

Braving the meandering trails of Mizoram



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The north-eastern states often conjure in mind the images of strife, discord and a kind of hostility. But nothing seems more unreal and untrue after one visits Mizoram - a place where eight foreign and 19 Indian students from IIM-A had visited for about a week to pursue learning from within, each other, nature and the common people.

The very first sight that left trekkers astonished in Champai, near the border with Myanmar, was the almost universal effort by every household in the area to harvest the roof top rain water.

There was no house which did not have a mechanism to store the water in some or other form of tanks. One could almost attribute Champai with the title of the 'household roof-top water harvesting capital of India'. I wish elites from Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad too visit the region to draw inspiration and ensure that we do the same here too. It would not be out of place to learn from water harvesting efforts of people in Saurashtra and Champai to make every housing society, school, college, hospital, office and other establishments to have roof top water harvesting systems installed within a year. This is the minimum we can do to reduce the burden on nature and at the same time improve collective quality of life. It was indeed sad not finding too many small farms as well as other public water harvesting structures in a region, like Mizoram, which receives so much rainfall.

When we walked through small towns and villages, we were deeply impressed with the region's hospitable and warm culture. Old ladies come out to greet us and ask about our needs, well-being and bless us. Men would inquire about our needs for firewood and members of the Young Mizo Association would, in fact, arrange that we all take one fuel wood stick as gifts from them, when we go back to our camp site.

The walk through the National Park at Murlen was an extraordinary experience. A native forest preserved for millennia without disturbance provided us unique opportunity to absorb raw nature and assimilate its benign grace. Many people fear that process of taking

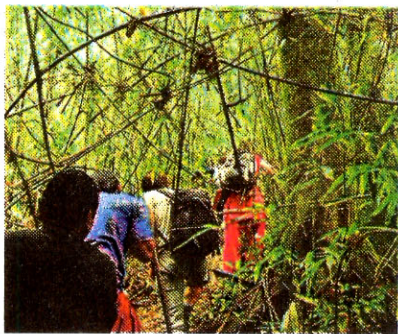
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inner line permit might be cumbersome, or that the region might be ethnically or politically 'disturbed'. In fact Mizoram is more peaceful than perhaps most mainland states of India. We met the state's chief minister, IT minister and the governor, who were all very keen on cementing this exploration so that better ties evolve with the margins of the country.

MINDS ON THE MARGIN

Creativity was widespread in every day life. The four-tier energy harvesting system in the

kitchens was a telling example of their energy consciousness. Emerging market of grape, passion fruit juice and sweet grape wine - a nutraceutical drink - was an invitation to entrepreneurs to join hands. There is a tremen-



dous scope for partnership between the entrepreneurs of Gujarat with biodiversity and the nature-rich communities of Mizoram, besides variety of mushrooms, orchids, herbs and a lot more. Maybe the tribal people of the Dangs can share and learn from the tribal communities of Mizoram as to how they could achieve such a high level of literacy when we have such low levels in our tribal regions.

Partnership with the margins of the country is the best guarantee for national integration and I hope that more people will travel to that region, to absorb its culture, rich natural landscapes and opportunities for long term socio-economic engagements.