



## Tracing the Cultural Context of Cleanliness in Asia's Cleanest Village<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper aims to assess the cultural roots of cleanliness in a small village named Mawlynnong. The village, also known as Asia's cleanest village, has a distinct way of life defined by its years ago the tradition of cleanliness, with its own historic- health context. Similarly, this habit of cleanliness is the prominent reason for the attract tourism to this remote village. Hence this paper explains the historic-cultural context of cleanliness and the changes in cleanliness that occurred after the introduction of tourism with both positive and negative sides. The discussions and findings of this paper are majorly qualitative and descriptive and are based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data has been based on group discussions, in-depth interviews and field surveys. The secondary data has been extracted from different articles and papers of online and offline data resources.

**Keywords:** Culture; Cleanliness; Health; Mawlynnong; Tourism

### Introduction

The notion of cleanliness always has several attached entitlements like Greece and Rome have their historical -cultural ties with the bathing culture [10]. Similarly, in ancient Indian text, cleanliness known as Swachhata has encircled by a more expansive notion, which not only includes the hygiene of body and purity of speech and mind, the moral obligations and duties are also part of it [9]. Similarly, it is associated with spirituality in a few instances, as the famous saying 'cleanliness is next to Godliness' reflects. On October 2014, the notion of cleanliness embellished with the nation's main target under the mission named 'Swachh Bharat Mission [7], in which the task is related to 100 per cent sanitation and hygiene up to 2019.

In this way, the notion of cleanliness has different attached meanings and contexts. However, this paper focuses on studying a Meghalayan village named Mawlynnong, which has its unique cultural saga of cleanliness, tied up with the notion of health,

religion, identity and tourism economy. Mawlynnong, popularly known as Asia's cleanest village, has a distinct culture of cleanliness that villagers have followed for almost over a hundred years. This unique legacy of cleanliness was acknowledged in 2005 when Mr Sen from Discover India Magazine visited this place to explore Meghalaya's beauty. As mentioned in a document shared by the Ministry of External Affairs, India, "Before Mr Sen went home, a contact at the Meghalaya Tourism Development Forum told him that Mawlynnong was the 'cleanest village in Asia', and the impromptu — and improbable — slogan became the catchphrase of Mr Sen's article, published in 2005. Soon after, the BBC program 'Human Planet' did a segment on the village and referenced Mr Sen's slogan" [3]. In this way, Mawlynnong was declared the Cleanest village in Asia in 2005 by Discover Indian magazine and later got recognized on different platforms like in BBC program.

This legacy of cleanliness and the tag 'Asia's cleanest village is often hailed on different platforms. Like, the Current Prime minister

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the Ph.D. thesis of the author

of India, Mr Narendra D. Modi, has also applauded Mawlynnong cleanliness efforts during his radio interaction named 'Man ki Baat' [11]. Similarly, BBC and Discovery channels address this village's effort in their documentaries.

Based on the background mentioned above, identifying the cultural context and cleanliness changes is essential. In this way, this study aimed to analyze it qualitatively.

### Literary concern over the cleanliness habit of mawlynnong

It is helpful to get assisted through relevant literature to understand the research subject better. A literature review is a valuation of previous contributions of scholars in a related field through reviewing relevant books, articles, journals, magazines, newspapers and other online and offline materials on the research topic. So, here an attempt is made to present the crucial points in relevant previous studies on the theme of cleanliness and the impact of tourism in the case of Mawlynnong.

As mentioned earlier, Mawlynnong is a small village near Indo- the Bangladesh border in Meghalaya. It is honourable for its cleanliness legacy [4], and its legacy of cleanliness called attention to the world in 2005, when Mr Sen from Discover India magazine covered this village while exploring the beauty of Meghalaya [3]. However, little literature has suggested that Mawlynnong was recognized as the cleanest village in Asia in 2003 [5] and the cleanest village in India in 2005 [8,15]. Hence, it can be argued here that Mawlynnong obtained the tag of 'cleanest village in Asia and India' from 2003 to 2005, and the Discover India magazine (India's oldest travel magazine) was the most powerful platform which was involved in delivering and promoting this label to the Mawlynnong village. On the other hand, little literature has misconceived it as a UNESCO site [22,24], which was not true as villagers confirmed it during fieldwork. In this way, most literature has applauded the act of cleanliness in Mawlynnong and portrayed it as an achievement.

However, few others have focused on implementing this act Pal [18,19] argued that the cleanliness habit of villagers has been ingrained in the next generation, too. Even the formal education system in schools of Mawlynnong also trained children to sustain this cleanliness habit. Similarly, few studies focuses on villagers' traditional institutionalized method of waste management, in which the whole village community participates. Nagar [15] has also addressed the waste management techniques of Mawlynnong

and further illustrates the process of making manure or fertilizer from it.

Badal [2] focuses on more community-based initiatives for cleanliness. In this way, most literature has investigated the cleanliness habit of the village. However, a few of literature also took participation in addressing it as a thriving ecotourism destination (Sharma and Sarmah [23], Meghalaya Forests and Environment Department, Bearak [3] Meghalaya government). However, a few of literature has portrayed the impact of tourism negatively; Shermin [24] argues that originally Mawlynnong had a vernacular settlement, but due to tourism, the architectural design of the houses of the village has changed. Similarly, this study further argues that the traditional knowledge regarding using locally available materials for craft and construction is losing value due to their high maintenance and fewer and less stable features than cemented architecture.

However, Sarmah and Sharma [23] have discussed the impact of tourism positively; in which they argued that in Mawlynnong, the engagement of both tourists and villagers plays an essential role in the cleanliness of the village; the revenue earned from tourism inflow is used for livelihood generation that further resulting in a positive behavioural intention towards awareness generation about 'cleanliness'. The study has further revealed that tourist-local community engagements sensitize tourists to the importance of cleanliness and its relation. Similarly, Nongkynrih and Das [17] also argue that villagers have a positive attitude toward tourism due to its positive contribution to living standards.

In this way, most studies have focused on cleanliness activity as an achievement or management. Moreover, little literature traces it concerning tourism activity and its impact.

However, the historical roots of cleanliness attached to the health, hygiene and the plague story have been least explored. Similarly, the changing pattern of cleanliness after the advent of tourism is also not traced extensively, which this paper is trying to address.

### The research setting

Mawlynnong, a small village in East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, where people are known for their cleanliness habits, is located nearer to the bordering areas of Indo- Bangladesh. Meghalaya is

divided into eleven districts, and this particular village belongs to the East Khasi Hills district, located in the southeast of Meghalaya. This village is home to around 548 Khasi tribes, in which the population of females is 289 and the male population is 269. Resembling another village of Khasi, the members of this village also follow the matrilineal structure, in which the members trace their kinship from the mothers' line. Although the traditional khasi still follows their Khasi religion, this village belongs to cent per cent of Christianity. Similarly, the literacy rate of this village is also higher than in other parts of India, as almost 90 per cent of the population is literate.

With these features, Mawlynnong is one of India's successful ecotourism destinations as this village has recently bagged Silver Award as the Best Ecotourism Destination in India by the Outlook Traveller Award.

As a tourist destination, this village belongs to Shillong- Dawki tourist circuit, which includes five tourist destinations and Mawlynnong is one of them. The nearest tourist attractions are the living root bridge shared by Nohwet and Riwai and the crystal-clear river in Dawki. Similarly, the village is accredited with a natural aesthetic sense as lush green trees and various flora surrounds the village. Even the village name is associated with nature as the Khasi term Mawlynnong means cavities on the rocks caused by rainwater. Due to the natural setting of the village, this rural setting is also known as 'God's own Garden.' (As mentioned on the official website of northeast tourism of Meghalaya).

## Methods

The key focus of this paper is to illustrate the cultural context of cleanliness in Mawlynnong and the changes drawn by tourism in it. These discussions are generally more related to the more profound sense of thoughts, anticipations and feelings, especially in tribal villages. Hence, the qualitative method was majorly used to investigate. Research tools named in-depth interviews, participatory and non-participatory observations, focus group discussions, and the PRA method has been used for qualitative data. For an in-depth interview, thirty-three villagers were chosen, in which the key persons and a few older generations participated.

Similarly, group discussions were organized around five groups, in which almost four to five villagers participated and shared their opinion. However, secondary sources have also been used

to substantiate the primary data. The secondary sources include relevant literature in articles, books, journalistic writings, tourist records and historical records if any.

## Tracing the cultural roots of cleanliness in mawlynnong

Mawlynnong's cleanliness story is aligned with the saying of UNICEF, in which it is mentioned that Better hygiene leads to better health, confidence and overall growth. The unique attribute of cleanliness in a remote village named Mawlynnong is not happened by chance. Villagers have carried this cleanliness story for more than 100 years, and now this act of cleanliness has become the symbol of identity for most residents.

In this village, cleanliness is associated with the tradition of hygiene, health and daily ritual.

Here, cleanliness has its historical health-related context, and the Christian Missionaries introduced it as a prevention of the Plague. During fieldwork, it was found that the villagers habitually maintain cleanliness and hygiene in their everyday life. Furthermore, the village has followed this habit religiously for more than 100 years.

One of the village's oldest and most affluent members, who is also one of the four founders of introducing tourism in Mawlynnong, explains the saga of cleanliness. He stated, "In 1887, Christianity came here. Before that, the people were followers of the Indigenous tribal Khasi religion. Life was so hard to live, sometimes, people used to die with some random diseases like Plague and at that time, we don't have any doctors or medicine here. So, whenever that kind of incidents had happened, our forefathers used to pay sacrifices on the stone named Rinkgu Shartiya and believed that this stone would protect them, but it was not true. But the life of villagers changed after 1887 as the missionaries told us that if you want to get rid of the Plague, you have to clean the surroundings, clothes and water. They told us to drink boiled water. Furthermore, from that time, we follow this cleanliness tradition as a part of life." Hence, in Mawlynnong, originally, cleanliness is associated with health and hygiene and the missionaries' practical efforts to mobilize villagers towards it.

In this context, it is vital to address that during those years, the plague epidemic invaded the northeast and another part of India. Similarly, in the northeast, the occurrence of Plague is

also associated with an ecological phenomenon named Mautam, in which the particular species of bamboo that have flowers once a year after 48 – 50 years became the prominent reason to spread Plague as their protein-rich seeds become the reason for the expanding rat's population. Moreover, even a festival named Behdienkhlam (the literal meaning of Behdienkhlam is chasing away the demon of Cholera) is annually celebrated by some of the communities of Meghalaya as a token to dispel the evil spirits of Plague and others. In this way, Plague always had devastating effects on the everyday lives of northeast India, and Mawlynnong village was one of them. Moreover, during one of the worst times of the Plague, the Christian missionaries take a chance of service and the opportunity to interrupt the life of villagers and teach them about cleanliness. Thenceforth, villagers have decided to maintain hygiene and cleanliness in their everyday life as a prevention from diseases. Hence, the history of cleanliness in Mawlynnong is more associated with the health hygiene introduced by Christian missionaries.

Along with the historic health-related context, the act of cleanliness is followed by them as a tradition followed by every community member as their everyday ritual. Even this habit is engrained into them since their childhood as children are trained through both formal and informal ways. As one of the female respondents said, "I learned cleanliness since my childhood as after coming from school, I had to clean clothes of my family first then we can go for the game. This has become a habit, and till today I continue this good habit of cleanliness".

Similarly, the cleanliness habit is not only a part of their age-old tradition but an intrinsic part of their life. For instance, while having lunch in one of the restaurants, the researcher was astonished to see the small but impressive efforts taken by villagers to clean their surroundings. In that incident, while serving food, the restaurant owner was distracted by the chips packets thrown by some tourists. She quickly steps outside and throws those packets into the dustbin. After that act, she resumed her work to serve lunch to the researcher.

Another similar incident was noted while having a bath in the stream area with some villagers, when the teenage girl corrected the researcher and commented, "Hey ...please wash and hang your clothes as we do." Mawlynnong people wash their clothes and utensils in a particular way, in which they spend much time

washing them neatly. Even when they hang their clothes, they follow a systematic pattern like long clothes would be hung on one side and small ones or the children's clothes put on the other. In addition, they often wash their children's diapers and hang and separate them on a particular side.

In this way, the cleanliness habit of Mawlynnong has its traditional legacy that is intrinsically blended with the culture and everyday life of villagers.

### Cleanliness and tourism

Although Meghalaya attracts its tourists due to its geographical attributes, Mawlynnong has offered its unique habit of cleanliness as the main tourist attraction since 2005. With the flow of tourism in Mawlynnong, this cleanliness habit is a growing issue of identity for the villagers. Earlier it was limited to only routine habits, where villagers used to clean their own houses and the near open and green alley by themselves or with the help of their children on a daily bases. However, after getting tourism and wider popularity, the cleanliness habit became an identity issue. Visiting celebrities like Cricketer Rahul Dravid and actress Amy Jackson and frequent visitation of government officers make villagers proud and associate their identity with cleanliness. Like one of the respondents said, "We feel so proud of our achievement. U know... when I go to a government office, and their people say good words about our village; it feels so good. Recently Modi jee also talked about our village. We feel so proud, and we will maintain this cleanliness". Even during fieldwork, it was observed that in Shillong, most taxi drivers know this village's tag 'cleanest village', not by its name.

Along with the increasing identity, the introduction of tourism has also led to challenges, as cleanliness sometimes seems a burden for the villagers. It was observed that they find it hard to maintain cleanliness, especially in the peak tourism season. Even in an online article, 'Paradise lost: Why the road to India's cleanest village is lined with garbage', Halarnkar also raised his concern due to the outside garbage in Mawlynnong and its threat to the cleanest village tag. Similar kinds of worries are expressed by one of the male respondents (age 55); he said, " It was much cleaner in the past than now. I still remember how my aunty and elders taught me that as soon as I got up from bed without even taking a tea, I had to sweep the home's courtyard, and villagers performed the same. Earlier, the pollution in our village was small. Now it is

mixed up; tourists are used to throwing plastic here and there. In my childhood, I never saw plastic; we used only leaves and cloth bags. In my opinion, the cleanliness of the village was much better in the past than now.

In this way, after getting fame and tourism, the act of cleanliness has become the identity to which villagers attached themselves. However, the introduction of tourism also led to some threats to this cleanliness legacy like excessive generation of waste, the introduction of plastic waste and the tourist's apathy towards their irresponsible behaviour needs to be addressed by the government agencies, non-profitable organizations, as well as village Dorbar.

### Conclusion

From the above discussions, it can be argued that Mawlynnong's story of cleanliness is not limited to an act; it is more about a tradition that has been followed for years to prevent different diseases. Historically, the association between cleanliness and Mawlynnong is closely linked with the preventive measures taken by villagers against Plague in which the Christian missionaries emerged as the leading proponent. However, after practising this habit year by year, it has now become the way of life in Mawlynnong. Besides this, after getting recognition and the advent of tourism, this tradition of cleanliness gradually became the identity of villagers. Moreover, in the present time, it has also become a prominent reason to attract tourists to this remote village, which positively impacts the villager's economic life. However, this cleanliness is slightly affected by the tourism activity, as the concept of 'responsible tourism' or 'eco-tourists' is still naïve to most tourists.

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