

LESSONS FOR HILL STATIONS FROM MAWLYNNONG, 'ASIA'S CLEANEST VILLAGE'

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Mountains, changes therein and in Flora & Fauna and the Effects of such changes

Ahaba Khongthiem is taking orders at her restaurant Dapbiang, in Mawlynnong, when she is distracted by a tourist flinging a plastic bottle on the street. She quickly steps outside, picks up the bottle, crushes it and throws it into a *khoh*, a conical bamboo dustbin, at the entrance.

Over 30 of these multi-purpose baskets, handwoven by the village's 500 locals every month, are used to keep the place clean. "For us, cleanliness is a habit. We choose to speak through our actions rather than words. We never correct tourists, but pick up their discarded plastic (food packets or bottles) and throw them into the dustbins, hoping they'll learn by observing us," says the 27-year-old.

Way before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Swachh Bharat Mission' was launched in 2014 — and his nationwide [ban on single-use plastic](#) from October 2 — Mawlynnong (80 km from Shillong) was making headlines for its clean living philosophy: functional public toilets, solar-powered street lights, and a ban on smoking and using plastic. Impressed, our PM turned the spotlight on the village in a monthly radio address a year later, and more tourists flocked to the quaint village, home to members of the Khasi tribe.

Now grappling with the blessing and bane of tourism, Meghalaya's Chief Minister Conrad Sangma (who recently visited the village amid the incessant rains) and the village's locals have taken their mission up a notch. They are working towards a ban on tourists carrying plastic wrappers and food packets, and plans to set up a checking counter and water filters (to discourage plastic bottles) are afoot. "In the next three months, we are considering to put a ban in place. This is aimed at decreasing the amount of solid waste generated," says village head, Banjopthiaw Kharrymba.

Until a year ago, every tourist was handed a pamphlet on ways to keep the village clean and a backstory of how the village head walked door-to-door, collecting money to build toilets. But when printing them became expensive, they were replaced by a marble slab at the village's entry point. 'Do not leave food packets unattended, find a dustbin, crush plastic bottles before disposing' are some of the instructions set by the Village Tourism Committee.

How did a community living on a hillock become so ecologically conscious? For resident Gallio Samuel Khongsdam, it is all about catching them young. "Before they head for school, children are taught to walk around the village with sacks and pick up any garbage they see. They then segregate the waste into different categories," says the 25-year-old, explaining how even dead leaves and flowers are rare sightings in Mawlynnong.

Care is taken to ensure minimal waste reaches the landfills. Biodegradable waste is composted to be used as fertiliser and the remaining solid waste isn't incinerated, but segregated and reused. Plastic bags, for instance, are used to make swings and to wrap saplings.

The leftover plastic waste is collected by the Shillong municipality. "It is disposed at dumping yards on the outskirts once a month. This arrangement is unique for Mawlynnong. Other villages have their own measures in place," says CP Marak, the State's Principal Chief Conservator of Forest. The villagers now worry about the plastic waste that cannot be reused. "We don't have

the funds to recycle plastic, so until we have a plan in place to manage solid waste better, this is a start," says Moral K Rymba, chairman of the Committee.

Ooty: The population of the entire district is around 7 lakh, and about 35 lakh tourists visit the Botanical Garden every year. Approximately 38 metric tonnes of waste (plastic and other dry waste) is collected by the municipality in a day.

Coorg: The hill station welcomes 15 to 20 lakh tourists a year, resulting in 15 lakh kg of waste annually. Over 60% of this is burnt and the rest ends up on roadsides and in water bodies.

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