

eclectic

NORTHEAST

We Speak For Our Region

Inside

Sikkim is Suicide Capital!



Inside the Black Mountains of Meghalaya



The Manipur Myanmar IMPASSE

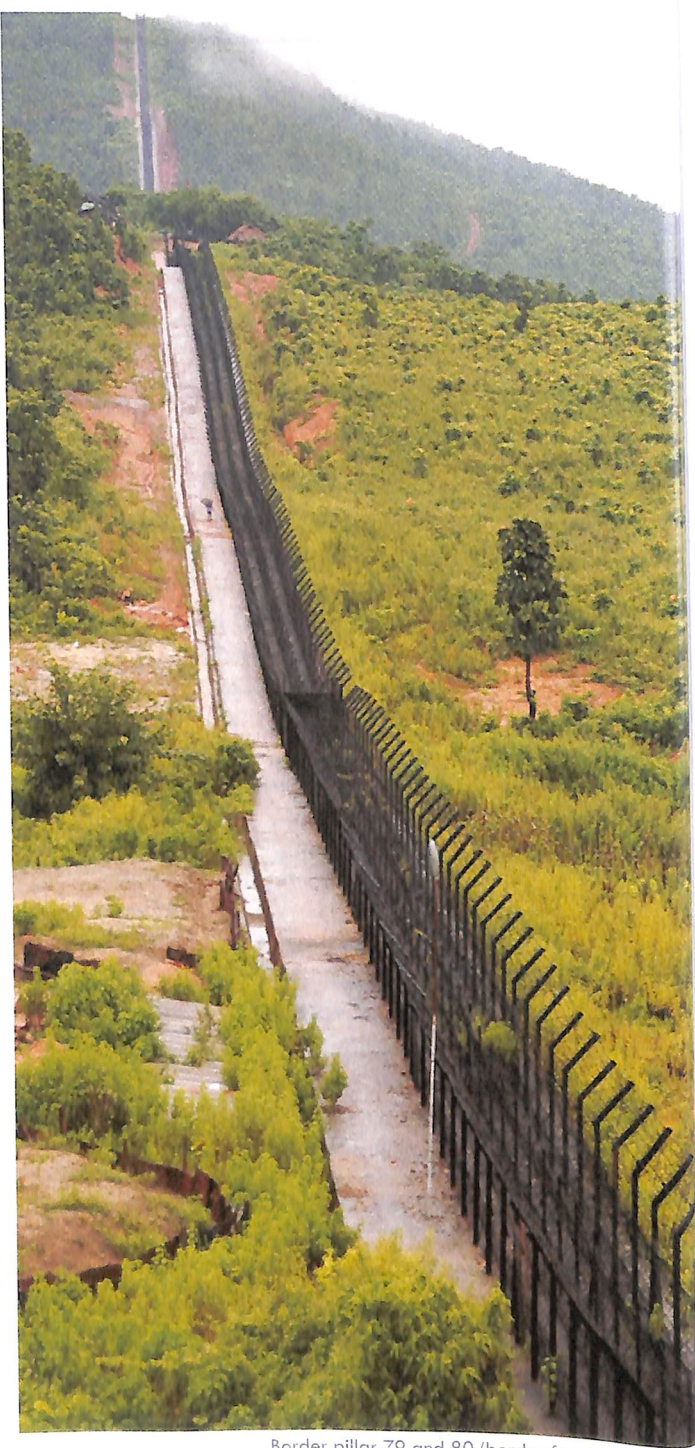
The Myanmar Army has allegedly tried to intrude into Manipur and set up base camps along the border, but the central government is yet to wake up to the gravity of the situation. **Jimmy Leivon** throws more light

The Indo-Myanmar international border, along the Chandel district of Manipur, has been in the eye of a storm after news of a major chunk of Indian land being lost to Myanmar surfaced. During the course of ongoing border fencing, a series of disturbing developments have been unfolding along the disputed border, further aggravating the prevailing situation.

Frequent incursions

The Myanmar Army reportedly patrols the disputed area round the clock and is constantly on the lookout for constructing a base camp. Villagers on the Indian side are spending sleepless nights. In villages like Holenphai, the Myanmar Army frequently encroaches and asks villagers to vacate the area amidst claims that the land belongs to Myanmar. The Indian Army recently foiled an attempt to construct a base camp by the Myanmar Army in this very village.

According to Lalkholun Haokip, Chief of Holenphai Village, the Myanmar authorities have erected a fake 'border pillar no. 23', a kilometre inside Indian



Border pillar 79 and 80 (border fencing)

Territory, after tampering with the original border pillar no. 73. Lalkhulun Haokip further disclosed that the area is under constant vigilance of the Myanmar Army whereas the Indian Army stands guard only during the day.

'As night sets in, we don't dare to venture out, and stay indoors because their army is always around; they also enter our houses at times and warn us to leave our village', says Lalkhulun. The villagers of Holenphai also expressed their fears for the worse with the army on both sides standing their ground as tensions escalate.

What the report says

As per an independent survey conducted by various civil bodies, around 18 villages of Manipur are on the verge of being absorbed by Myanmar if the 'faulty' border fencing is not addressed. The report further suggests that around 100 villages will be affected if the existing border situation is allowed to continue as it will not only affect Chandel, but Ukhrul and Churachandpur districts as well. The report indicated that the disputed area along Churachandpur lies between border pillar no.32 to 48, and border pillar no.90 to 130 in Ukhrul district.

GOI's inaction

For the people of Manipur, the current border row is a grim reminder of the controversial handing over of Kabaw Valley to Myanmar. With the sentiments of the people at stake, the Manipur government constituted a high-powered committee called 'Indo-Myanmar Border Fencing Committee' to placate the questioning public. The main objective of the committee whose chairman was the Manipur Principal Secretary (home), Suresh Babu, was to conduct a field assessment of the disputed area and submit a report to the central government.

The committee accordingly conducted a survey on 26th August, during which Suresh Babu informed media persons that border fences do not represent the exact boundaries between two countries. Border fencing is actually security fencing aimed at checking cross-border movement of people in an unlawful manner and other illegal activities. The next day, Manipur's Governor, Ashwini Kumar, also personally inspected the disputed area (Moreh border town). To mitigate the situation, Ashwini Kumar



Haolenphai village



Manipur Principal Secretary (Home), Suresh Babu, on inspection

assured the village elders at Moreh that he would appraise the situation, and inform both the state and central government in a joint meeting.

Regardless of public sentiment, the central government conveyed its intention to keep a one-hand distance from the dispute, fearing the souring of bilateral relations between the two nations. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in a letter, asked Chief Minister Okram Ibobi to stop pursuing the matter on the pretext of bilateral relations.

Ongoing demands

Disappointed with the indifferent attitude of the central govern-


ment, civil bodies and opposition parties in the state have pledged to confront any threat to the territorial integrity of the state. Meanwhile, major civil bodies of Manipur like UCM and AMUCO have reached a consensus to stop the 'faulty' border fencing at any cost and only let it resume after a proper demarcation arrangement between the two sides. They further threatened to launch a massive public movement if even an inch of Manipur is given away to Myanmar. The joint civil bodies also insisted that both governments come out with a white paper on the actual border boundary and make it public at the earliest. 

Photo Courtesy: IFP photos



Inside the BLACK MOUNTAINS OF MEGHALAYA

It was a drastic change of vision—from rows of pines to hill-sized stacks of ‘black diamond’—as our cab driver broke his silence identifying ‘Hong Kong’, one of the biggest coal dumping grounds along national highway 44 that traverses the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Our cab driver’s not-so-enthusiastic words was a wake-up call for us that we have entered the ‘danger zone’. With Kong Aung, the real name of ‘Hong Kong’, starts the territory ‘ruled’ by the mining mafia. ENe brings you the inside story of sleaze and slavery.

The entire region is densely dotted with ‘coal wells’, infamous as ‘rat hole’ mines, and coal dumps, waiting for their *crorepati* buyers. People say money flies in the air in these areas, one of the most backward tracts in terms of road conditions, health and hygiene, law and order, etc., in the state. There are grave environmental concerns as well—the coal drenched in the rain gives out sulphuric acid which flows down along with water into the once

fertile valleys. Many such valleys have turned barren over the years; others are feared to meet the same fate, unless unrestricted dumping of coal is checked soon. Also rich in limestone, the former Jaintia kingdom, which stretched up to the plains of Bangladesh, has become a mining hotbed within the past few decades. Nearly a dozen cement plants are digging out hundreds of tonnes of limestone every day, eating up hill after hill.

Coal mining is basically con-

trolled by the indigenous traders, mostly landowners. On the other hand, the reigns of the more sophisticated cement industry is with companies owned by non-tribal businessmen, a concern often expressed by nationalistic forces within the state. This is probably the primary reason for local groups often raising environmental concerns against the cement companies while surprisingly being far from vocal about the massive destruction caused by coal mining on





Photo: Rupam Kalita

Coal fields of Rymbai in Jaintia Hills

the land and water of the region.

Increased media exposure to the far-reaching impact of coal and limestone mining in Jaintia Hills coupled with the government's new mining policy, which promises tough steps to curb unscientific mining, has made the miners sceptic about outsiders venturing into the mines even to 'take a look'. A massive slide in the demand for coal from Meghalaya, pushing down sales as well as prices, has left the miners more worried and

unable to risk pro-environment voices. Our driver friend's objection in leading us to take a peek into some coal mines, which were just a stone's throw away from NH-44, could be readily understood.

Lack of Regulations

Most of this Sixth Schedule state's land is owned either by the community or individuals, thus making it difficult for the government to address serious ecological concerns as these private land owners often undertake small-scale mining activities without any mining lease from the government. Forest minister Prestone Tynsong recently went on record saying that it was the land tenure system

which has hampered the government's enforcement of forest conservation laws. In a non-Schedule state like Assam, the sole control over the mineral resources—whether it is discovered on private or institutional land—lies with the central government. In Meghalaya, an individual is authorised to take up mining on his own land and sell it outside by paying a nominal royalty to the government.

The Government of Meghalaya introduced the 'Single Window Clearance System' in order to facilitate more investment to the industries sector. Under the system, the investor is provided assistance in getting approvals from various agencies, including forest and



Photo: Rupam Kalita

Workers load coal onto a truck in Meghalaya

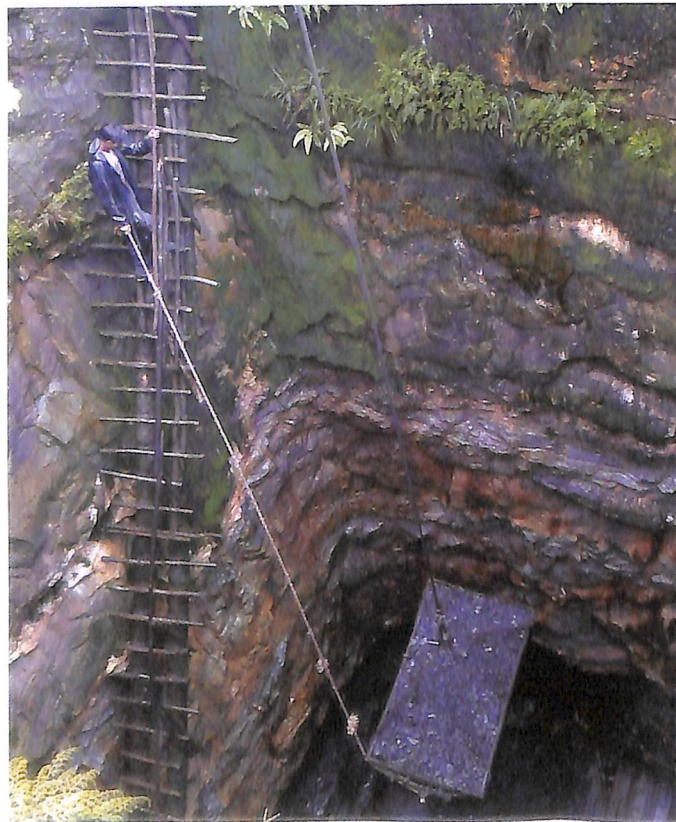


Photo: Sannio Siangshai

A miner at work in a rat-hole mining field

environment clearance, besides taking up matters related to land to set up the industry. However, the 'voice' of the landowners and the community rule the roost when it comes to the implementation of any project. The industry has to obtain a 'no objection certificate' (NOC) from the particular village. The *Dolloi* (headman) convenes a meeting of the *Dorbar* (traditional village council) and presents the industry's proposal before it. The *Dorbar* provides a NOC if it is satisfied with the incentives offered by the company to the village. NOCs are also required from the respective autonomous district councils before obtaining permission from the district administration.

Most of the cement companies keep their production capacity below 1,000 metric tonnes to avoid obtaining a mandatory clearance certificate from the central government. 'The companies also get away with the rule of the land lease for coal and limestone quarries. The maximum area to be allotted for mining is three hectares, but the companies lure locals to provide them *benamil* and, which remains in the name of the local person, but is actually used by the industry,' Brian Kharpran, known as the 'Cave Man of Meghalaya', says. In some cases, they manage to get five times the approved land for mining. The company pays a nominal royalty and

enjoys huge central subsidies for development of the plant in that 'remote' region.

There are more than five cement plants within a 5–6 km radius in the region, flouting all existing norms. Although the government cites employment opportunities generated by these industries, in reality, the locals are reluctant to work for such tedious jobs involving prolonged working hours. The work force mostly consists of Nepalese, Biharis, Bodos, Rabhas, Bengalis and other migrant communities.

'People engaged in the mines are mostly migrant labourers. Those handful local people, who have become rich, are the coal mafia and the middlemen,' an elderly man from Lumshnong said on condition of anonymity.



Photo: Sannio Siangshai

A miner comes out of a rat-hole after a hard day's work

Life of the workers

The density of limestone caves along the southern border of Meghalaya, facing the Bangladesh plains, is one of the highest in the world. Some of the longest cave systems of the subcontinent also exist in this region. Caves filled with limestone are priceless for environmentalists—while for the mining mafia—it is only the limestone reserves that matter the most. The government is also swollen with pride of the state's huge limestone reserves and could not care any less for the caves formed by the essential mineral.

Shnongrim Ridge in Jaintia Hills has both coal and limestone reserves. But this 30 sq km area also has 145 km of cave passages and the country's longest cave system. A part of one such passage has already caved in under the impact of limestone mining. Although the coal mines mostly belong to nearby Sutnga region, mining for the black

diamond has started in the Shnongrim Ridge too. The coal mafia has allegedly claimed parts of the ridge as under them, despite opposition from the local *Dolloi*. 'It is a ridge, how can a part of it belong to another?' wonders Brian Kharpran, who had filed a PIL in the Supreme Court against rampant limestone mining in Jaintia Hills. Following the PIL, the apex court had asked the government to constitute an expert committee to look into the matter and ordered to enforce a state mining policy.

'The entire coal business of our area is run by a few influential contractors. Their monthly income is more than ₹ 50 lakh! They have links with the businessmen of Beltola in Assam and they conduct the trade as per their whims and fancies. They don't care about anything else,' laments Deepak Mandal of Khliehriat area.

The Shnongrim Ridge, com-

prising nine villages, was once bestowed with myriad varieties of flora and fauna. Regrettably, due to rampant mining over the past few years, the green canopy was the first thing to vanish leading to massive soil erosion and severe scarcity of water. Ground water channels get destabilised with constant deep mining—shrinking water levels rapidly—besides causing pollution. The once pristine waters of the Lukha River, which has limestone formations on its riverbed, has turned blue due to the presence of sulphuric acid originating from the coal dumps; the same pollution has turned the rocks under Lytan-River a dirty yellow. The Lytan valley, one of the biggest valleys in the hilly state, and, once known as a 'rice bowl', is almost barren, thanks to coal mining.

The Meghalaya government receives a royalty of ₹657 per metric tonne of coal. 'The state govern-

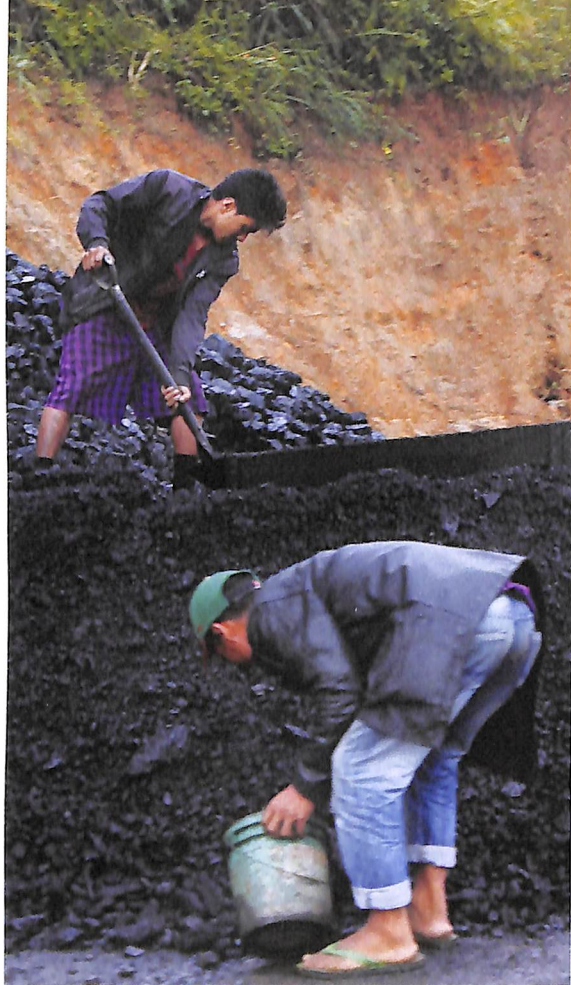


Photo: Rupam Kalita

Fruits of labour



Photo: Sannio Siangshai

Impact of coal mining on a river in Jaintia Hills

ment encourages only well-planned mining, which is also known as scientific mining. The miners have been given 12 months' time to abide by the norms spelled under the new mining policy,' says a senior official of the state mining department. 'The government is concerned about the involvement of middlemen in the coal mining sector. Underground mining in Meghalaya, which is known as rat-hole mining, can also be scientific mining. The topography of the state doesn't allow open cast mining; entire hills will collapse if we undertake open cast mining here. So, it is important to undertake rat-hole mining, albeit scientifically. There has to be proper refilling once mining is over in a pit,' the official emphasizes.

A typical day for a miner starts as early as 7 am with a small lunch-break at 12 pm. It is time for him to again crawl into the rat hole and dig for another 2-3 hours. Finally,

his duty comes to an end at around 3 pm. When the weather is good, miners even work at night. 'It's a tough job. Sometimes, we even have to crawl deep inside through just one-foot high passages. We court danger every day,' says Dairang Daimary, who hails from Assam and has been digging out the 'black diamond' at Rymbai area for the past 20 years.

Once a miner fills a sack, which contains roughly three metric tonnes of coal, he receives ₹1,000 as wages. 'Life is not easy out here. Since I had lost my father at an early age, my entire family is dependent on me. I have to look after my brothers and sisters, who are studying back home,' says the miner.

Most of the miners live in temporary shelters which lack basic amenities such as water and electricity. 'Our *sardar* keeps a very tight vigil on us even though he doesn't stay with us. Whenever

there is extra demand for coal, we are asked to work for extra hours without many incentives. Just to make ends meet, we work here,' he rues.

While we sneak inside a check gate near Jowai, we receive a rude reality check as we witness the guard of that check post exchange a few pleasantries with a truck driver, after which both of them go on their ways. 'The check gates are just for namesake. The truck drivers know the tricks of the trade. Even the small-time contractors earn over ₹ 1,000 by overloading each truck,' says KN Syiemlieh, a small-time shopkeeper from Jowai.

'A few people at the top rung of governance, including officials, politicians and ministers, are involved in the coal trade and the common man usually has no inkling of the kind of shady deals that are made,' David Lyngdoh warns us.

Threatened environment



By Naba Bhattacharjee

Environmentalist & Columnist
Chairman—Meghalaya People's Environment Rights
Forum

Our environment in Meghalaya is ailing and at breaking-point what with the situation deteriorating with each passing day. The countdown has begun. Yet no tangible initiation except for rhetoric and empty commitment has been witnessed. There has been no positive action to arrest the rapid decline of the environment which has been allowed to be defiled and exploited at will. The issues are not new. They have been in existence for decades, gradually assuming alarming proportions, in the absence of any concrete measures to evolve a comprehensive strategy to tackle the impending holocaust. Increase in population leading to diverse patterns of land use by destruction of vegetative cover, deforestation for commercial, pastoral and agronomic activities, ignoring land capability, soil and water conservation, unplanned development, and, above all, mining and quarrying are at the root of the decline.

The issues range from receding catchments of water bodies, including the rapid disappearance and defilement of water bodies, high air and water pollution, threat of annihilation faced by the Wah Umkhras and Umshyrpi Rivers, and Umiyam Lake—the reservoir of the first hydel

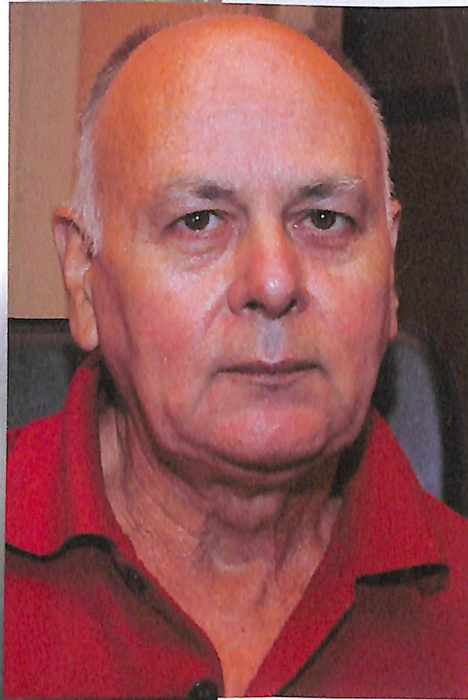
power generating unit of Northeast India. In course of the last decade and more, one has witnessed large scale diversion of forest land for non-forestry purposes in gross violation of FC Act 1980 for mining—particularly limestone—to feed the slew of cement plants which have sprung up like mushrooms. Moreover, there is shifting of responsibility with the forest department claiming that around 4% of forest areas are under their jurisdiction while the rest 96% is under the management of Autonomous District Councils. In this overlapping of accountability, environment issues are 'no one's baby' while the violators in connivance with officials are having a field day. There is violation of the Supreme Court's order in the infamous PIL viz T N Godavarman Thirumulpad Vs Union of India (W.P 202 of 1995) where it was clarified that the word 'forest' must be understood according to the dictionary meaning of the term, irrespective of the nature of ownership and classification thereof, and shall include forests under district councils constituted under VIth schedule of the Constitution. Another blow to the cause of environment has been the passing of the Meghalaya Forest Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 2012, by amending the Meghalaya Forest Regulation (Application and Amendment) Act, 1973.

The primary objective of the amendment is aimed at redefining the term 'forest'. The sudden urgency to re-define forests, without taking public opinion and maintaining optimal transparency, is obviously not intended at enhancing conservation and increasing forest cover, but, on the contrary, provides a license to deforest with impunity. The amendment is unique in the sense that it shall now take hundreds of hectares outside the purview of 'forests' with the sole motive of diverting such forests for non-forestry purposes, mainly mining. This is probably the first time in the history of our country where a forest amendment is proposed not to preserve but annihilate whatever little forest cover remains in Meghalaya today.

Coal mining is another evil which has caused serious damage. Unscientific rat-hole mining has not only destroyed the land but poisoned the water bodies and ground water through acid mine discharge. Agricultural land has been rendered barren, while drinking water supply is a scarce resource. In addition, rampant quarrying and sand mining has severely impacted catchments of rivers, and drying of natural streams and water sources. Environment issues lie at the bottom of the priority list of the government and receive minimum or no attention at all.

Cost of mining

By Brian Dermot Kharpran
President—Meghalaya Adventurers Association



When the Supreme Court of India dismissed the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the Meghalaya Adventurers Association against unregulated and indiscriminate mining, and quarrying of coal and limestone, and the subsequent destruction of innumerable caves and caverns, a floodgate of frenzied mining activity was released. It was as if the industrialists and miners had been given a license to kill; and kill they did. Nothing was spared in their quest to extract the minerals; forests were razed, soil eroded overnight

and fauna disappeared as if it had never been.

What struck at the heart of the rural communities was the disappearance of springs and water sources—the pollution of streams and rivers—making them highly acidic and lethal to aquatic life, and the acidification of their fertile paddy fields which was their main source of subsistence. To add to the woes of the villagers, the areas are now being swamped by invading immigrant labourers, which is posing a grave threat to the demographic structure of the community. In one ugly stroke, the unsullied life of the villages was crudely levelled to the ground. Nothing would ever be the same again.

While the mafias amass wealth, the poor village communities are marginalized, having to stoop to breaking stones to make a living. Ironically, in the midst of arid dust in the degraded environmental landscape, the little churches that had served the villages for so long have now been replaced with huge modern and beautiful churches, courtesy the soul appealing acts of the coal barons/mafias.

When the PIL was filed in the Supreme Court in 2006, the state government impressed upon the Hon'ble Court that a 'Mining Policy' was being drafted and would be put in place shortly. It took six years for the policy to be passed by the government; the working rules, however, have yet to see the light of day. Isn't it an irony of justice that the unscrupulous rich become richer and the poor poorer? Do the downtrodden have a welfare government?

What a sad plight awaits the future!



Photos Rupam Kalita

One of the caves at Shnongrim Ridge in Meghalaya



Photo: Rupam Kalita

Rice Bowl of Jaintia Hills

In retrospect

It's a well-known fact that land is a private property in Meghalaya, and local people have the right to use their property profitably. However, even if land is a private property, water is not. The rampant mining activities across the state have destroyed its precious water bodies. In most places in the Jaintia Hills, water sources are contaminated. The larger question is: is it logical to use lands for mining, destroying another natural resource? If people have rights to their lands, they must also possess the right to drink clean water!

Although on the surface it looks like limestone and coal mining provide livelihood to many people in Meghalaya, this is not the case in reality. The local people are mostly engaged with the coal business as over ground wage labourers. What will happen to them, say after 30 years, when there won't be any coal reserves left? There won't be any irrigable land available for them either. What will be their alternative source of employment? A question we need to ponder on urgently before we destroy the very resources we survive on.

Our investigation reveals that only a handful of people in the state are making money out of the coal business. Thus, a wide disparity of income now exists among the people in the state, pointing at a future where the rich get richer every day and the poor have no say. Finally, no one seems accountable for the contemporary situation; everyone is passing the buck. This must be stopped. Meghalaya, the abode of clouds, needs to be preserved. Or its beautiful hills where thousands of tourists throng every year will only exist in sepia-tinted pictures. 🇧🇲

Words: Dhiraj K Sarma

Disclaimer: Some names have been changed to protect identities



Children on their way to a ses

Assamese Stories that C-o-n-n-e-c-t

We have all loved stories as children but storytelling for social change and cultural assimilation gives the good old storybook genre a whole new meaning, says **Aamir Zahedi**

Stories, that wonder-world part of every child's favourite memory of childhood—passed on by the loving story tellers (mostly parents and grandparents) helps children take to flights of fancy in an otherwise drab world—filled with lessons to be learnt and tasks to be completed. Also, these stories often instill moral teachings within young minds without the need to be didactic.

Who has not cherished listening to *Burhi Aair Xaadhu* (Grandma's Tales) by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, containing some of the most enduring stories like *Burha-Burhi* (The

Old Couple), *Bandor aaru Xial* (The Monkey and the Fox), Tejimola, *Budhiyak Xial* (The Clever Fox), and other timeless tales? In the 21st century, however, folk stories have been overwhelmed by the internet, high speed bikes and video graphic war games, especially in Assamese society, where the storytelling phenomenon has received a rude jolt. Under these circumstances, the tea garden community of Assam brings in a sliver of hope as they use this tool of storytelling to bridge the gap between them and the larger Assamese community. ENe finds out.

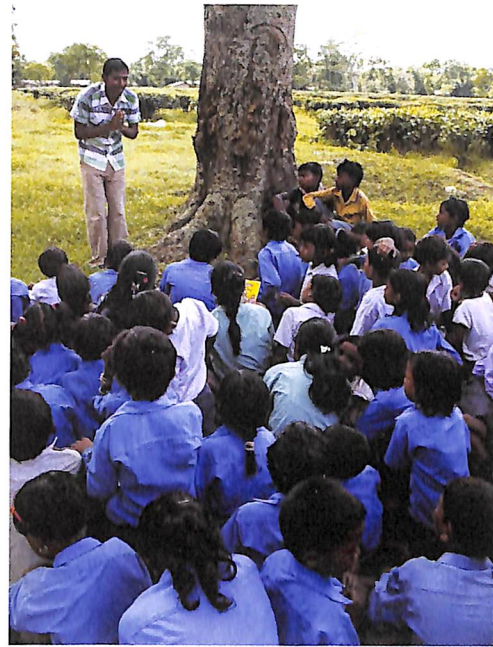
Revival

Seven-year-old Sunil Munda gets up early in the morning on a lazy Sunday and hurriedly wears his school uniform to reach his school at Govindpur Tea Estate in Assam's Jorhat district. The school is buzzing with other children of his age, listening to Bineeta Rajput, who is dramatically narrating stories from *Grandma's Tales* with myriad expressions on her gentle face as the story rises to its climax. The spell-bound children easily repeat every detail in the story as they re-enact the story one by one.

The story telling initiative for



On-going session



Open air story telling session

language development among the children of the tea garden community is a unique project of the NGO Heritage Assam which was launched in 2009, in partnership with UNICEF, to help primary students of the tea garden community to overcome hindrances and become fluent Assamese speakers. This transition would also make sure that they are assimilated into the mainstream Assamese cultural milieu rather than remain isolated on the social front.

Bridging gaps

The project covers over 5000 children from about 40 tea gardens in the districts of Jorhat and Dibrugarh. The story tellers were taken from the same community, initially numbering around 40 from 20 tea gardens when the project started in June 2013; their numbers presently touch 100. All of them have been hand-picked up after proper screening by Heritage Assam and provided formal training. They are further encouraged to go back and work among the community thus helping in the easy transition of the children. They are well-versed with the two languages and the three-day residential training-cum-workshop by noted writers, education-

ists, and theatre personalities, with emphasis on demonstration and pronunciation, enhanced their skills considerably.

Bineeta and her colleagues first narrate the stories in the Sadri dialect and later in Assamese. Afterwards, the children narrate the same story, which helps them relate and pick up words, while comparing the two different languages according to their understanding. Slowly, during the different phases of the programme, picking up new words become second nature to them.

A similar workshop was in progress in Khorikotia Tea Garden, a few kms away from Govindpur, along the Titabor-Mariani highway where children gathered to listen to the story teller in an open air arrangement, below the big trees of the tea garden, somewhat reflecting the Shantineketan style of teaching. While the parents of the children were busy plucking tea leaves, their children were immersed in stories.

Touching lives

PC Tamuly, writer and founder of Heritage Assam opines, 'The formal education system has not been able to serve linguistically marginalized communities. We had to do something beyond the ordinary,

and if we are successful in our efforts, then why only the garden children, but we will also try to connect the other communities as well. The engagement of the story tellers entitles them to monthly stipends and they have proved to be the best guides and teachers among their communities. While the road ahead is not easy, and we will have to plan our plan of action meticulously, the impact as of now can be felt in numbers'.

Saleha Khannam, a retired school teacher from Jorhat informs, 'Bachelors of Teaching (BT) program requires a teacher to develop four skills among the children that is: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Specifically, listening and speaking is enhanced by the art of storytelling'.

Universally loved

The gift of storytelling is one of the most powerful and envied of skills and not everyone is blessed with it. Good story tellers can transform you to another world altogether. A good story can also help a child irrespective of caste, creed, religion, colour and language cherish the everyday moments of life and bridge all boundaries. 🌟

Photo Courtesy: Aamir Zahedi

Sikkim is Suicide Capital!

All is not well in the eco-paradise of Sikkim as the escalating suicide rates indicate. **Kunal Rai** takes stock of the situation



Sikkim has recorded the highest rate of suicides among all the states in the country, reveals the latest reports of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The suicide rate (number of suicides per one lakh population) of Sikkim was listed as 29.1% followed by Tamil Nadu with 24.9% and Kerala with 23.6%. Altogether 181 persons, including 85 females, had committed suicide in Sikkim in 2012 as per the NCRB statistics. The data also mentions that no person in Sikkim committed suicide due to bankruptcy, poverty or unemployment. Illness, drug abuse and family problems were some of the major reasons for suicides in Sikkim while a fall in social reputation, illegitimate pregnancies, failed love affairs, and failure in exams also contributed to the death toll.

Suicide helpline started

Despite Sikkim leading the nation in suicide rates, the counselling helpline number which

Suicide Run in Sikkim			
Year	Deaths	Suicide Rate (%)	National Rank
2010	280	45.9	1st
2011	184	30.3	3rd
2012	181	29.1	1st

*Source: NCRB

had been installed at STNM hospital in Gangtok has rarely received any calls after the helpline service was made operational this year. 'The response to the suicide helpline number is very poor, there are only a few isolated incidents where a person with suicidal tendencies has called up to seek counselling' says the senior psychiatrist of STNM hospital, Dr CS Sharma.

The state government had installed the toll free helpline number in the month of June this year—to provide free counselling to persons suffering with depression—and suicidal tendencies. 'We received a couple of calls from the public out of which many were prank calls, but we also have

a success story to tell. A woman from Gangtok who is a housewife was cured after she received counselling from our doctor. She was a patient of severe depression. Now, she is perfectly fine. It took almost two hours for us to convince her, over the phone, to meet us for the medication. Later, we found out that the reason for her depression was her alcoholic husband', Dr Sharma says.

Awareness drive crucial

A senior doctor says that one of the reasons for the fewer calls is due to the lack of proper sensitization and awareness, 'Calling a helpline is a new trend in Sikkim and many people are still not aware of its existence. The re-

sources of the government need to be expanded in studying the actual reasons for these suicides and spreading information about the helpline’.

According to the data provided by the Sikkim State Crime Record Bureau, 29 cases of suicides were reported in the month of June and July (the date of August is awaited). Rapid urbanization, unemployment, depletion in the traditional sources of income, depression and substance (narcotics) abuse are some of the key reasons for committing suicides, the experts observe.

Pervasive concern


In all the 29 cases, the victims have committed suicide by hanging. Dr Sharma observes that the prevalence of suicide is more in

the persons aged between 25–45 years in Sikkim. He also said that there are cases in which school-going children and persons above 50 years of age has also committed suicide.

‘In one of the cases, an eight-year-old child who tried to commit suicide told me that his parents wanted him to stand first in class which he could not do; high expectations of parents and extreme academic competition often lead the students to suicide’. A senior doctor adds that the number of persons dying of suicide is much more than persons dying of any other killer disease in Sikkim. ‘Use of narcotics is another reason for the suicides, it leads to intense depression and which eventually leads one to commit suicide’, cautions the

doctor. Speaking on Sikkim Anti Drug Act 2005, Dr Sharma said that the act is too lenient and needs serious amendments.

CM’s words

Readers are aware that Chief Minister Pawan Chamling had famously stated in June this year that 50% of suicide victims in Sikkim are non-locals but all such deaths are recorded as from Sikkim. The Chief Minister had directed all police stations to set up helplines through which proper counselling could be provided to people suffering from depression. Only time will tell how effective these measures will be to tackle this persistent concern. 

The writer is a reporter of
The Sikkim Express

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Photo: Rakesh Soud

The Wansuwa dance

A Timeless Tiwa Celebration

On a mission to locate a missing colleague in Karbi Anglong, **Rakesh Soud** comes across an ancient Tiwa celebration that engages his thoughts

It was a warm evening in July when I was trying to get through to one of my fellow researchers. She had been working deep in the hills of Karbi Anglong for her folklore documentation project. Whenever there is political turmoil, our best bet is to rely on each other. I decided to form a search party and set out for the distant hills.

Meet the Tiwas

Karbi Anglong has always been known for its rich culture and distinct ethnic groups. The Hill Tiwas are one such group that represents the vibrant mix of cultures and traditions that make up this hill state. The Tiwas of Assam mostly live in the hilly areas of Nagaon and Karbi Anglong and primarily depend on

agriculture for their living. Geographical constraints divide them politically in two distant groups: the Tiwa community living in the plains of Kamrup, Nagaon, Morigaon, and in the foot hills of Karbi Anglong (Assam); and the Hill Tiwa community living in the westernmost areas of Karbi Anglong as well as in the northeastern corner of Ri-Bhoi district (Meghalaya).

In the hills, they speak a Tibeto-Burmese language of the Bodo-Garo family and are divided into clearly identified clans. They were also known as Lalungs in the Assamese Buranjis, or Tai Ahom historical accounts, and in colonial literature. British and most post-Independence accounts, however, provide a very confusing image of the Lalungs,

mixing up people with contrasting features.

Towards the Hills

The search party embarked for the distant village of Khawra-kri where she was supposed to be staying. I talked to Rana Kowar, a young and passionate photographer, about the rescue mission and he agreed to join us, camera in tow. We decided to scale the remote village with our rusty vehicles, starting from Ouguri. The nearby Nelli Tea Estate flashed by next. The last night's rain had muddied the roads. We took the next turn through Aamsoi and drove towards Ulukunchi of Karbi Anglong. We reached Umpanai after a long drive of around 70 kms from the national highway. The clouds

and hilltops' refreshed us on our long drive.

Before entering Khawra-kri, we noticed hordes of people walking past us. Every Tiwa person was dressed in her or his traditional finery and was on the way to Khawra-kri village—much like us. We came to know that they were celebrating one of their holy festivals, *Wansuwa*. Despite a striking cultural dichotomy, today the Tiwas undoubtedly form one 'ethnic group', with both hill and plain dwellers acknowledging a single identity. This comes from their enthusiasm to celebrate cultural festivals together, *Wansuwa* being one among them.



Photo: Pallavi Dujta

A Hill Tiwa girl with sprinkled rice flour

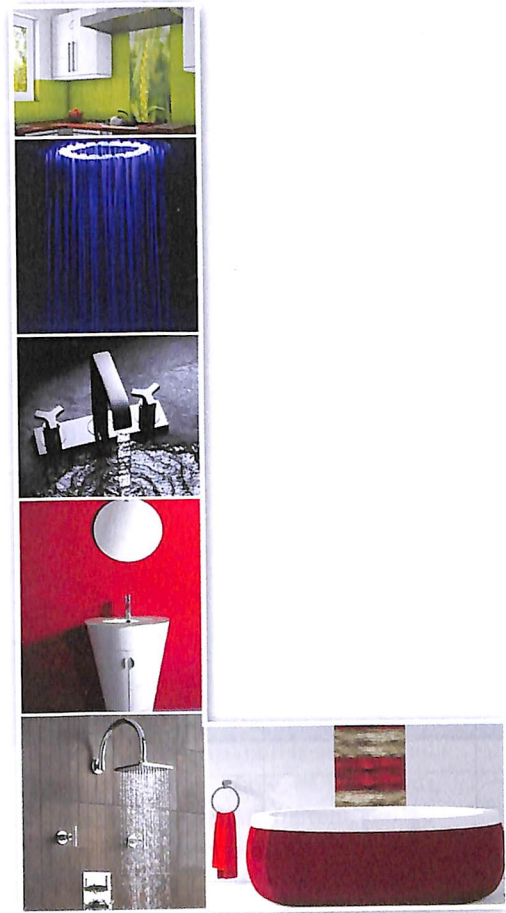
Colourful ending

Wansuwa is a festival which is held in different Hill Tiwa villages and takes different forms in every village. The term *Wansuwa* is a combination of two words—*Wan* means 'flour of rice grain'—and *Suwa* implies 'grinding'. Rice beer and pork are the foods of celebration during those days. Tiwas generally select a Wednesday for the main ritual, a holy day in Tiwa faith. We finally met Pallavi, my missing colleague, busy in documenting the rituals and completely in one piece.

We noticed that mortars were placed in a circle on the ground around Changdolo, one of the heads of Chamadi, or the Bachelor's Dormitory, which is also known as *Dekachang*. In this ritual, some elderly people of the village recite *montrors* or holy verses, followed by a pig sacrifice. The liver of that pig is exposed to know the future of the society as was a custom in many other ancient civilizations. The young boys then start grinding the rice grain—to the melody of *Wansuwa* songs and dance. The rhythms of *Khram Ludang* and *Khram Panthai* along with the melody of *Pangsi* follow the songs. The songs sing of the wisdom of Sari-bhai and Guru Lamfa Raja, Satonga Raja and Maldeo Raja, as kings form an integral part of Tiwa society even today. The newly appointed leaders—the Changdolo, Changmaji, Khuruma, and Khurumul are advised by their predecessors to keep alive the Tiwa rituals, and also dispense everyday tasks earnestly. At the end of the performance, two persons sprinkle a mix of rice powder and water on everyone. They believe this liquid form of rice to be the holy water of goddess Laxmi. For the Hill Tiwas, these celebrations are both socially and politically important for their ethnic identity as a group. After the celebrations were over, we returned with the setting sun and the memory of many vivid colours. 🌸

Author is engaged with IIT Guwahati for his doctoral research and focused in Conservation Biology of large mammals and political ecology of human-wildlife interaction along with the ethnographic research.

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Advocacy for Statistical Awareness by **DIRECTORATE OF ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS, ASSAM**

Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam at a glance



The system of collection of essential Statistics for administrative purposes was prevalent in pre-independence India. Just after Independence, the process of planning for economic development of the country started resulting requirement of information on various socio-economic aspects. The process pioneered mainly by Prof. P. C. Mahalanobis, the doyen of Indian Statistical System, which led to the establishment

of various statistical organizations viz. Central Statistical Organization (C.S.O) (now called Central statistical office), in 1956, the Computer Centre in 1967, the Indian Statistical Institute (I.S.I) at Kolkata in 1931, National Sample Survey Organization (now National Sample Survey Office), Bureau of Economics and Statistics in the States (now called Directorate of Economics and Statistics) etc. C.S.O acts as a nodal and coordinating agency in the

Central Government while the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in the States are responsible for collection, compilation and interpretation of various types of statistical data required for planning purposes both at State and Central level.

The State Directorate of Economics and Statistics was established in the year 1948. The Directorate is assisting the State Govt. by supplying various types of information on each

sector of the economy thereby helping the Govt. to prepare plan model for overall development of the State. The Directorate is under the administrative control of the Planning and Development Department, Govt. of Assam. The Directorate has its offices at Districts headed by the Deputy Director of Economics and Statistics, at Sub-division headed by the Sub-divisional Statistical officer besides having statistical cells in almost all the line departments of the State Govt. As the Block statistics are very much important for grass root level planning, hence one Sub-inspector of Statistics is posted in the development block for maintenance of statistics on each important component of the economy village wise so as to gauge the progress of the development. In addition, there are two Zonal Statistical offices, one at Kokrajher for four BTC districts and the other one at Diphu for the two hill districts headed by the Joint Director for looking after the Statistical activities in these areas.

It is pertinent to inform here that for quality data, awareness among the public regarding the importance of Statistics is pre-requisite. The Directorate is taking various steps to aware the common public regarding the importance of Statistics through radio talk, holding meetings among the stakeholders, installing hoarding in important places depicting the importance and various uses of Statistics, through various departmental publications, holding workshops etc. A documentary film covering the activities of the Directorate is being prepared to reach the common people for quality information. The Directorate is declared as Nodal Agency during May'2010 as per recommendation of National Statistical Commission (NSC) headed by the then Governor of RBI Sri C.Rangarajan for coordinating all the Statistical activities in the State.

Some important activities of the Directorate are:

- Estimation of State Domestic Product (SDP)
- Estimation of Capital Formation and Savings
- Estimation of District Domestic Product (DDP)
- Estimation of the contribution of local bodies
- Conduct of Annual Survey of Industries
- Computation of Index of Industrial Production (IIP)
- Estimation of Area, Average Yield and Production of Principal Crops
- Wholesale & consumer Price Index computation
- Conduct of Socio-economic surveys
- Conduct of Agricultural & Economic Census
- Conduct of Assam Govt. Employee Census
- Compilation of Education and literacy Statistics
- Compilation of Labor and employment statistics
- Compilation of Housing & Vital Statistics
- Compilation of various Health statistics
- Compilation of environment, forestry statistics
- Compilation of Road Transport statistics
- Compilation of Electricity production and distribution statistics
- Compilation of Water Supply and Sanitation Statistics
- Conduct of various socio-economic surveys on varied subjects of importance as recommended by Govt. of India under National Sample Survey
- Compilation of Statistics for local area planning etc.

Where are outcomes of the censuses or the surveys implemented?

- » Data collected from Consumer Expenditure Survey is analyzed and used to understand the financial conditions of the citizens of the country as well as of the State and their purchasing power.
- » It is used to decide the population below poverty line which is one of the important indicator for implementation of various plans and programmes of Govt. for BPL population.
- » It is used to compare economic disparities.

Data collected from Annual Survey of Industries are used as follows: -

- » Capital Formation
- » Industrial Growth
- » Index of Industrial Production

Data collected from Economic Census is used as follows:-

In order to capitulate the change in structure and composition that might have occurred in the economy as an impact of economic reforms, the Economic Census is conducted throughout the country at the initiative of Govt. of India. Through Economic Census number of Establishments carrying out various types of economic activities along with number of workers and participation of women workers in the economic activities can be ascertained which is an important tool for future planning. A Directory of Establishment is prepared basing on the economic census data which would provide input for preparation of a Business Register. Also it serves as a frame for follow up socio-economic surveys on different parameters.

Data collected from Agricultural Census is used to analyze the following factors:-

- » Size Class wise total number of holding.

- » Average Size of the Agricultural Holding
- » Crop wise Land use
- » Irrigated and Un-irrigated wise area under different crops
- » Source wise Irrigation etc.

Crop Estimation Survey:

- » To estimate average yield and production of different crops. This data is very much essential to chalk out various innovative plan and programmes under Agriculture sector. Cooperation from officials of Revenue, Agriculture, Forest, Horticulture and Irrigation departments are very much essential to make the process successful.
- » A report on land use is prepared depicting different land use pattern.
- » Reports are generated incorporating different characteristics relating to Agriculture sector basing on the survey data including report on Index of Agriculture production.

Besides this the following activities are also done by the Directorate:

Dearness Allowances of the government and the semi-government employees are decided.

- A. Daily income of the agricultural labourers of different levels from some selected village centers are collected and compiled.
- B. This data along with the data collected by other departments are used for deciding the Minimum Approved Rates of agricultural products.
- C. It can never be possible to find out the actual monthly demand if the consumers from both urban and rural areas do not provide proper information to the survey staff about the demand of food needed for their daily consumption.
- D. It is not possible to produce the report containing the actual number of employees and their salaries within

a particular time if the government and semi-government employees do not fill up the census forms that are given to them at regular interval of time.

Moreover, to set up the developmental plans which are part of the five year plan prepared by each State Govt. and approved by Planning Commission, following data becomes extremely crucial:

- Data about Crop Production
- Per Capita Income of the state
- State Domestic Production
- Land Utilisation Statistics
- Irrigated-irrigated area under different crops
- Data about Industrial Production
- Socio-economic status of the population
- Education and Health statistics— dropout rates, enrolment ratio, infrastructure facilities available in the education sector, girl child education etc, infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate, immunization status, child care facilities, infrastructure facilities available in the health sector etc. etc. are required.
- Status of Small scale Industries
- Economic Infrastructure
- Veterinary statistics
- Per capita use of electricity, water supply and sanitation
- Factors responsible for Regional inequalities
- The retail and wholesale rate of various commodities
- Rate of economic development

All these information are collected by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics with their direct or indirect approach engaging their trained field staff. It is pertinent to point out here that field staff of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics are trained in different module as required in the training centers available inside and



outside the State. A few of the institutions where officials of the Directorate are trained are Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Lucknow University, Central Statistical Office training centers, Data Processing Division, Kolkata of NSSO, Labour Bureau, Chandigarh, National Building Organisation, Assam Administrative Staff College etc.etc.

- Plans can never be accurate if the collected information is not correct. All Citizens are therefore requested to cooperate with the field level officials of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Assam for the greater interest of the State as well as of the country.
- A few Important Publications of the Directorate are: Statistical Handbook, Economic Survey, Budget Analysis, Economic and Purpose Classification, Assam at a Glance, Report on Gender Statistics, Price Statistics, Report on SDP estimates, Report on Agriculture Statistics, Report on Agriculture Census and Input Survey etc.etc. are published from the Directorate of Economics and Statistics. Details are available in our website: www.ecostatassam.nic.in

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WHEN **Northeast** MEETS **West**

Meeta Borah speaks to Purple Fusion about making waves with their unique fusion music



Although fusion is the flavour of the month, there are very few bands who have managed to perfect this musical integration. It may be too soon to say that Nagaland-based Purple Fusion will be one of the

greats, but if they keep churning out songs like they have for the past year, it won't be long before people everywhere start chanting their name.

It is interesting to note that the band was actually envisioned

as an instrumental fusion band. Mhathung was on bass, Mhasave Tetseo on guitars and Temsu Kichu on drums, with Lamtsala H Sangtam as the band manager. It was only in the course of writing and composing songs that the

band felt the need of a vocalist. They realized that a vocalist could enrich their compositions, and aid incorporation of ethnic music with western and other forms of music. The current line-up of Purple Fusion consists of Lamtsala, Temsu Kichu, Imsanger Lkr and Mhathung Odyuo. We talk to the band members to know more about them and the band.

What is the idea behind incorporating indigenous ethnic music with other genres of music?

Purple Fusion (PF): It sets us apart from the rest of the pack and gives us a certain sense of uniqueness. There are countless rock and metal bands in Nagaland that are doing really well, but the sad part is that they are mostly confined to the state and have little channels of venturing out. Doing folk fusion has given us the opportunity to break free from that chain and look forward to newer horizons.

Lamtsala, you took a very long sabbatical from the music scene in between, what was the reason behind that and what made you want to make your comeback as part of Purple Fusion?

Lamtsala: A very long gap indeed! Well the reason is simple, I was never supported by my parents, and I never had the courage to take up the challenge and pursue my dream. Mhathung and I even looked for a female vocalist for this band, but it didn't work out somehow. So I thought of giving it a second try. Audiences accepted me, so I am back again!

Mhathung Odyuo and Temsu Kichu, both of you have been part of other bands, what made you want to be part of Purple Fusion?



“ ONE THING THAT WE ALL HAVE EXPERIENCED AND LEARNT FROM HAVING SHARED STAGE WITH MUSICAL GREATS IS EXTREME HUMILITY. NO DENYING THEIR MUSICAL ABILITIES, THEY ARE WHO THEY ARE BECAUSE OF IT, BUT THE MOST STRIKING QUALITY THAT ALL THESE PEOPLE HAVE IS HOW HUMAN THEY ARE LIKE YOU AND ME. ”

Mhathung: I have been associated with a few successful bands in Nagaland for a long time. I personally enjoyed the music that we made together. Honestly, I didn't know if I wanted to do other forms of music, but the chance involvement in PF has given me a totally different approach towards music. PF is a 'Free Spirit' in almost every way; it goes to places where few dare to go musically.

Temsu: I always wanted to try something new and I really began to love fusion. Moreover, I met the right people to work with.

As individuals, all members bring something different and distinctive to the table, so what is the thought process like when it comes to song-writing or composing?

PF: As of now, Lamtsa and Mhathung have been doing all the writing and composing. There are no complexities about how we write our songs. Lamtsa comes for practice with a folk tune, and Mhathung listens to it and plays chords over it. The next day, all of us come together: Mhathung plays the guitar, Lamtsa hums



DID YOU KNOW??

Lamtsala has made a comeback to the music scene after about a gap of ten years.

Temsu Kichu is a self-taught drummer and has a lot of experience playing almost all genres of music. He is often the quieter one among the band and really loves his *tamul* (betel nut).

Imringer Lkr is a new face who has a very mysterious demeanour. He has played the guitar for Diatribe, one of the top metal bands.

Mhathung Odyuo is often referred to as the 'Father of The Band' or even the 'Grand Father'.

the melody, Temsu joins in on the drums, the guitarist figures out the chords and melodies, the structure is made and lo! we have a new song. 90% of the time, it's that simple. If ever there is another process, it's usually when the guitarist does a fancy round of chords and Lamtsa hums the harmony over it. Sounds complicated but it's 8th grade stuff, like the saying goes 'sometimes less is more'.

You have shared the stage with John W Schlitt (Petra), Rahul Ram (Indian Ocean) and Rewben Mashangva, and was even featured on Mtv's Sound Trippin 2, tell us about your experiences. What lessons have you learnt along the way?

PF: One thing that we all have experienced and learnt from having shared stage with musical greats is extreme humility. No denying their musical abilities, they are who they are because of it, but the most striking quality that all

these people have is how human they are like you and me. Musically, we don't have to mention how much we learn and benefit from playing alongside them. It's like experiencing a 'classroom of experience'.

Lamtsala: Featuring in *Mtv Sound Trippin 2* was a challenging experience. Getting new lyrics and a new tune on the day of the recording—where I had to sing on that day itself—and doing a video the next day was something which I never thought I will be able to do. But at the end, I loved it.

Tell us a little about the striking music video of 'TRING TRIN—Marks of War'. Did you guys know from the beginning about how you wanted the video to look and feel?

PF: It's funny how this experimental video opened so many doors for us. Did we from the beginning know how this video will look and feel? The answer to that is yes and no. Initially, head of the

royal house of Tripura, Pradyot D Burman gave us a clue on how the video should be made. Later, the band sat down with the video producer and sketched out a rough script, and, from there on, things took their own shape. For a while we thought we are doing a documentary movie—just one videographer from Hawaii—and the Purple Fusion members. In the process of editing, we happened to get in touch with many interesting people from Vh1 India & Mtv India who loved our music.

What can fans expect from Purple Fusion in the future?

PF: Definitely an album!! We have been very privileged as almost everyone who has heard us playing live loved our music. And a lot of people have been asking where they could get our music online. Our album is almost on the verge of completion and will be an energizing one. 🎸

For updates and downloads visit www.facebook.com/PurpleFusionofficial and www.reverbnation.com/pfusion

Photo Courtesy: Purple Fusion