Runners to boost Meghalaya bypoll

In Ranikor constituency, athletes will sprint to officials with key messages

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The runners are back in Meghalaya in strength after more than a century – not to deliver letters like their predecessors, but to relay messages to and from polling booths.

Ranikor, in South West Khasi Hills district, is one of two Assembly constituencies where by-elections are scheduled for August 23. The other is South Tura in West Garo Hills district. Ranikor has hilly pockets that have no road or mobile phone connectivity. This prompted the Election Commission to go back to the era when the postal department employed runners to deliver mails. Mail runners became redundant after the advent of the railways in the 19th century, but continued to work in far-flung areas. They were immortalised by Bengali poet Sukanta Bhattacharya in the early 20th century, while Tamil actor-producer Ram Arun Castro played a mail runner in Oattathoodhuvan-1854 (The Mail Runner) in 2015.

“The district authorities identified 15 strong young people to transmit the messages, which in turn would be communicated to the returning officer and election officials,” Frederick Roy Kharkongor, Chief Electoral Officer, said.

Mr. Kharkongor said there are five polling stations in Ranikor perched on remote hills. One has to walk over 45 km to reach the farthest stations. The poll messengers must walk briskly or run several times in a day. The runners have thus been chosen from among youth who take part in local fitness contests.

“Each runner will be paid an honorarium on a par with polling officials. The decision to employ them was taken when ideas were discussed on how best to cover remote centres,” Mr. Kharkongor said.

The by-election to Ranikor, with 26,880 voters, was necessitated after Congress’ Martin M. Danggo resigned in June.