-fated man who plays the flute and has a tragic love story

Tirof Sing: freedom fighter of the Khasis (1802-1835)

*ka tungrymbai*: fermented soybean

*u sohphlang*: *Flemingia vestita*

Likai falls: a plunge waterfall located near Cherrapunji

*wah Simsang*: a river in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya

*khublei shibun*: thank you

CINEMA

# ‘NE FILMS’ IS A WRONG TAG



Internationally acclaimed filmmaker JAHNU BARUA has always been vocal against those who tried to belittle the collective identity of the North East and the individuality of each state and its tribes.

The veteran filmmaker observes that it is cinematically wrong to put all films from the states of India’s northeastern region in one basket. The North East is a diverse region where there are more than 200 tribes and sub-tribes speaking equal numbers of languages and dialects. However, the decades-old practice of misidentifying tribes and misrepresenting the region has adversely affected the people here. While there should have been a zero-tolerance policy for misnomers and denigration of identities and individual history, there has not been much criticism about this.

Nabamita Mitra speaks to Barua to understand, among other things, the divide and why films from the region should be considered in their individuality. Excerpts:

“  
As a filmmaker, I can never support the government or anyone’s objective to mix cinema with tourism

When we talk about films from states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Bengal or Odisha, we refer to them by respective states. But we say ‘Northeast films’, and then go on talking about how films from the region are getting recognised. Don’t you think there is a dichotomy/hypocrisy in this “recognition”?

Very much. I don’t think the term was coined by anyone from the North East, not at all, and definitely done by a non-Northeasterner for convenience. They (people outside the northeastern region) are not at all aware of the North East. It is convenient to club all local movies here, whether Manipuri, Assamese or from any state. I am against it.

In fact, many years ago, I vehemently protested against this. It was during the IFFI (International Film Festival of India). There were five films from the North East in the Indian Panorama (late 1980s). PIB held a press conference for each state, but when it came to us, it clubbed the press conference for all five films from the North East. I objected to this. Cinema is identified as a base for language and culture. Each film was in a different language. So, it was not right to club us together. The term ‘North East’ is being imposed on us.

Some people, of course, get excited about being identified as part of the northeastern cinema. But as far as I am concerned, I feel they are doing a lot of injustice to the cinema of the North East.

Also, in saying Northeast films and generalising the region, isn’t the credibility of Assam and Manipur, states with a history and culture of films, lessened?

It is true that we enjoy being northeasterners. Emotionally, we have a lot of similarities. But in terms of language and culture, we are different. Emotional unification does not mean you impose an identity on us that is cinematically wrong.

There are some films from the North East which have been highly overrated. Yet, these films won the highest honour. Do you think there is a political play behind this rather than an acknowledgement of great art?

If you observe and analyse all the film festivals around the world today, you will see that these are not like what they used to be. Their agenda has become different. Wrong films get promoted. This would happen, and now it is more. As a filmmaker, I could feel this more, and I stopped taking part in film festivals. I am not saying that I am always doing the right thing, but at the same time, it does not feel nice when the right film does not get recognised. Film festivals are driven by an agenda that has nothing to do with cinema.

Meghalaya has decided to invest Rs 1 crore in films to promote tourism. Doesn’t this policy undermine the encouragement and support that films must get as a form of art?



As a filmmaker, I can never support the government's or anyone's objective to mix cinema with tourism. They are totally different. When you mix both, then it is more of a political agenda. I don't know how they do this. In India, politicians and bureaucrats get excited about this... Film should be treated as art, and the returns you expect from it are something different.

Tourism comes into filmmaking differently. When we shoot a film, we try to get help from the Tourism Department. But that does not mean that you will wrongly treat this medium... It is wrong.

We have seen several socio-politically sensitive movies being made in Assam and Manipur. However, that is not the case in Meghalaya. Don't you think the growth of filmmakers and viewers has been hindered by this culture of staying within the safe zone?

Talents, regardless of which state, must be promoted. The government must find a way to nurture these talents. The independence to create something good is important for a filmmaker. So, governments should support and promote these talents in every way. A film can make a huge impact. For instance, a film made by a filmmaker from a village can change the village... So, the benefits (of a film) are abstract and cannot be perceived just like that.

The so-called mainstream considers the northeast to be a region for insurgency and drugs, when there are many contemporary socio-political subjects. How well have those subjects been explored or not explored? Shouldn't the stereotyping be stopped?

How many filmmakers are there in India who are truly interested in the North East? Whatever they hear through the media about insurgency or drugs is how they connect with the region. They don't have a genuine interest in the North East. Once, I was approached to make a documentary about Lachit Borphukan, the Ahom warrior. The man who contacted me said Lachit Baruah (*laughs*). So, that is the kind of information they have based on which they want to make films or series.

However, we, the Northeasterners, are also to blame. We need to be tough in safeguarding our history, and must not allow any insult to it.

Not many mainstream filmmakers do their homework properly, like in the case of *Anek* and *Pahuna*. What will be your message to those mainstream filmmakers who want to showcase the region?

I would tell them that come here and study the region... It won't be ethically right and a wise way (to make a film) unless you are aware of the particular subject. Suppose I am approached to do a film on an African ethnic group. Should I jump onto the project because there is money? Should I make the film without researching the subject?

Some filmmakers directly come to the North East without even visiting the places earlier or doing any research. I get calls from such filmmakers, and when I ask whether they had visited the region earlier, they say 'no'. This is the wrong thing to do. I don't see the seriousness in filmmakers in the rest of India when they want to do something on the North East. But we also allow them to take the advantage.

There are some good short films/documentaries from several states in the North East (films by Dominic Sangma, Pradip Kurbah, Maharshi Tuhin are only a few



examples). Shouldn't there be a platform for independent short filmmakers and more focus on this?

Yes, I agree. Short films and documentaries are required. Documentation of a particular time and subject is necessary. Governments should support these projects without any political agenda. These will become history tomorrow... Short films and documentaries keep the connection alive. In fact, each northeastern state should have a separate department for short films and documentaries. There are so many talents here, for instance, Pradip Kurbah from Meghalaya. He is very rooted, and I want him to keep making films. There are other talents too. And there are so many stories to be told, our history is so rich. And, this will vanish if it is not documented. ■

Jahnu Barua is a 12-time national award winner who has made films in Assamese and Hindi. Some of his award-winning films are *Aparoopa*, *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai*, *Ajeyo*, *Firingotti* and *Kuhkhal*. Barua received the Padma Shri award in 2003 and the Padma Bhushan in 2015. Photos are sourced

CULTURE

# SHAPING THE FUTURE OF PNAR LANGUAGE

The Jaintia literary body is preserving & promoting the language to protect the unique identity, write Prof. PM Passah & Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

The Jaintia Language and Literary Association started on February 8, 1975. According to Article 8 of its Constitution, the association's objective is to preserve, develop and research the language and literature.

According to some people, the Jaintia language is just a dialect of Khasi. But, considering what an eminent linguist, RH Robins, has stated in his *General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey*, the Jaintia language is a language in its own right. Robins said, "... the linguist must either recognise some mutually unintelligible tongues as comprised within one language, or better divide the area into several languages is with the admission that some dialects of one may be also intelligible with some dialects of another that lie adjacent to them. Or he may fall back on extra-linguistic, political, or geographical division."

In addition to its core mandate of preservation, development and scholarly research on the Jaintia language and literature as outlined in Article 8 of its Constitution, the Jaintia Language and Literary Association actively advocates for the official recognition and institutional implementation of the Jaintia language on par with other recognised languages in Meghalaya and Northeast India.

The Association strives to ensure that Jaintia is included in educational curricula, government communication, media and public life, thereby affirming its status not merely as a dialect but as a distinct linguistic and cultural heritage. By promoting its use in formal and informal domains, the Association seeks to empower Jaintia-speaking communities, safeguard intergenerational transmission and secure the language's rightful place within the multilingual fabric of the region.

Publication of the Jaintia language

Whatever may be the case, the Jaintias who continue to accept Khasi as a medium of instruction in schools would not give up their mother tongue. The Jaintia language has been

written down since at least 1900, when two early pieces about it appeared in the Linguistic Survey of India. Even though many Jaintias use Khasi as the medium of instruction in schools, they have always held on to their mother tongue. Over the years, writers and scholars have published many books, articles and documents in the Jaintia language, using a writing system based on the Roman script similar to the one used for Khasi and adapted from the English alphabet. Some early examples include Kiri Dkhar's writings on the 1897 earthquake and Albin Pariat's *Ka Kot Rwai Pnar* (1937). Since then, numerous works have continued to be published, helping to preserve and promote the Jaintia language up to the present day.

The Jaintia language movement

A movement has always been there to preserve the Jaintia language since education was introduced in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills by the British in the last century. But an organised movement not only to preserve but also to develop and research the language and its

literature was first started in 1974 and resulted in the formation of the Jaintia Language and Literary Association the next year.

According to late Albin Pariat, who used to be regarded as the national poet of the Jaintias, there was a strong and enthusiastic move among the members of the Jaintia Labour Corps, which joined the war service during the First World War in France and the Middle East, to initiate attempts for the development of the Jaintia language.

But after the war, according to Pariat, the erstwhile members of the Corps could not be contacted and brought together to achieve their declared goal. He, on his part, however, was completely absorbed in composing songs and poems in the Jaintia language as soon as he returned from the War. His poems were subsequently published in his *Ka Kot Rwai Pnar* in 1930. Continuing this legacy, L Sungoh another devoted Jaintia writer, composed the song *I Rwai Lai Thma France*, which poignantly captures the wartime experience and sentiments of the Jaintia Labour Corps.

The Jaintia Phonetic Alphabet that was approved and adopted by the JHADC Executive Committee during its Budget Session on March 25, 2021

CAPITAL LETTERS															
A	B	C	D	E	Æ	H	I	Y	J	K	L	M			
N	Ñ	Ŋ	O	Õ	P	R	S	T	U	Û	W				
SMALL LETTERS															
a	b	c	d	e	æ	h	i	y	j	k	l	m			
n	ñ	ŋ	o	õ	p	r	s	t	u	û	w				



Mih na yung khyruin thadoh  
U Khublei sa shisien  
Ya ki kha ki man waroh  
U khublei dei mynsiem

Kitbok khadar Dalloi  
Yoh i cha yung u poi  
Ham ya diaw ya kiwa lai  
Cha yung u poi dei rakhai

Kattu da toh i por  
U ya æh yei lum yei thor  
Chawa sep ka sngi u lai  
Chynrang wow khih wow kamai

Further, according to the late Rev. Lowel Gatphoh, an attempt was made by the late Rev. G Angel Jones, a Welsh missionary, to get the Bible translated into the Jaintia language. Jones made his proposal in one of the meetings of the Assam Branch of the erstwhile Bible Society for India, Pakistan and Ceylon, of which Gatphoh was also a member.

According to Gatphoh, most of the members present at the meeting felt that the Jaintias could easily cope with the Khasi language because of its fairly long usage among them, and hence, Jones' proposal was dropped. Jones, who was stationed at Jowai, was fluent in the Jaintia language and was convinced that the Holy Bible could be translated into that language.

The people of Jowai, especially the Jaintia community, have long been writing in their own language not just for books or schools, but for their vibrant cultural life. Every year, during festivals like Bam Phalar, Chad Sukra, Behdeinkhlam, and other social gatherings, they create plays, songs and dances performed entirely in Jaintia.

Bam Phalar, in particular, is held annually by the seven localities of Jowai known together as Poh Chnong. Each locality traditionally stages at least three original dramas every year, all written in the Jaintia language. If we take a modest average of 14 dramas performed yearly, this means around 1,100 drama scripts have been written in Jaintia over the past 78 years alone.

After India's Independence, the Jaintia language programme was also introduced on All India Radio. Over the last 75 years, this has led to the creation of a vast collection of radio scripts, stories and dialogues in Jaintia, much of it preserved in archives or memory, even if not formally published.

Together, these efforts show how deeply the Jaintia language lives — not only on paper, but in performance, voice and community celebration.

#### Activities of the Association

The Jaintia Language and Literary Association (*Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia*) has played a key role in promoting and preserving the Jaintia language. It has organised five major conferences where all activities, including speeches, debates, extempore talks, quizzes and literary competitions, were conducted entirely in Jaintia.

In 1984, the Association honoured the legacy of the renowned Jaintia poet Albin Pariat by hosting a special Memorial Lecture in his name, delivered in the Jaintia language. It also published *Kyrsu*, a quarterly journal dedicated to Jaintia literature and language. Structured under its Constitution, the Association operates through five sub-committees: the Script and Spelling Committee, Research and Publication Committee, Textbook Committee,



Literary Committee, and an Editorial Board.

A major milestone came in 1975, when under the leadership of Professor B. Pakem, then Vice-Chancellor of North Eastern Hill University, the Association formally adopted a standardised Jaintia alphabet in Roman script. Developed by the Script and Spelling Committee, this alphabet consists of 33 letters: 28 borrowed from the Khasi version of the English alphabet and five specially added to represent distinct Jaintia sounds. The system is largely phonetic, ensuring that written forms closely reflect spoken pronunciation.

#### Efforts to standardise and promote the language

Building on these efforts, the Jaintia Hill Autonomous District Council (JHADC), on January 25, 2017, constituted the Jaintia Alphabet Committee to further refine and standardise the script. A sub-committee chaired by Professor PM Passah submitted its report in July 2018. Most significantly, the JHADC officially notified the Jaintia Phonetic Alphabet in July 2022, which was published in the Meghalaya Gazette on August 11, 2022. This formal recognition marks a crucial step in institutionalising the Jaintia script and reaffirms the community's enduring commitment to linguistic preservation, education and cultural identity.

#### Keeping the language alive

The Jaintia language is more than just words; it carries the history, culture and identity of the Jaintia people. For generations, it has been used in songs, plays, radio programmes and daily life, even when it was not taught in schools. Thanks to the hard work of writers, scholars and community leaders, the language now has a standardised script and official recognition from the JHADC.

But the work is not finished. The next important step is to bring the Jaintia language into classrooms so that children can learn and

The Jaintias have their unique culture, tradition and festivals. For instance, the Behdienkhlam festival is celebrated in July each year after the sowing period. The festival is a way of chasing away the plague. The rituals are distinctively different from those performed during any Khasi festivals in the Khasi Hills. Photo by MM

grow up speaking, reading and writing it confidently. Teaching the language in schools will help ensure that it survives and thrives for generations to come.

Every child deserves to learn in their mother tongue, for it builds confidence, strengthens cultural roots, and keeps traditions alive. Let us support this cause and make teaching Jaintia in schools a reality, not just a dream.

It is now for the JHADC to implement the Jaintia alphabet as urgently as possible. It can start with the introduction and teaching of these alphabets to their own schools, which are now more than 70 in number. The JHADC has the power to do this in its own schools. The teaching of these alphabets could be one period of 40 minutes or so on any day of the week. ■

(PM Passah is a retired professor of Economics, North Eastern Hill University. Dr Omarlin Kyndiah is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Biochemistry at St Edmund's College, Shillong)

## INTERVIEW

# ‘TEACHING PNAR IS CRUCIAL’

The Jaintia National Council's central body Publicity and Information Secretary, **MEBANTEILANG SUKHLAIN**, tells Nabamita Mitra why Pnar should not be eclipsed by the dominant Khasi language.

#### Why was Pnar not given the status it deserves?

The Pnars, also known as Jaintias, faced several issues in Meghalaya that hindered their recognition, especially compared to the dominant Khasi tribe. Ethnic tensions, linguistic differences and alleged marginalisation of traditional governance institutions have led to the marginalisation of the Jaintias. The Jaintias' traditional governance institutions, such as the Dolois, have been replaced by centralised state laws, weakening their customary authority.

Economically, industrial projects have often failed to benefit the local population, leading to environmental degradation and land alienation. Pnar identity movements aim to reclaim their unique historical kingdom and cultural heritage. Religious and cultural erosion has also occurred, with efforts to maintain the traditional *Niamtre* religion. The feeling of not receiving the deserved status stems from internal power struggles in the state and the perceived neglect of Pnar-specific cultural, linguistic and economic concerns.

#### What damage has it caused to the language so far?

The Pnar language is under threat due to the dominance of languages like Khasi, English and Hindi, along with a historical lack of official recognition and a written script. This has resulted in the language being marginalised in education, government and the media, leading to a decline in its usage among younger generations.

#### Educational and administrative marginalisation

- For many years, Pnar children were taught Khasi, as there was no standardised written script for Pnar. This has undermined the intergenerational transmission of Pnar.
- The Pnar language is not listed in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution, which means it is denied the benefits and support given to recognised languages. In January 2024, the non-inclusion of Pnar in Meghalaya's new state anthem sparked widespread criticism and was seen as an invalidation of the

language and its speakers.

- The lack of official recognition has historically relegated the Pnar language to a secondary status within state government and administrative functions, which are conducted primarily in English, Khasi and Garo.

#### Language erosion and assimilation

- With English and Khasi acting as the main languages for instruction and official communication, the Pnar language has been largely restricted to the home and other informal settings. This can cause speakers to view their language as less important than the dominant languages.
- Like many endangered languages, Pnar is at risk as younger generations increasingly adopt dominant languages for education, employment and social mobility. This shift can eventually break the chain of language transmission from elders to youth.
- While linguistically distinct, Pnar is often grouped with the closely related Khasi language. Historically, this has led to a lack of individual attention and support for Pnar, contributing to its endangerment.
- The JHADC approved the A-B Jaintia alphabet in 2021, and the Jaintia National Council (JNC) is advocating for its use in schools and official documents.
- The JNC is pressuring the JHADC and the state government to pass a resolution to include Pnar in the Meghalaya State Language Act and recognise it as an official language.
- The Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India (SPPEL), a central government initiative, documents threatened languages and could support Pnar preservation efforts.

#### Why was the JHADC so late to pass the resolution?

As of late September 2025, the JHADC has yet to pass a resolution to include the Pnar language in the Meghalaya State Language Act. This delay is attributed to a complex, multi-year process involving advocacy efforts, governmental actions and organisational pressures rather than a single recent event.

One significant factor contributing to the delay is the focus on the recognition of the Khasi and Garo languages, which has overshadowed the Pnar language. Community advocates argue that the Pnar language has not received adequate attention as the state government prioritises the inclusion of Khasi and Garo in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

“Pnar is often grouped with the Khasi language. Historically, this has led to a lack of individual attention and support for Pnar





Additionally, while the JHADC approved the A-B Jaiñtia alphabet in 2021, a formal resolution is still required to prompt the state government to incorporate Pnar into the Meghalaya State Language Act, a process that involves navigating multiple bureaucratic levels.

Financial constraints have also hindered the JHADC's operations, as the council faces a budget deficit and pending mineral revenue from the state government. These financial difficulties impact its ability to prioritise legislative matters, including the resolution of the Pnar language.

Furthermore, the general legislative and administrative processes within the JHADC can lead to delays, influenced by scheduling conflicts, competing priorities and the need to adhere to proper procedures.

Political dynamics play a crucial role, with community organisations like JNC actively advocating for the resolution. Their efforts highlight the necessity of ongoing pressure to keep the Pnar language issue at the forefront of the JHADC's agenda. Although the Pnar language was included in the amended Meghalaya State Anthem earlier in 2025, this action was taken by the state government and does not confer the full protections of an official language under state law.

**Is JNC working with Pnar intellectuals/writers to push for the cause?**

The JNC is actively pushing for the Pnar language cause, its actions reflect an engagement with the cultural and historical

framework that Pnar intellectuals have long established.

#### Direct actions linked to Pnar intellectual work

- The JNC has called on the JHADC to begin using the A-B Jaiñtia script in its official documents, especially for legislative matters and notifications. The recognition of this script was announced in the Meghalaya gazette in 2021, and its promotion by the JNC directly follows the efforts of local linguistic scholars and writers who worked to develop and formalise the Pnar script.
- During the formation of a new unit in West Jaintia Hills in April 2025, JNC President Sambormi Lyngdoh invoked the sentiments of the late Professor Barrister Pakem (founder of the Association of Jaiñtia writers called *Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia* in 1975, a key figure in the Pnar language movement) by quoting Pakem's mission — “*Im i ktiēñ-Im ka Jaidbru*” (a living language ensures the survival of our tribes).

#### Advocating for Pnar cultural rights

- The JNC is prominently advocating for the inclusion of the Pnar language in the Meghalaya State Language Act. This demand is backed by the historical and cultural legitimacy of the language, an argument that relies on the body of work and research by Pnar intellectuals and linguists.
- In early 2024, the JNC strongly criticised the exclusion of the Pnar language from the new Meghalaya state anthem, describing it as a “snub” to the Jaintia community. The group's vocal opposition, echoing

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Pnar is taught in some schools in the Jaintia Hills, although English remains the official medium of instruction

sentiments from other intellectuals, underscored the importance of recognising the Pnar identity in state-level representation.

- In addition to language, the JNC is pushing for special laws to safeguard Jaintia customs and traditions, including the unique matronymic naming conventions. This effort to protect the Pnar identity from attempts to “mislead” or alter it is driven by an intellectual understanding of its cultural significance.

#### Will JNC, in the future, ask for its inclusion in the 8th Schedule?

The JNC is actively advocating for the inclusion of the Pnar language in the Meghalaya State Language Act, with future aspirations for its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule, but for now, the JNC is advocating for the inclusion of the Khasi language as it is the central language of the Hynñiewtrep (Khasi & Jaiñtia communities).

The JNC's focus on securing state-level recognition is a strategic move that could facilitate a future campaign for the Eighth Schedule inclusion. The advocacy efforts of other linguistic groups in Meghalaya, such as the Khasi and Garo communities, highlight a supportive linguistic and political environment for such demands.

#### Is Pnar taught in schools in Jaiñtia Hills?

Pnar is taught in some schools within the Jaintia Hills, although English remains the official medium of instruction. The Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) is being encouraged to explore ways to incorporate Pnar into the educational curriculum, reflecting a growing movement for its official recognition. Notable institutions, such as the Khasi Pnar Sec School, highlight the presence of Pnar in the



region's educational landscape.

Currently, while English is the primary language of instruction, Pnar serves as the main language for the local population in both East and West Jaintia Hills districts. The JNC is actively advocating for the inclusion of Pnar in the state education system, emphasising the need for the state government to recognise the language and integrate it into the Meghalaya State Language Act. This recognition is viewed as essential for preserving the cultural heritage of the Jaintia community.

The presence of schools named after the Pnar language, such as Tahpat Pnar LPS, underscores its significance in the local education system. Despite being a prominent language, Pnar lacks a standardised written form, although efforts are underway to promote its use and strengthen its presence in the community.

The preservation and teaching of the Pnar language are crucial for maintaining the cultural identity of the Jaintia people. Incorporating Pnar into the educational framework not only empowers the community but also fosters a sense of cultural distinctiveness, reinforcing the importance of language in cultural heritage.

Additionally, Wyrta, an online news platform established in 2015, serves as a vital resource for promoting the Pnar language, identity and culture in Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills. The platform, which translates to “news in Pnar”, publishes content in both English and Pnar,

catering to the region's internet-savvy audience.

A key focus of Wyrta is the promotion and preservation of the Pnar language. By creating a digital space for Pnar, the platform aims to enhance its visibility in the global digital landscape, reaching both local and international Pnar speakers. Wyrta has actively reported on significant linguistic developments, such as the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council's acceptance of the ‘A-B Jaiñtia’ phonetic alphabet in 2021, which supports the written form of the language.

The platform also emphasises literacy by advocating the use of the A-B Jaiñtia script, encouraging local schools and community organisations to promote it.

In addition to language preservation, Wyrta plays a crucial role in safeguarding the Jaintia identity and culture. The platform highlights the community's matrilineal traditions, where children inherit their mother's surname, and stresses the importance of maintaining this practice amidst external influences.

Wyrta also highlights significant cultural events, such as the Jaiñtia festivals, ensuring that these traditions are documented and shared widely. Further, the platform addresses historical and social issues affecting the community, including grievances related to the 1951 decision that separated certain Pnar areas, which is regarded as a pivotal moment in the community's history. ■

(left page) A locality in Jowai. Photo by MM;  
(above) a file photo of JNC members holding a meeting to discuss issues related to the Pnar language. Photo sourced

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Pnar serves as the main language for the local population in both East and West Jaintia Hills



# A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The ethereal beauty of the Himalayas leaves one speechless. Vijay Mantri pens an account of the journey to the Manasarovar as Liaison Officer & a traveller who experiences spiritual awakening

**T**he Kailash Manasarovar Yatra is not merely a journey — it is a pilgrimage that transcends geography and tests the limits of faith, endurance and camaraderie.

As Liaison Officer for Group No. 9 on the Nathu La Route, I was privileged to accompany 40 pilgrims from across India on this sacred odyssey, organised by the Ministry of External Affairs. Our group's travel window began in late July 2025, coinciding with the monsoon mists of Sikkim and the ethereal calm of the Tibetan plateau.

#### Delhi: Orientation and preparation

Our journey commenced in New Delhi, where yatris (travellers) assembled from across the country. The first few days were devoted to rigorous medical examinations at the Delhi Heart and Lung Institute and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Base Hospital, ensuring that every pilgrim was fit for the demanding altitudes ahead.

As Liaison Officer, my duties included coordinating documentation, visa formalities and group briefings at the Ministry of External Affairs, where officers sensitised the yatris about the route, terrain and protocols to be followed in India and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The atmosphere was charged with both excitement and reverence as each yatri collected the much-awaited Chinese visa.

#### Bagdogra to Gangtok: Gateway to the Himalayas

We flew from Delhi to Bagdogra, descending from the haze of the plains into the emerald folds of the Himalayas. From there, a convoy of buses carried us through the winding Teesta Valley to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. The ascent was breathtaking—terraced hillsides, fluttering prayer flags, and cascading waterfalls heralded the spiritual aura of the mountains.

In Gangtok, located at around 1,600 m, we began the process of acclimatisation. The hospitality extended by the Sikkim Government and the liaison staff from the Ministry of External Affairs made our stay comfortable. The yatris were briefed about high-altitude adaptation, hydration and emergency procedures.

At 4,176 m, Nathu La — the 'Listening Pass' — has long been a historical trade route and now serves as the corridor linking Indian and Tibetan pilgrims. The view while crossing the pass was surreal, and one could already feel the spiritual connection with nature



The following days were spent at 15th Mile and Sherathang, each halt climbing higher into the rarified air. Medical check-ups by the ITBP ensured that all members were ready for the Nathu La crossing. Amid cold winds and swirling mist, we witnessed the stoic dedication of Indian soldiers stationed at these heights — a reminder that the Yatra, while spiritual, also traverses the frontiers of national service and sacrifice.

#### Crossing Nathu La: From India to Tibet

The morning of the Nathu La crossing was surreal. The air was crisp, and the tricolour fluttered proudly beside rows of prayer flags. At 4,176 m, Nathu La — the 'Listening Pass' — has long been a historical trade route and now serves as the corridor linking Indian and Tibetan pilgrims.

After completing immigration and customs formalities on the Indian side, we walked a short distance across the border fence to the Chinese checkpoint. Here, officials of the Tibet Autonomous Region received us with courtesy, assisted by interpreters. The sudden shift in landscape and language was striking — the terrain turned starker, with undulating brown hills stretching endlessly under a vast blue sky.

Our Chinese-operated buses awaited us at Kangma, marking the start of the trans-Himalayan journey. The convoy moved westward through Lazi and Zhongba, gradually gaining altitude and revealing the majestic emptiness of the Tibetan plateau. At each stop, we were greeted with bowls of yak-butter tea and warm smiles from the Tibetan support staff.

#### Manasarovar: The Lake of Tranquillity

Days later, as the road curved past mountain passes, the first glimpse of Lake Manasarovar emerged like a mirage — an expanse of turquoise water encircled by snow-clad peaks. For every pilgrim, this was the moment of spiritual culmination. Situated at about 4,620 m, the lake is revered in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions as the abode of purity and divine energy.

We performed the Manasarovar Parikrama by bus, covering the 80-km circuit that offers panoramic views of Mount Kailash, rising serenely in the distance.

As Liaison Officer, my role extended beyond logistics — I found myself a bridge between cultures, faiths and languages, ensuring coordination among the Indian and Chinese



guides, medical personnel and pilgrims. The shared faith and mutual respect within the group were humbling. Many yatris broke down in tears, overwhelmed by the realisation of their lifelong dream.

**Kailash Parikrama: The ultimate test**

From Manasarovar, we drove to Darchen, the base camp for the sacred Kailash Parikrama. The trek, spanning three days, is considered one of the most arduous spiritual circuits in the world.

The first leg to Deraphuk (5,060 m) offered a majestic view of the north face of Mount Kailash, a sight that defies description. Pilgrims walked in silence, each step a prayer.

The second day — the crossing of the Dolma La Pass (5,590 m) — was the true test of endurance. Oxygen levels were barely half of what we breathe at sea level, yet the human spirit triumphed. As yatris crossed the pass, they offered scarves and prayers at Gauri Kund, symbolising renewal and surrender.

The descent to Zunzhui Pu and return to Darchen completed the circuit. Despite exhaustion, every pilgrim’s face radiated fulfilment — a rare glow that comes only from the confluence of physical struggle and divine grace.

**Return journey and reflection**

The return route retraced our path through Zhongba, Lazi and Kangma, culminating once again at Nathu La. Crossing back into India, we were greeted by the familiar sight of the tricolour and the warmth of Indian soldiers — a homecoming that stirred deep emotion. In Gangtok, the yatris gathered for a thanksgiving ceremony. The group shared stories, laughter, and tears, realising how the journey had transformed us. It was not merely a pilgrimage to a distant mountain but an

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**We performed  
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rising serenely  
in the distance**



inward voyage — toward humility, tolerance and unity.

As Liaison Officer, accompanying this diverse group of men and women — young professionals, retirees, homemakers and ascetics — was a lesson in leadership and compassion. The experience reaffirmed that faith transcends language and that shared hardship forges unbreakable bonds.

**Epilogue**

When we finally flew back from Bagdogra to Delhi, each pilgrim carried a piece of Kailash within — the serenity of Manasarovar, the resilience of Dolma La, and the fellowship that blossomed amidst adversity.

For me, the Yatra was both a professional responsibility and a spiritual awakening. Standing on the windswept heights of Nathu La, watching clouds drift between two nations, I felt the essence of pilgrimage: to walk the path of devotion with humility, to serve others selflessly and to return transformed.

The 2025 Kailash Manasarovar Yatra via Nathu La will remain etched in memory—not as a mere itinerary of dates and places, but as a living testament to human faith, endurance and the timeless call of the Himalayas. ■

*(Vijay Mantri is the Commissioner Secretary of the Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya)*

The first glimpse of Lake Manasarovar emerged like a mirage — an expanse of turquoise water encircled by snow-clad peaks. *Photos contributed by author*





## SHORT STORY

# A HOUSE FOR MRS BISWAS

The ageing house demanded constant attention, and Mrs Biswas took care of it. But for how long? Nilanjan P Choudhury tells her story



In the spring of 1981, Mr Biswas bought a house for Mrs Biswas. One Sunday afternoon, after their customary lunch of mutton curry and rice, Mr Biswas popped a kwai into his mouth and announced: “I have some important news.”

Mrs Biswas’s face fell. “They’ve thrown you out of your job, isn’t it!” she exclaimed. “I knew it. I told you! If you show your face in the office only on payday, then who will keep you? Even the government of India is not so kind. I told you! But do you ever –”

“No, no, I haven’t lost my job,” Mr Biswas interrupted. “On the contrary, you have gained a house,” he twirled the ends of his bushy moustache. “That too, on Jail Road.” “Spare me your tall tales,” she replied. “House indeed! Is your job –” “Oh, forget my job, will you!” he exclaimed. “I’m talking about our house, our very own house!”

“Our own house, huh?” she scoffed. “And that too on Jail Road. You wouldn’t even be able to afford a handkerchief there with your AG office salary. Speaking of which – you’re sure you still have your job?” “Will you stop, please! Have you ever heard of anyone in the AG office losing their job? They don’t fire even certified lunatics.”

There was a grain of truth in this. The Accountant General’s office was the Hotel California of Shillong. Once someone got in, they never left. Mr Biswas had been employed there as a clerk for the last twenty years. It was a dream job. Every morning, he would make a brief appearance in the office, sign the attendance register and then vanish, spending the rest of the day gallivanting about town and busying himself with all sorts of social causes.

A few years ago, Mr Biswas and a few other quixotic individuals had together founded a social service organisation named the Shillong Citizens Forum. The forum had recently embarked upon two ambitious projects for the betterment of the town – shoshaan ghat (crematorium) and bhashaan ghat (immersion point), as Mrs Biswas would sarcastically call them.

The first was to persuade the government to build an electric crematorium in a non-tribal area. The only crematorium in those days was located deep inside a Khasi-dominated neighbourhood. Most Bengalis were scared to go there, especially after dark. It wasn’t ghosts that struck fear into their hearts, but memories of the ’79 riots that still haunted them.

Non-tribals dreaded having to carry their dead through hostile Khasi territory to reach the crematorium. They had a nagging fear that if they got unlucky, their own last rites might have to be performed, alongside the deceased. And so, people on their deathbeds received gentle hints from their well-wishers that it would be nice if they could manage to die well before sunset.

Mr Biswas thought this was intolerable. “Aamrar dekhi ikhano moriyao shanti nai,” he would mutter angrily in Sylheti, “no peace in this place, even after death.” So, he spent his days drafting petitions, writing indignant letters to the local newspapers, meeting ministers and politicians, and soliciting public support for his shoshaan ghat. The remaining time was spent collecting donations for his second pet project, the bhashaan ghat – a concrete pier that was to be



raised on the banks of the Wah Umkhrach stream in Polo Grounds. This was where the idols of goddess Durga were immersed during the visarjan on Vijaya Dashami. A muddy, slippery slope led to the stream and the young men carrying the massive idols would often lose their balance and tumble into the mud. This was no way to send Ma Durga and her family back home to Mount Kailash, thought Mr Biswas, and he took it upon himself to give them a more dignified farewell.

With Mr Biswas more concerned about the mother goddess and her children, the responsibility of taking care of their own children fell squarely on Mrs Biswas.

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The Biswas-es had two children – Tinku, a girl of fourteen and Tublu, a boy of ten. They lived in a rented house in Malki – all crammed into a tiny two-room tenement with a common toilet that had to be shared with the landlord.

Mrs Biswas often dreamt of a house of her own. Nothing grand or fancy — just a small cottage with a private toilet. Perhaps a little garden to grow a few roses, eke out a cabbage patch — that would be bliss. But she had little hope that her dreams would ever come true. Houses were for the worldly-wise, not wild goose chasers with no money, like Mr Biswas. So, when he told her that he had bought a house in a prime locality like Jail Road, she brushed it aside.

But Mr Biswas twirled his moustache and gave her an enigmatic smile. “Just wait and watch,” he said. “Before this month is over, you will move into your new home on Jail Road.”

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He wasn’t lying. The following week, much to her disbelief, Mr Biswas took her to Jail Road and showed her the house that he had bought for her. It was just as Mrs Biswas had imagined — a pretty little Assam type cottage, crowned by a slanted red tin roof that stood upon whitewashed walls of wattle and daub. It even had a small garden, overrun though it was with weeds and wild lantana bushes. But for Mrs Biswas, it was no less than the garden of Eden, for she could already see the clumps of crimson gladioli, waxy-leaved camellias, and monkey-faced pansies that would soon bloom there. A wooden nameplate nailed to the front gate read: ‘Nirmal Niketan’.

“You really bought this house!” Mrs Biswas gasped in bewilderment. “But how? It must have cost a fortune!” “Only thirty thousand rupees,” Mr Biswas replied airily. “That’s impossible!” Mrs Biswas said. “A house like this would cost at least two or three lakhs — if not more.” “Well... let’s just say I got a discount from the owner,” Mr Biswas said.

The reason for the discount soon became clear. There was a fly in the ointment. A fly named Photol Choudhury. Photol-mama (as he was universally known) had been staying in Nirmal Niketan as a tenant for the last ten years. And by the looks of it, he had every intention of staying there for the next twenty. An imposing, well-built man, he ran a body-building club on Jail Road and had the reputation of being a bit of a ruffian.

The owner of Nirmal Niketan, a retired bank officer now settled in Calcutta, was keen to sell off his Shillong house. But the formidable

Photol-mama dug in his heels, chasing away any prospective buyers with the ferocity of a Cerberus at the gates of Hades. A protracted legal battle now commenced between owner and tenant, and the house remained unsold for years.

Until Mr Biswas arrived on the scene and made the long-suffering owner an offer that he could not refuse — the princely sum of rupees thirty thousand for the property, with Photol-mama and his family thrown out for free.

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“You are mad,” said Mrs Biswas, her face blanching, after she learned of her husband’s doings. “Do you know who Photol Choudhury is? Everyone in Jail Road is scared of him. How will you ever evict him from our house?” she demanded.

“Just wait and watch,” replied Mr Biswas with a twinkle and a twirl of his moustache.

The next day, Mr Biswas hired a troupe of kirtan singers. They were instructed to arrive at Nirmal Niketan every night by ten o’clock, occupy the verandah and sing as loudly as possible all through the night. Of course, they could rest whenever they wanted, as long as they kept the kirtan going until dawn.

It was a most peculiar assignment, but the kirtanias jumped at it, for it was a full month’s work at a handsome fee. And so, every night after dinner, they would arrive at Nirmal Niketan and sing for all they were worth. Their raspy voices would join the harmonium’s wail, the beating of drums and the clapping of the kartal to make a most terrific sound that would explode inside Photol-mama’s sleepy head like a thunderstorm at midnight.

Photol-mama was in a fix. He could have easily thrashed the kirtanias black and blue and sent them packing. But he was a devout Hindu and did not dare strike these men of God. Being an illegal occupant, neither could he complain to the police. He appealed to the neighbours to stop this circus, but they were politely indifferent to his woes. Yes, the nocturnal ruckus was a pain, but it thrilled them no end to see someone finally giving it back to Photol-mama.

Within a week, the severe sleep deprivation had reduced Photol-mama to a bundle of nerves. But he was made of sterner stuff. The louder the kirtanias sang, the stronger became his resolve to stay put. Mr Biswas now decided to play his next card.

One morning, soon after the kirtanias had departed, a pair of cows sauntered into the garden of Nirmal Niketan. They were followed by a wizened old Bihari milkman bent double under a huge sack of hay. “Biswas-babu told me he wants to build a cow shelter here,” he informed Photol-mama. “Babu is a great man. Kishan bhagwan will bless him,” he said, chuckling fondly as he watched a cow nibble a lungi flapping on the washing line.

The cows did what the kirtanias could not. After one week of living with them, Photol-mama and his family fled from Nirmal Niketan. Mrs Biswas finally had a home that she could call her own. And she instantly fell in love with it.

She loved the way the sunbeams slanted across the kitchen table in the morning as she brewed her first cup of tea. She loved watching the mist rolling past the hills in the distance

as Tublu and Tinku chased dragonflies in the garden, and Mr Biswas read his newspaper. And most of all, she loved pottering around the garden amidst the flowers and vegetables she had raised with her own hands.

“I will never leave this place. And if I do, it will be to go to my mister’s shoshaan ghat,” she said to herself, as a deep peace came over her.

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But twenty-five years later, she wasn’t so sure anymore. Mr Biswas had died a few years ago, and with him, had died the shoshaan ghat project. In deference to his memory, Mrs Biswas herself had tried to keep it going, along with the few remaining members of the Shillong Citizens Forum. But after a while, the apathy of the government and her increasing age forced her to give it up.

She was all by herself now. Tinku was in Bangalore with a software company. Tublu had become a lawyer in Delhi. All their old friends and relatives had either died or left Shillong in the belief that they had no future there. She hardly recognised anyone these days.

Shillong itself had changed beyond recognition. Everyone seemed to own a car, and the traffic jams rivalled Bangalore’s — a dense, unbroken chain of vehicles winding through the heart of Shillong like a giant, poisonous snake of steel and smoke. If only people walked like they used to in the olden days, they’d reach wherever they wanted much faster, thought Mrs Biswas, and look much better too. But what dismayed her most were the ugly concrete apartments and shopping malls that had mushroomed all over town. Every day, someone was selling off their traditional Assam-type cottage to some builder, who would tear it down to construct a high-rise.

Jail Road bore the brunt of the construction boom. Nirmal Niketan was now besieged by monstrous concrete apartments, towering precariously above the sloping hillock upon which they stood. The hills and the stars had vanished from sight to be replaced by petticoats and underwear flapping in the breeze. Not everything had changed for the worse, of course. After decades of turmoil resulting from the tribal non-tribal conflict, peace had finally returned to the town. And that was no small thing. Yes, Shillong had changed beyond recognition, in more ways than one. But it was a Shillong that Mrs Biswas still loved — like a grown-up child one no longer understands but continues to adore.

And in this fluid, uncertain world, it was the house that had been her anchor and her refuge. Friends, children, husband, even Shillong itself, they had all deserted her — only the house had remained behind like a faithful companion. It had kept her going, given her a purpose in life, a reason to get out of bed.

For, like a cranky senior citizen, the ageing house demanded constant attention — its tin roof would leak in the heavy Shillong rains, old wooden floor planks would suddenly collapse, and the garden had to be defended from lantana attacks. Mrs Biswas took care of it as she would her own child, and the results were visible. The spruce little cottage and its blooming garden sparkled like a little green emerald amidst the grey concrete that had sprouted all around it. But she didn’t know how much longer she could keep it that way.

Like the house, she was also getting old — as



Tinku and Tublu would remind her from time to time. How long could she manage everything by herself, they would ask. Stay all alone? What if she fell and broke her hip? What if the house was burgled? It was high time she left Shillong and lived with them.

Mrs Biswas’s head told her that the children were right. But her heart wanted to tell them to buzz off. Yes, she was old, alone. But she was fine. She would much rather live in her own house and on her own terms than be imprisoned in her children’s flat in the chaos of Delhi or Bangalore. And yet she knew a day would come when she would have to bend to the hard logic of her children’s wishes.

It came soon after her seventy-fifth birthday. Tinku and Tublu put their foot down. She would have to leave Shillong and move in with one of them. She could not be allowed to live alone anymore. Naturally, the house would have to be sold. With her gone, it was sure to fall into disrepair or worse — into the hands of a vile occupant like Photol-mama.

After much persuasion and much more reluctance, Mrs Biswas finally gave in — very well then, she would go. And with her would go the house.

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A buyer was soon found — Ranajit Deb, a wealthy Bengali businessman who was suspected of having a finger in the illegal coal mining pie. Mrs Biswas took an instant dislike to him. But she finally decided to sell him the house because he was the only buyer who promised not to tear it down and build an

apartment.

“What will I do with flats?” Mr Deb laughed. “By god’s grace, I have enough money. All I want is a traditional cottage just like this. Hardly any left in Shillong these days.”

The money bit certainly seemed to be true, for he was offering a breathtaking amount for the house that Mr Biswas had bought for only thirty thousand rupees.

“One crore and fifty lakhs,” Mr Deb said. “If you just sign here Mrs Biswas, it’s all yours. And your children’s of course,” he grinned at Tublu and Tinku, who were standing beside their mother. They had come down to Shillong so that they could all stay together for once last time in the old house, like in the old days.

Mr Deb pushed the sale deed towards Mrs Biswas and offered her a pen. She took it from him and uncapped it. The nib trembled over the paper. “Go ahead, Ma,” Tinku said gently to Mrs Biswas. Tublu placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes, just give me a minute, please,” Mrs Biswas said, her eyes abnormally bright. She drew a deep breath. “One minute, please, before I sign away twenty-five years.” She sat still as a rock. All of a sudden, she shot out of her chair and strode into the garden. The children followed her, watching silently as she removed a yellowing leaf from a hydrangea bush. She stood quietly for a while and then turned abruptly to face Tinku and Tublu. “Please tell Mr Deb that I’m sorry. But I cannot sell the house. It is my home. I cannot

leave it,” she said.

“But Ma!” the children exclaimed. “Not today, at least. Today I cannot go. I’m sorry. But I just can’t. And I don’t have to, do I? I am only seventy-five, still in good health. I can take care of myself. In fact, I can take care of more than just myself.”

“Meaning?” “Something has been niggling at me ever since the day I decided to go. You see, I still have some unfinished work here — your father’s shoshaan ghat. I’d like to give it another try. Your father would be happy — even if I failed.”

“You can’t be serious, Ma!”

“I am cent per cent serious. Eighty-year-olds are running marathons these days. I’m only seventy-five. I can try. I might even do it. Shillong is a different place today. People are more open to new ideas. Things are happening. Who knows, maybe even your father’s shoshaan ghat will finally happen. And if it does, I’d like to go there myself when the time comes.”

“Not that I intend to go anywhere, anytime soon,” she chuckled loudly and straightened her shoulders.

It was as if the weight of half a century had suddenly rolled off her back. ■

(Nilanjan Choudhury is a novelist, theatre-maker and science communicator)

Photos by MM



## SPORTS

# STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

Can Meghalaya go from attractive venue to sporting powerhouse? The Twelfth Man introspects

**M**eghalaya has developed a reputation for being a fun place that is good at putting on a decent show.

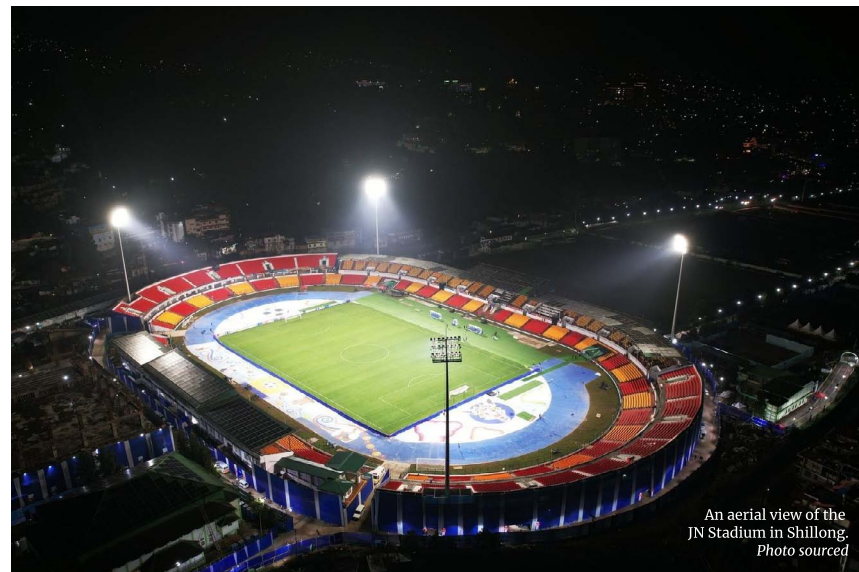
The festival economy is key to this government's vision for Meghalaya — a place for big music concerts, socio-cultural events, traditional festivals and lots of MICE (that's meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions).

Sports is a developing area in the same field. In the last two years, Meghalaya has held important football spectacles — two editions of the Durand Cup, Indian Super League matches for NorthEast United and international men's and women's fixtures.

Apart from this, the state has hosted other national-level sporting events in more niche disciplines — like archery and table tennis. Shillong also co-hosted the South Asian Games in 2016. The latter was under the previous government, which had also initiated Meghalaya's move to host the 39th National Games, which are now set to take place in 2027.

It is this current government that has taken several steps, indicating that it is serious about sports. Scholarships for deserving athletes and a standardised financial incentive programme have been launched to reward top-performing athletes. The government has also gotten behind the Meghalaya State Olympic Association's (MSOA's) use of a private company to systematically and scientifically test youngsters for innate athletic ability. Sports infrastructure projects dot the state, and the government has invested in individual sports associations for their National Games preparations.

And yet, Meghalaya still underperforms in sports, even in its favourite discipline, football, where it has managed to send precious few players into the Indian Super League or the



An aerial view of the JN Stadium in Shillong. Photo sourced

senior national team, especially when compared to Mizoram and Manipur, which drive much of Indian football. In other disciplines, too, Meghalaya typically fails to shine, and the state is usually towards the bottom of multi-disciplinary competitions, like the National Games, Khelo India Youth Games, etc.

Even when we do well, it comes as a surprise to our MSA officials. During the National Games earlier this year, a local journalist asked the MSA General Secretary if Meghalaya had won any medals, only for the latter to retort that the seeds were only planted in 2022, so it was too early to expect success. The very next day, Meghalaya won the first of five medals in canoeing, kayaking and rowing.

While investment in infrastructure is welcome, questions dog some of the government's choices. For example, do we really need to spend Rs 700 crore on a football-only stadium in Mawkhonu? Granted, the JN Stadium is a bit of a mess, but it was redeveloped since 2020, so why were its failings not rectified?

The stadium has several shortcomings, including supports that obstruct the view of spectators. The stadium was also not originally designed for football alone, and it used to have an athletic track around the perimeter. However, this was not redone when the stadium was renovated, and the space is just a vacant stretch now.

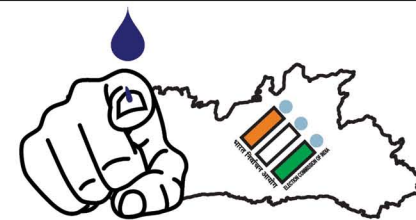
Thousands of seats have been newly installed, but the front rows are too low and are, therefore, kept empty during matches, which makes it an odd sight, especially when the

government claims that the games are sold out. The renovation also did not fix the player entrance — modern stadiums have a central tunnel for footballers to emerge from, but the JN Stadium's is off on the side; this is not a dealbreaker, but it isn't ideal either.

Spending on hosting football events has also raised eyebrows. A deal the government struck with NorthEast United is set to cost the exchequer Rs 24 crore. Hosting the Durand Cup and international football matches also does not happen for free.

At least one Meghalaya Football Association vice-president is said to have resigned over disagreements with the government's willingness to spend money on these events rather than supporting local clubs. Hosting international matches is certainly a matter of prestige for Meghalaya, but all three of the women's fixtures were sparsely attended, while the men's international friendly against the Maldives also saw a rather underwhelming response from the public.

Obviously, there needs to be a balance between the entertainment side and driving the success of athletes in the state. Manipur is said to have become a major sporting powerhouse after hosting the National Games in 1999, as the boost in infrastructure and spotlight on sport led to an explosion in public interest. Meghalaya had a similar opportunity in 2016 when it hosted 12 disciplines at the South Asian Games, but the state did not take advantage of it. It needs to make 2027 and the National Games count for more, or else the investment over the last few years will have been wasted. ■



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