

'India's cleanest village' clings on to its serenity

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In Mawlynnong, bamboo dustbins stand at every corner, volunteers sweep the streets at regular intervals and large signs order visitors not to litter

In the tiny hamlet of Mawlynnong in India's far north east, plastic is banned and spotless paths are lined with flowers—but its reputation as Asia's cleanest village has proved a mixed blessing.

Until 2003 no tourists visited the remote community of 500 inhabitants

high in the mountains of Meghalaya state, which had no roads and was accessible only by foot.

Home to the Khasi tribal people, Mawlynnong is famous for being a rare matrilineal society, where property and wealth are passed on from the mother to her youngest daughter and children take their mother's surname.

In recent years the village has become known for another reason—its exceptional cleanliness, far removed from the noise and dirt of India's big cities.

Bamboo dustbins stand at every corner, volunteers sweep the streets at regular intervals and large signs order visitors to throw away plastic packaging: littering is sternly frowned upon.

"We clean every day because our grandparents and our ancestors have taught us how to clean the village and the surrounding area, because it's good for our health," said Baniar Mawroh, a teenager sitting at the entrance of her small but gleaming family home.

After the village built its first road 12 years ago, a journalist from Discover India travel magazine wrote a now-infamous article naming it the cleanest village in Asia.



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The trickle of tourists became a flood, with visitors now reaching 250 a day in high season, swelling the village's population by 50 percent.

But the accolades have brought several downsides.

"Now there is noise pollution. I've talked to the village council which has written to the government to build a new parking lot further away." said Rishot Khongthohrem, 51, a guesthouse owner.

Deepak Laloo, a former official of the Meghalaya Tourism Development Forum, advised the village in the early stages of its tourism development but fears for the impact of the visitor influx.

"There's no more privacy. A woman is washing her clothes, she's being photographed," he said.



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"That social bond which binds the village together is disintegrating," he said.

Cholera outbreak

Mawlynnong's concern for hygiene emerged about 130 years ago when an outbreak of cholera struck.

With no medical facilities in the village, cleanliness was seen as vital to prevent the spread of disease.

"Christian missionaries told our ancestors: you can protect yourself from the plague (cholera) only if you maintain good hygiene, be it at home, with food, on your land, in the village, or for your body," Khongthohrem said.

Mawlynnong maintained its fastidious habits and has gone on to other achievements, eradicating open defecation—prevalent across much of rural India—with toilets for each of its approximately 95 households.

The village has even been hailed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an autumn radio address imploring Indians to erase the poor national image of rubbish-strewn highways and monuments under his Clean India campaign.

"I was amazed to know that there is such a village in remote north-east, Meghalaya which is so passionately carrying the mission of cleanliness for years," he said.

While the pristine [village](#) is proud of its achievements, some believe it must limit visitor numbers to protect the wellbeing of its inhabitants.

"They must learn to regulate the number of tourists and to say no at some point," tourism expert Laloo said.

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