

**City dancers
set the stage
on fire in
national talent
hunt shows
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The message is loud & clear this poll season

By Nabamita Mitra & Kynsai L Sangriang

Elections are akin to festivals in most parts of the mainland. But in many states in the North East, militancy and political volatility mar the festive mood for both the electors and the elected. Containing the violent elements becomes the primary focus of the monitoring body both in the state and at the Centre.

In Meghalaya, which is among the three northeastern states readying for the ballot battle, the situation is near peaceful giving the state election body ample opportunity to focus on the public, the primary deciding factor in the battle. Awareness on various issues, besides enrolment for the electoral rolls, becomes a challenge when a large section of voters is illiterate and poor rural folks.

But the state Election Department took up the gauntlet and performed with aplomb winning accolades for both creativity and sincerity.

Unique canvases

While political graffiti is scarce in Shillong and other parts of the state, the colours of democracy shine brightly on city walls thanks to the election office's use of the unique canvases to send out the message.

"The best way to grab eyeballs is to deploy creative medium. When press releases and advertisements fail to make an impact, pictorial depiction of our messages goes a long way," says Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Frederick Kharkongor about the art on the wall.

The use of creative medium started



from the last election in 2013. This time the Election Department leveraged local resources to create timeless art that can be described as traditional, witty, innovative, humorous and definitely "loud and clear".

Kharkongor says the election office needed to make the electorate aware of informed and ethical voting, voter-verified paper audit trail, accessible voting and enrolment.

From living root bridges, Wangala dance to monoliths, the election canvases are vibrant.

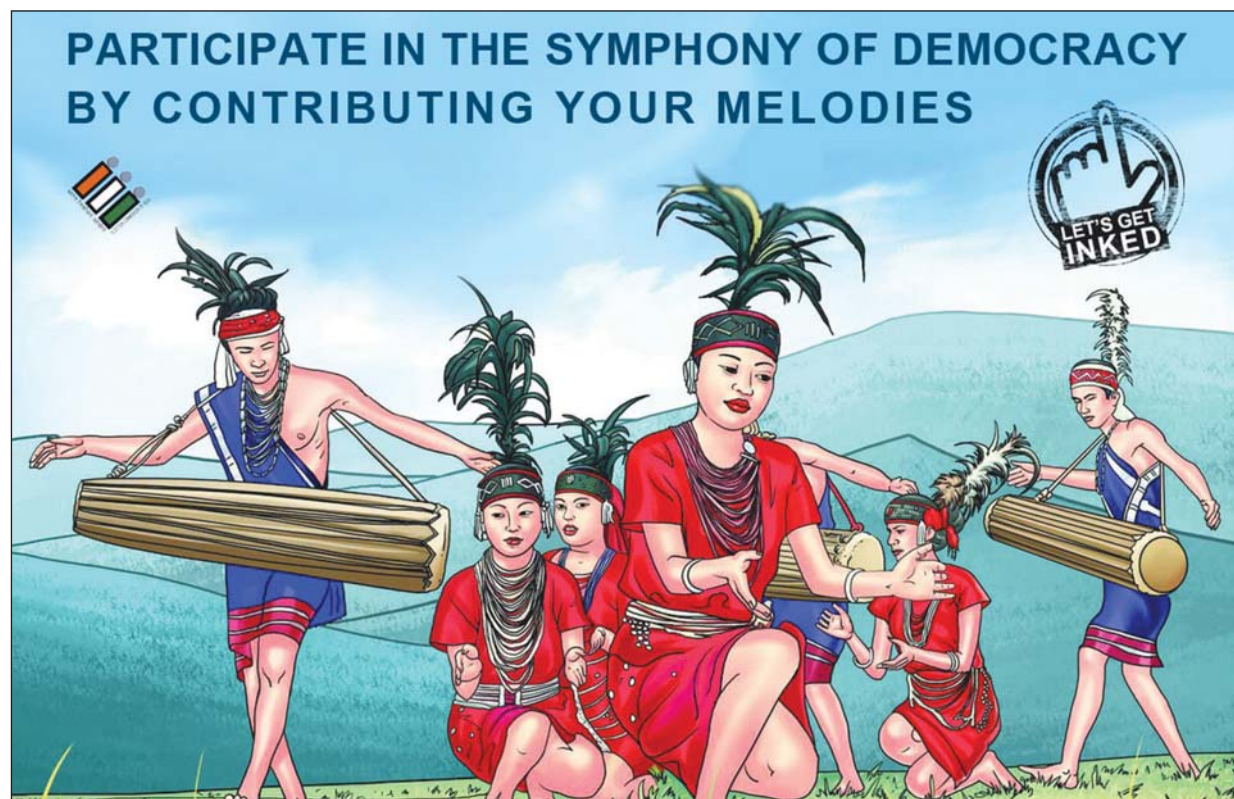
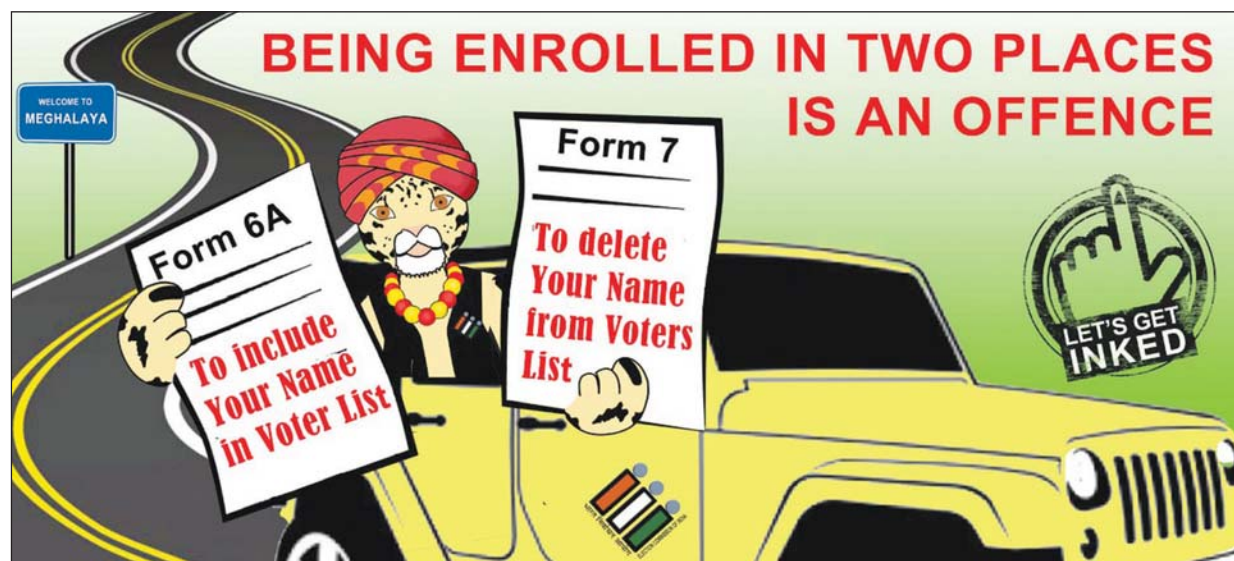
One graffiti shows a group of Garo dancers in their traditional attire participating "in the symphony of democracy" by contributing their "melodies". Another wall art shows

a Khasi couple with their daughter standing in front of a living root bridge with the message — "Let's act as living bridges by voting".

There is also emphasis on first-time voters and persons with disabilities. While a girl's smiling face beckons young voters to practise their franchise the silhouette of triple figurines, one on wheelchair, depicts the need for differently-abled persons to participate in the democratic process. "It required a lot of brainstorming with young as well as experienced artists and everyone contributed ideas," says Kharkongor. There are about 15-20 graffiti with various messages, he adds.

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(Clockwise from top) One of the paintings depicting Mark and Markor on the wall of the DC's office; Mark with enrolment message; a graffiti shows Garo dancers holding Wangala drums; Markor talks about VVPAT; the living root bridge has become the inanimate face of the EC office; and Grace in Mawkyrat with her hoarding in the background



Colours of democracy

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Three students of Shillong Public School along with local artists helped the election office in wall painting. “The creatives were derived through a brainstorming session with approval of the CEO Meghalaya. The school has always been playing an active role in promoting art amongst students and budding artists from the community,” says Aaron Warjri, principal, Shillong Public School.

Last year, artists from Meghalaya Fine Arts and Crafts Society were part of the awareness programme. The group of 12 artists conceptualised the graffiti based on the theme given by the EC. Raphaphang Sohliya, secretary of the art society, says this time a new group has participated for fresh ideas and variety. While talking about their experience last time, Sohliya does not forget to mention the challenges which the artists faced working in a public space.

“We had to use other tools besides brushes because the surface we were working on was not so smooth. We also have to keep in mind that these are public places. Sometimes we had to halt to allow pedestrians to pass through. Another challenge is vandalism and the most common form is spitting chewed pan on the graffiti,” rues Sohliya.

Millennium moment

This time, the election office targeted first-time voters, or millennium voters born on January 1, 2000. It has used the face of Millennium Grace Marwein, a Class XII student of KJP Synod Higher Secondary School in Shillong.

Grace, who says she is often questioned about her name, was spotted by the district Deputy Commissioner Isawanda Laloo. The teenager is now the face of the Election Department, smiling from a hoarding, to encourage and educate young voters. “After the Election Commission of India directed us to identify voters born on January 1, 2000, we reached out to the district medical and health officer and schools. We identified 12 millennium voters in the district... we were fortunate to find out that there is one Millennium voter whose name is Millenium Grace



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Frederick Kharkongor, CEO

Marwein from Mawlangwir village... a very sweet coincidence indeed,” says Laloo, adding, “Through her we expect that more young voters will feel encouraged and excited about voting... the entire point is to generate and sustain an interest in election.”

There are altogether 113 millennium voters in Meghalaya. “I’m very proud and happy... there were many millennium voters in the district (South West Khasi Hills) but they chose me as their icon,” says Grace in Mawkyrwat.

The teenager, who smiles and admits that many people will know her name after the election, says she is happy about the campaign that “will definitely make people understand the value of getting inked and usher in positive changes”. The state election office will felicitate all the millennium voters on January 25 on the occasion of National Voters’ Day.

Mascot message

Besides using local themes, the Election Department has also aptly chosen the clouded leopard, which is considered as state animal, as its mascot. Mark (get inked) and Markor (the shortened version of the Khasi word *markordor* that means precious), the male and the female mascots, respectively, are also helping the election office in spreading awareness. The duo can be seen in different local attires — Garo, Khasi and Jaintia — beaming from

graffiti or hoardings and advising voters on dos and don’ts.

“Seeing is believing,” Markor says as she shows her inked finger, the VVPAT machine standing right behind her. Mark drives in a more serious message. “Being enrolled in two places is an offence,” says the sagacious mascot as he displays two kinds of forms for enrolment. The mascots were unveiled last June during Systematic Voters’ Education and Electoral Participation activities under the National Electoral Rolls Purification Programme.

Other media

Besides wall writings and graphics, the Election Department has also used posters with witty graphics and messages. For instance, one graphic shows a mouse trap with cash kept as bait. The message says “someone is watching” in Khasi, so beware of cash for vote.

It has also taken on board celebrities, like sportsperson Dolyne Kharbhih, and renowned music groups, like Summersalt and Khasi Bloodz, to impress upon voters the power of ballot. “This is the first time we became a part of the election awareness campaign and we really enjoyed being part of it,” says Kit Shangpliang of Summersalt who has written the lyrics of *Tarak Tak Tak*, the campaign song.

Street plays are another way of spreading awareness in rural areas and the endeavour started in October-November. Skits on EVMs and VVPAT awareness performed in collaboration with Riti Academy of Visual Arts have been initiated by the CEO at major traditional market places in the Khasi-Jaintia region.

The CEO’s initiatives have earned it a place in the Limca Book of Records for creating the biggest human logo with 2,870 students. This was done to attract youths to the electoral process. It has also won national accolades. “All we have done is to drum up support for democracy and encourage the youths to realise their power as citizens,” says Kharkongor with a smile of satisfaction.

With all these efforts, Meghalaya can hope for a free and fair poll this time. But while voters have been alerted, who will tame the wretched political forces?