

"Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative."

— H. G. Wells

The Shillong Times

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Mood of the nation

THE Mood of the Nation, as reflected in the assembly polls to five states that ended on Thursday, is clear from the series of exit polls that aired their findings within a matter of minutes. Exit polls by now have attained a sense of maturity and give a hint as to what's in store when the actual counting takes place. Those who do not do proper legwork, however, come up with the wrong projections. Three exit polls in Madhya Pradesh gave the upper hand to the Congress while two polls said the BJP would retain power. In Rajasthan, six polls projected larger support for the BJP. In Chhattisgarh, exit polls unanimously concluded that the Congress would retain power. In Mizoram, MNF retains the upper hand in three out of four exit polls while the Congress is seen to be having the upper hand in Telangana in four exit polls, leaving the BJP a poor third.

The Congress has reasons to cheer even as it seemed to be losing power in Rajasthan on the back of anti-incumbency sentiments coupled with the internal group fights among Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and senior minister Sachin Pilot. Both would deserve a well-earned rest after the long-standing fight. In Madhya Pradesh, Shivraj Singh Chouhan wanted to be chief minister for a fifth term rather than leaving the chair to others in the BJP. The last assembly polls there too had not given the BJP a majority and the Congress came from behind and formed a government with support from others, which however did not last for long. The central government had pumped in huge sums for infrastructure development in Madhya Pradesh, as with other BJP-ruled states, but this in itself might not satisfy the voters. This was evident in Karnataka, where the BJP was ousted and the Congress rode to power.

In Mizoram, the exit poll projections are overall hinting that the MNF would retain power. There were no major anti-incumbency sentiments. Chhattisgarh too had no such trends, as is reflected in the exit-poll findings. This could be advantage Congress. The Congress obviously outwitted the BJP in Telangana, but whether it can win power is still a moot point. The mass support at the Congress campaign rallies this time was a major improvement on the past. The Congress can save face, if it wins power in at least two of the five states; which, as per exit poll trends, look quite likely. If not, this will have a debilitating effect on the INDIA alliance, which is soon to start a nation-wide campaign for the 2024 Parliament polls. If the Congress wins three of these states, it would put the BJP decisively on the defensive.

Letters to the Editor

Uphold students' voices against mandatory college uniforms at St. Anthony's

Editor,
The students' body at St. Anthony's College has found itself united in protest against a new rule proposed by the institution — the mandatory implementation of uniform for all students. This unexpected move has stirred a wave of discontent among the students, who believe that such a policy infringes upon their rights and creates undue financial and logistical burdens.

Financial Strain
One of the primary concerns voiced by the students is the substantial financial burden imposed by the mandatory uniform policy. With costs exceeding 5000 INR for a set that is only required for a single academic year, many students find themselves struggling to allocate funds for an item they did not anticipate when enrolling. This raises questions about transparency and fairness in the college's decision-making process. The fact that 3rd semester students who only have a year left in college, need to buy a minimum of 2 sets of uniforms and spend a minimum of 5-8k, is very illogical and not carefully thought of.

Impact on admissions
Anticipating a significant drop in admissions, students argue that the imposition of mandatory uniforms will discourage potential can-

didates from choosing St. Anthony's College. The fear is that this rule might deter future students, leading to a potential 50% reduction in admissions. Such a decline would not only affect the diversity of the student body but also the overall academic environment.

Financial Disparities
The call for uniformity fails to account for the diverse financial backgrounds of the student body. Not all students can afford the prescribed attire, and this policy risks creating a socio-economic divide among the students. The essence of education is to be inclusive, and the imposition of a mandatory uniform undermines this principle. Many students have taken admission in the institute with no prior knowledge of the change. Hence, it met their needs but with this new change, many students who are unable to afford to buy uniforms find themselves in a very difficult situation because at the time of admission, they did so in accordance with their needs. This adds a new financial burden to them and as many have expressed, the scholarship they receive hardly pays for their education — adding a uniform to this just puts the students in a helpless situation.

Logistical Challenges for Morning Shift Students
Morning shift students, in particular face practical challenges in adhering to the uniform policy. The early morning timings make it difficult for them to maintain impeccably clean uniforms, affecting their overall well-being and comfort during the academic day.

Restrictions on Student Engagement
St. Anthony's College boasts of a student body ac-

Women-led Tourism Projects

— A new and challenging vista

By Patricia Mukhim

On November 22 last, Asian Confluence the think-tank hub saw some path-breaking women from rural Meghalaya assembling to speak of their achievements and challenges. In attendance was Ms Veena Sikri, former High Commissioner to Bangladesh who also wears many hats today. Currently she is on the Ford Foundation endowed Chair, Bangladesh Studies Programme, Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. It was Veena Sikri who proposed that following the trajectory of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) alliance a joint effort be made to start a tourism circuit around the above countries, which would involve women as primary stakeholders. Sikri works closely with Bangladesh and came in contact with the Khasi people there, who she said, felt alienated from their ancestors in Meghalaya and yearned to connect with them if only to keep their culture and tradition alive. It was this that triggered a thought in the former diplomat to connect the Khasis of Bangladesh and Meghalaya using the tourism circuit.

The women who assembled at Asian Confluence came from diverse backgrounds but had been exposed to government programmes aimed at empowering them in providing healthcare, managing small enterprises and to run self help groups among others. The women spoke of the organisations that enabled them to serve the community around. These organisations were named in their abbreviated forms hence it was difficult for listeners to know exactly their full form and intent. However, they all seemed to be part of the state government's outreach programmes to train and empower young entrepreneurs and other village leaders to take up different responsibilities.

One by one the women narrated how they started off from a point of complete helplessness and how they have now found their feet. One woman, now running an export business, boldly

narrated how her husband, a violent man would beat her up in front of their two daughters and how he would warn them not to tell a soul, else they would face similar or worse consequences. One fine day the man took all the money earned over several years with him and left the family, never to return. The woman decided to carry on the export business and continues to do that even while she also teaches at a local school.

Another young lady said she is a jeweller dealing with gold and silver ornaments. Normally this is a trade that is male-centric and it was so in this case too. The husband of the lady was the jeweller but he passed away. That's when she decided she was going to carry on with the trade. She must be the first woman jeweller not just in Meghalaya but perhaps the country too. When asked if she faced any challenges in this trade, the lady said she only faces problems when scouting around for stones and gold when she has to take the help of her male colleagues.

And so it was that about 20 women told their moving stories. They were stories of struggle and pain but also of small victories in overcoming those to chart out a new life. There was limited time allotted for the programme else we would have gone on listening to each of these vibrant women whose age ranged from 25-35 years. You could see they were all eager to tell their stories; eager to be heard and eager to start life afresh, given an opportunity. And it is at this point of need that the government can step in to hone their skills and scale up their little start-ups. Some of these women had become mothers early. It was evident in their visage and the stories of their journeys. And that's Meghalaya for you! Motherhood starts early; sometime as early as 15-16 years of age and by age 25 such women have collected basketfuls of experiences from which they have learnt to negotiate the

pitfalls of life.

These women have realised the power of Voice as agency. What's needed now is for them to know how to use that Voice; to figure out what gives Power to Voice; why Voice must focus on issues that matter to them and why that Voice must find its way into the corridors of power; into the State assembly where one is used to listening only to the cacophony of male rhetoric. How can these Voices be aggregated to form a strong coalition of women's articulations for their rights to better governance and where their bodies must stop becoming the location for violence and the orthodoxy of culture.

Women's voices are absent in policy-making. Take the Tourism policy for instance. Did any women-related issue figure there? Who were the main stakeholders in the crafting of that policy? Obviously, the educated male elite from the city. There were no stakeholder consultations at the villages. If at all there were consultations those would have been with the tour promoters or the village leaders, who are all male. How does the female perspective get into any policy-making then? Or are we suggesting that a policy does not lend itself to gender nuances? Gender blind policies result in further pushing women to the fringes of the economy. Including women as stakeholders in the policy-making process can expose policy makers to complex and nuanced issues that have been previously overlooked. Ensuring that policies use a gendered lens can make such policies not only more successful but also more meaningful since women, men and other genders have different needs which remain unmet for the simple reason that government policies have always remained gender blind or gender neutral. So far governments have believed that only the Health Policy should be more women-centric. That's wrong and way off the mark. Every policy from education to policing

to tourism, environment and forests, mining and geology, finance, sports and youth affairs must have a gender perspective. No wonder most policies fall flat.

Merely raving that there are enough women in administration or those heading important public institutions is meaningless if such women are schooled in the crucible of patriarchy. That goes for the much-touted, much romanticised matrilineal society of Meghalaya too where far too many women in the backwoods have fallen by the wayside and carry burdens that are invisible in the economic charters of the Government. Just imagine this: a serious discussion happens in the Meghalaya cabinet. How much of diversity of thoughts are allowed in such meetings? Yet diversity of thought is arguably the most important diversity. When perspective are unrepresented in discussions; when some kind of thinkers are not at the table, that room becomes just an echo-chamber, rather than a sounding board of contesting thoughts and we all lose. A successful Chief Minister has to make decisions while radiating hesitancy, stay open-minded in the face of new evidence and not fall into the trap that afflicts those with excessive self-confidence.

Veena Sikri has taken that first step to create a hub for women to share their stories and this is a powerful way in which women empower one another and benefit from cross learning. Before women can lead tourism ventures they need to be skilled in the multiple demands of the tourism industry. So much has to do with culinary skills; of hospitality; of story-telling; of creating narratives and making the tourism experience immersive. Women cannot always be relegated to cultural icons who can only dance, sing and play musical instruments or to be showcased as weavers or turmeric growers and processors. They have more latent skills that have not been explored. It is important to explore those skills instead of stereotyping what women can and cannot do. If you ask me, there's nothing women cannot do!

Cinderella Men

By Rahul Saikia

The cricket world cup of 2023 will be memorable for bringing together two contrasting and complimentary narratives around the game. The first is the compelling storyline of the 'underdog' as exemplified by Australia's ultimate victory in a manner reminiscent of India in the 1983 world cup. The second narrative relates to India's amazing winning-streak which almost mirrored the sheer dominance of the West Indies and Australia in the 1970s and 2000s respectively. As the excitement over the world cup settles, we can perhaps better appreciate how both these narratives have inspired various national teams and their supporters over the decades.

Watching Australia's Travis Head advance into India's modest fortress of 240 runs, I recalled an eerily familiar scene from the 1996 finals, when an equally impervious Aravinda De Silva chased down an almost identical score (of 241) to defeat Australia and complete Sri Lanka's fairytale world cup. As the term 'giant-killers' comes to mind, one cannot help but think of India's much mythologised 1983 victory against the legendary West Indians. Then as now, it was the larger-than-life grit of one-man, Kapil Dev who with his unbeaten 175, like Glen Maxwell with his audacious 201, galvanized a team of underdogs towards belief and victory. That Australia now stands where the Indian team stood in 1983, is a testament to how roles can reverse and come full circle across the pages of this wonderful and heart-breaking game.

Australia clearly deserved their victory over India at the finals this Sunday. Of course, one is likely to argue that India, with its ten-match winning streak was the better overall team for most of the series. Not insignificantly, one of these ten wins was a comfortable victory over the Australians in the group stages. India it could be said, was a victim of its own success, while Australia had luck on their side. Such second-place arguments must nonetheless acknowledge how the Australians so convincingly outplayed the Indians on the day when it mattered the most. That the Australian bowlers restricted Virat Kohli and KL Rahul to a single boundary for most of the Indian innings is the most telling fact here.

From the Australian perspective, their triumph in the finals is also the culmination of long transformation of a recently middling side into a team of world beaters. Here, one can draw solace and inspiration from a team that was once in far greater shock and disarray than the Indian team might currently be in. This was the Australian team after the ball-tampering scandal of 2018, which witnessed the long exile of their two biggest stars in Steve Smith and David Warner. What followed was a long and arduous campaign to rebuild a team from a largely unknown and initially uninspiring crop of reservists and newcomers. One of those relatively unknowns was Travis Head.

Of course, the reasons for India's current world-cup upset are nowhere as worrisome as the crisis of Australian cricket in 2018. This same Indian team (Kohli, Rohit, and Shami included) might still salvage a last hurrah in one of the big international tournaments to come. Still, there is a quiet sense that Sunday's defeat also signals the gradual waning of another wonderful era in Indian cricket. With it comes the familiar challenge of rebuilding another inspiring team from a sprawling field of younger players eager to prove themselves as worthy successors to the established greats in the current side.

In this, there is something in India's current cricketing moment that resembles the Australian experience from a few years ago. This includes the challenge of regrouping after an unexpected and psychologically taxing setback. Far from the gaze of politicians and tycoons, this quest to rebuild a winning team will quietly resume over challenging pitches and unfamiliar outfields across the world, where new heroes will be born

even as old legends hang up their boots. This is a storyline that India and Australia, and every other cricketing team will recognize.

Last Sunday, as Australia breached the psychological 200 run mark, I switched off the game with a pang of anger and sadness. Scrolling through Netflix for a suitable distraction, I recalled when I had first experienced such a feeling. It would have been the 1990s, when my then favourite team, the mercurial West Indians, would time and again set themselves up for victory — only to fall apart against a variety of less talented but better disciplined teams. It is only now, in hindsight that I can better appreciate how one team's fairytale win is the tragic end of another's dream-run.

Beyond this trinket of morality, it is worth delving further into Indian and Australian storylines, especially from the perspective of their fans. For starters, India's ten-match winning streak took the team's supporters on a fantastical journey that allowed for the temporary suspension of our messy realities. For a few hours, we were no longer the flailing characters that we often imagine ourselves to be in our private and/or professional lives. For a few hours, we could live vicariously through the exquisite skill and domineering aura of the men in blue.

On another level, such a streak of dominance allows people to participate in the myth of a resurgent nation as articulated in the supernatural abilities of certain players. It is an idea best encapsulated by Virat Kohli who reflects a modern Indian ethos that combines the traditional ideas of fair-play and hard work (ala Sachin Tendulkar) with a confident and even brash assertiveness to compete fearlessly against the best in the world. While the old role-models preferred to err on the side of caution, the new ones would rather stake their claim to greatness, even as it entails the obvious risk of failure. Such supreme confidence can also nurture illusions of invincibility, which when they finally burst, reveal a red-faced sense of shame and disappointment, leading to the kind of sullen withdrawal that we witnessed from fans last Sunday.

The idea of a cricket team as a symbolic vehicle of national pride and excellence has been variously embodied by Australia, West Indies, Pakistan, and India over the decades. For all its promise of 'post-colonial' empowerment however, critics would point out how such a sense of national pride can easily spill over into nationalist chauvinism. Here, it would be worth reflecting whether, and to what extent India's world cup campaign was accompanied by, and ultimately distracted by, such nationalist pride and hubris.

It would be naïve to think of a world where cricket is divorced from politics and big-business. At the same time, it would also be erroneous to assume that these factors determine everything, and that too always in a singularly negative manner. If that were the case, then Australia would not have not walked away with the cup.

Beyond the realm of divisive politics however, the Australian victory is important because it provides a realistic alternative to the practically impossible idea of absolute perfection and complete dominance. For even as it inspires, such an absolute idea of perfection is ultimately untenable for any team, as it is unrelatable for most ordinary people. Often, we can better identify with the storyline of the underdogs, who warts and all, nonetheless emerge from the margins, to claim their moment in the sun. Here, it is the long Australian struggle towards a fairytale ending that is equally, if not more relatable for the millions of supporters (Indians included), who are similarly stumbling forward despite their constraints and circumstances. In this respect, Australia's World Cup win signals a victory for all the Cinderella Men of cricket, who over the years, have come from teams across the world, including from India.

not only the reconsideration of this rule but also a broader conversation on inclusive decision-making that respects the diverse needs and circumstances of the student body. Education should empower, not constrain, and it is in this spirit that the students of St. Anthony's College voice their concerns.

Yours etc.,
Students of St Anthony's College,
Names withheld on request

Uniform for college students?

Editor,
I am writing on the matter of uniforms in college. Once a student graduates or passes out of higher secondary school there is a sense of adulthood and freedom one gets from moving on from a typical skirt or trouser uniform into civil clothing. It gives young minds that freedom of expression that one so craves for in their youth. For years many young minds have been excited about the transition from a child to a young adult and hoping to be recognized as such. However, implementing school uniforms does the opposite of that.

St. Anthony's College has now implemented a college uniform for the present students, non-NEP students included; that is, 3rd and 5th semester students. With only 1 year or 6 months of education left, for the non-NEP students, is it fair to take away that small sense of freedom a young adult gets?

Being able to say, "I am a college student," is being able to dress the part.

Including school uniforms or "college uniforms" takes away our creativity. Not only that, but allowing students to wear what they want is the best option for colleges because it allows students to express themselves the way they want and it saves money that parents have to spend for college education.

I understand implementing the uniform rule on NEP students as they have 4 years left for their education in the prestigious college, but to tell students, with only 1 year or 6 months left for their education to be completed, to spend money in unnecessary blazer and trousers for such a short period of time is patently unfair. Instead of forcing the youth to dress like school children, the College can look into the water supply in the toilets or just make sure the lights work in the individual stalls.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Address traffic congestion: Implement odd-even rule

Editor,
I wish to draw attention to the escalating issue of traffic congestion in the Shillong area and propose a potential solution that could alleviate this problem. As residents, we experience daily frustrations due to the growing number of vehicles on our roads, leading to prolonged traffic jams and increased commute times.

I suggest that the government considers implementing an odd-even rule for all vehicles within the Shillong

areas. This rule, which has been successfully adopted in other cities, involves restricting vehicles based on the last digit of their registration numbers. On odd-numbered days, vehicles with registration numbers ending in an odd digit would be allowed to operate, and vice versa for even-numbered days.

This strategy would be applicable to a wide range of vehicles, including government vehicles, two-wheelers, and commercial vehicles, with exceptions for essential services such as ambulances and public buses. By diversifying the days certain vehicles are allowed on the roads, we can distribute the traffic more evenly throughout the week.

Implementing such a measure could lead to a significant reduction in traffic congestion, thereby decreasing travel times, lowering fuel consumption, and ultimately improving the overall quality of life for Shillong residents. Additionally, this approach encourages the use of public transportation, contributing to a more sustainable and eco-friendly urban environment.

I urge the authorities to consider this proposal seriously and explore the potential benefits it could bring to our community. By taking proactive measures, we can collectively work towards a smoother and more efficient transportation system in Shillong.

Yours etc.,
Aebha Dkhar
Via email

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"Humiliation is the beginning of sanctification."

— John Donne

The Shillong Times

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Death of Cold War architect

HENRY Kissinger, the most powerful U.S. diplomat of the Cold War era, who helped Washington open up to China, forge arms control deals with the Soviet Union and end the Vietnam War, but who was also responsible for the worst forms of human rights violation died on November 30 at the age of 100. Born in Germany, Kissinger was a Jew whose parents migrated to the US. He was an academic who switched careers to diplomacy and remained successful at that. In life as in death Kissinger remains a highly controversial figure. Almost all US Presidents sought his advice. It is amazing how he balanced the China and Russia ties. His obituaries reflect the impact that US diplomacy has had across the world. Those who wrote his obituaries included academics, policy makers, public intellectuals, diplomats, journalists and those engaged in international affairs. Each of these writers had their own points of view on Kissinger and his diplomatic spins and statecraft over several decades.

Senior Indian diplomats had a healthy respect for Kissinger, perhaps because unlike the normal diplomat whose role is to play chess adroitly without tilting the boat, Kissinger moved with a confidence drawn from the fact that he was virtually given a free hand on managing international affairs. US Presidents barring the odd one, relied heavily on his diplomatic skills. The way he managed the Cold War has continued to shape global politics even today. In July this year, China invited Kissinger to open a line of communication with the Biden administration. This underlines the fact that Kissinger not only retained a high degree of influence on world politics but also reveals how China which now claims to be an economic superpower has to rely on a doddering diplomat who retired nearly four decades ago. In the US, Kissinger's views were sought by politicians from all sides of the divide. At the age of 100, Kissinger retained his astute observations of world politics and hence continued to remain in the news till the very end — a feat very few could boast of. But realists that are not overawed by Kissinger have called him a cruel power broker who had least respect for human lives. His policy in aiding Pakistan to thwart the war for liberation of Bangladesh and the thousands of people killed during this liberation struggle in which India assisted the people of East Pakistan to create the nation of Bangladesh, is an ugly scar on his career as also his role in Cambodia.

In October this year Kissinger stated that given the challenges of the present world, the US must develop a concept of where it is headed and how it intends to get there across party lines and despite political differences, for, that is what leadership means. Perhaps Kissinger senses the palpable lack of strategy in American foreign-policy today.

Cricket Defeat and 'Panauti' Politics

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Nearly two decades ago, a prominent Hindi news channel showcased a flagship cricket show provocatively titled, 'Match Ka mujrim' (Criminal of the Match). With a boisterous audience, live voting via SMS and by pitting cricket pundits against each other, the aim in a rather perverse way was to identify the 'villain' of the day, the player who had let the team down. A TV studio became a gladiatorial ring, a cricket crazy crowd was transformed into a lynch mob, lines between fandom and tamasha were blurred. Years later, the frenzied blame game continues as angry reactions to India's defeat in the World Cup final have proven. It would seem almost as if most Indians don't know how to handle defeat with grace.

From blaming the slow pitch to questioning the choice of Ahmedabad as a venue for the finals to targeting the all-powerful cricket board supremo Jay Shah to even bizarrely labelling prime minister Modi as a 'panauti' (bad omen) only because he attended the match, it seems that there are an entire row of 'mujrimis' (criminals) being lined up to face trial in the court of public opinion. Few are willing to acknowledge the immutable truth: Australia played the perfect one day match; India which until that moment were on a remarkable run of wins simply did not.

The fickleness of fan behavior in labelling a team as modern-day invincibles one day to dismissing them as chokers the very next is hardly new. Recall how in 1971, the Indian cricket team received a ticker-tape welcome in Mumbai after defeating England for the first time in an overseas series. Just three years later, when we were whitewashed 3-0 by the same opponent, captain Ajit Wadekar's home was stoned and a victory bat in Indore was defaced. Then we were an adolescent cricket nation that lost more matches than we won; now we are a front-ranking team

and yet we still haven't been able to deal with defeat with more dignity.

There was also no social media or instant messaging services to intrude into our lives in the 1970s. It was, in that sense, a gentler age. Now, we just need to type in a few words on a WhatsApp group or twitter or post a meme on Instagram

in the process is that while limitless financial resources allow you to bully others beyond the boundary, bank balances cannot determine on-field match outcomes.

At another level, the unwillingness to accept defeat with poise is the direct consequence of an idolatry culture that celebrates individual heroes but doesn't

the Chandrayaan achievement must focus solely on the scientific community, so also the post-mortems for defeat in a cricket match must not needlessly drag in political figures. If today the Congress raises the 'panauti' barb against Mr Modi, the BJP could well remind people of how Indira Gandhi was in attendance when Pakistan defeated India 7-1 in the 1982 Asian hockey finals in New Delhi. Superstitious beliefs can rapidly descend into inanities that cut across the political divide.

Which is why it might be time for a reality check, be it in sports or politics. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar warned against a personality 'cult in the context of politics: 'Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship'. Sadly that warning has gone unheeded and larger than life autocratic figures dominate our political landscape. Now, in cricket too,

we need to perhaps strike a cautionary note: our men in blue are a group of hugely talented individuals who have earned their place in the Indian team through sheer merit. They will probably win more than they will lose but victory-defeat margins in sport at the elite level are notoriously wafer-thin. The intrinsic value of sport is to be celebrated for the pursuit of excellence, not by treating the game as a 'do or die' war without weapons and the players as soldiers in uniform. A war leaves you with painful images of death and destruction; a sport must engulf you with joyous memories.

Post-script: In the aftermath of the final, there was much chatter about the prime minister visiting the defeated Indian team in the dressing room. Frankly, the prime minister's interaction could be seen as a morale booster. The only question: did the intrusive camera have to capture what is surely a private space for the players?

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to trigger an avalanche of furious responses, almost as if the entire country is seeking vicarious pleasure in the public defaming of our cricket icons when we lose a game.

Remember how a Mohammed Shami was singled out for calumny when we lost a T 20 match to Pakistan in 2021; the same Shami is now feted as the best seam bowler in the world.

At one level, the emotional roller-coaster mirrors the hyper-nationalism that is integral to cricket's role in contemporary Indian society. Cricket is no longer just a sport, it is an extension of our national identity, of our unfulfilled desire to be seen as a genuine global super-power. We may not be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council but in cricketing matters, we do have veto power. This status as the unquestioned big boss of sport has bred hubris, an unshakable belief that India was almost pre-ordained to win the World Cup because we were, after all, the most powerful cricketing nation by some distance. What we forgot

embrace the spirit of sport. Anyone who watched Star Sports — the official World Cup broadcaster — during the tournament would have noticed the endless stream of programmes devoted to Virat Kohli. While Kohli is an absolute superstar and arguably the greatest one day batsman ever, the gushing adoration bordering on feudal devotion to a single player in a team sport is infuriating, even nauseating at times. Which partly explains the extreme responses: when Kohli scores his 50th record-breaking ton in Mumbai, he is elevated to God-like status but when he struggles in the final against Australia, he suddenly is accused of faltering under big match pressure.

This hero-worshipping cult stretches from cricket to politics. When even the historic Chandrayaan-3 moon landing moment becomes part of a relentless government propaganda machine where the prime minister is shown sharing credit with our space scientists, then it is almost inevitable that Mr Modi's presence at a cricket final will attract undue attention. Just as the applause for

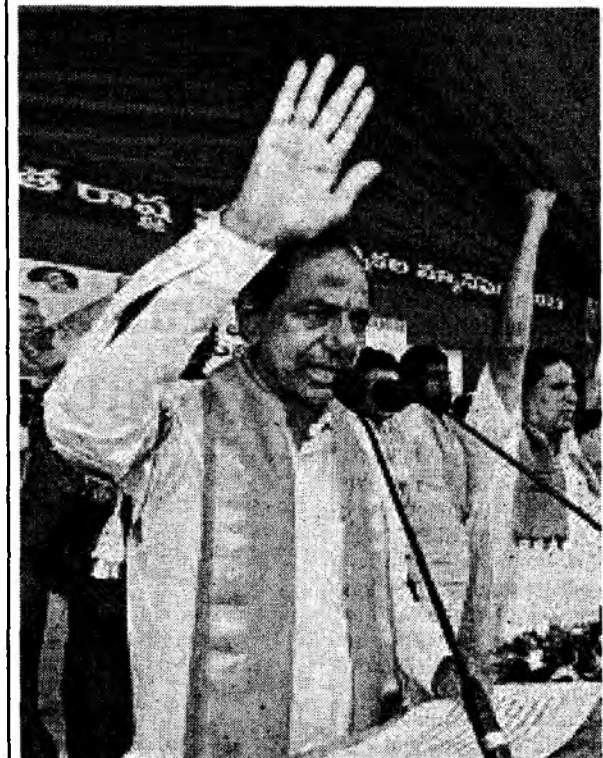
Congress will have big breakthrough if party wins in Telangana BRS supremo K Chandrasekhar Rao has to postpone his national plans

By Sushil Kutty

The still nascent state of Telangana is up for its first great opportunity with Telangana Chief Minister, the great K. Chandrashekar Rao — 'KCR' for short — poised to make his exit if the exit polls of November 30 are to go by. The exit polls have given Telangana to the Congress and KCR's Bharat Rashtra Samithi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party are behaving like sore losers.

that KCR wants to be Prime Minister and foist his son KTR as the next Chief Minister of Telangana?

More important, whoever thought the Congress would lay claim to Telangana? Fear that the exit polls cannot go wrong has gripped BRS. KCR's campaign for a first BRS term — a third TRS term — might come to naught on December 3. KCR was up against not only double anti-incumbency but also against



"Sore" because both the BRS and the BJP are refusing to accept the exit polls' predictions. The two had no objections when early on, the exit polls predicted a "close, tight fight", which was better than to be told they would be out of reckoning in the heats itself. Curiously, while the BRS seemed to accept the fait accompli, it was the BJP which refused to concede defeat to exit polls.

Exit polls are only predictions — an assessment of what could be, and not what will come. The real numbers will be out only on December 3 when the votes will be counted and the results declared. Till then suffice to say that exit polls have a habit of coming too close for comfort of all parties in the fray.

In Telangana's case — Sonia Gandhi's Congress, KCR's Bharat Rashtra Samithi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata

a rejuvenated Congress which is still running on Bharat Jodo Yatra steam.

A Congress victory on December 3 and the Congress will be on a strong Telangana wicket for the 2024 general elections, which should put the jitters in the BJP. With Karnataka in the kitty and Kerala a fine prospect, the Congress will be at the top of its game in South India in 2024, where the Bharatiya Janata Party has been trying to get a foothold for donkey's years and not making it beyond a couple of "government" in Karnataka.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is on record that Telangana is the BJP's gateway to South India. The exit polls have dispelled that notion. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is doomed to wait. The chances are fairly good that a Congress victory in Telangana could shut the BJP out of South India for another

Letters to the Editor

College without a qualified Principal

Editor, St. Edmund's College, Shillong recently celebrated 100 years of its existence and has contributed immensely to education in this state. However, the College has been without a regular and a qualified Principal for over 8 months. It seems the management of the College is deliberately not appointing a regular Principal and wants to administer the institution according to its own whims and fancies. In the absence of a regular and qualified Principal the college is unable to provide the right kind of leadership to the students and other stakeholders which is so essential. This is a clear flouting of norms laid down by the prevailing UGC regulations on appointment of College Principals. The toothless state government and NEHU seems to be least bothered with the prevailing status of the college which also shows the quality of education in this state. Moreover, the appointment of Vice-Principals in the College is also contrary to the UGC norms, where it is required that a senior serving faculty should be appointed to this post for a tenure of 2 years. In summary, educational institutions nowadays seem to be administered like business corporations and the regulatory agencies are turning a blind eye to this.

I hope that the College does not carry on like this for the next 100 years.

Yours etc.,
D. Swer
Shillong- 22

Tunnel rescue mission

Editor, Appropos the editorial, "Tunnel Rescue Mission Successful" (ST, November 30, 2023), there are three lessons to be learnt from the Silkyara tunnel episode. First, inadequate investigations prior to the excavation for tunnel should be avoided. The horrifying act of playing with the lives of the workers and with laws of nature must be brought to an end. Second, the heroic rescue act by rat-hole miners established human supremacy over machines. Our workers deserve more respect from the people in general and more care and security from the government in particular. Students in schools should learn to appreciate the dignity of labour through real stories such as the rescue operation by the rat-hole miners where the skill, endurance, patience and perseverance of labour ultimately made the impossible possible.

Third, the heroic rat-hole miners showcased the wastage of huge human resources and potentials in India. Thousands of rat-hole miners, manual scavengers, ragpickers and gig workers could have become great assets of India in various fields had they got necessary

opportunities in their lives. It explains why India sits at the back bench (bench number 132nd) of the Human Development Index.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Time for Meghalaya to rethink land use

Editor, The special article, "Establish a Wine and Mead SEZ in Meghalaya" ST 28th November 2023 by KN Kumar, Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission is excellent. I cannot disagree with him that the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Government of Meghalaya "be immediately pressed into area expansion of various local fruits to ensure an adequate supply of these important flowering plants and fruits." The author has correctly articulated that given the favourable land-man-ratio a large tract of wasteland can be converted to a Special Economic Zone. The District Council should allocate such land for SEZ for which it could also benefit through rentals. The Government of Meghalaya which has already taken the initiative to promote home grown wine from Meghalaya should now immediately take action in establishing an exclusive Wine & Mead SEZ. Mr Kumar rightly

emphasised that "It's time to raise a glass to Meghalaya's unique and promising future"

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

A holiday letter - A grace-filled Christmas

Editor, Hello December, the last month of the year—the curtain closure of the year. It's the season to be jolly because the holidays are here again. It's that time of the year that we are all waiting for — the crisp, cold hands but WARM HEARTS; it's time to indulge in a little festive food, partake in some carolling, perhaps, and maybe even keep a keen eye out for the arrival of Santa Claus and the array of presents many children, young and old, hope he has with their names on them. Christmas is never good without the children. But let's take a pause and reflect on what Christmas is all about? Is it just the Christmas trees, the glitters, the decorations, the presents and all the commercialisations that come along with it? Or is there something else? Yes, it's the season where we remember the birth of Jesus Christ—the Saviour, the Messenger of Hope, Love and GRACE.

"AMAZING GRACE Indeed". John Newton the renowned poet and writer of this beautiful hymn thinks

so highly of Grace that he labels it, "The undeserved mercy and favour of God to the world." As Christmas moves ever closer, grateful choirs will sing how God's grace is Christmas' most amazing gift: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found! Was blind but now I see."

Like John Newton, all Christ's followers journey forward with encouragement from the words of this popular hymn. The gift of grace evokes the Holy Spirit, the faithfulness of God's love, and Jesus' guiding light with each step we take and surrounds us with God's promise to protect us. It highlights our compassionate God's bountiful love for His unpredictable creation often oblivious to His Grace.

As much grace as God has given to us, is there something we can do for others to show them the love and the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And while many of us count the days until this time of year rolls around again, for others in the community, the season is anything but jolly. Each and every year we hear the pleas from charities and churches about the need for both donations and volunteers to help make the season bright for the less fortunate among us.

Although a small gesture, donating a few non-perishable goods to the local churches or volunteering or making a small donation to

a non-profit organization, helping the less fortunate may not seem to have that much of an impact, but if enough of us do it, it can make a big difference to others in our community.

By all means we can enjoy spending time with our friends and family over the course of this festive season but we can't forget that not everyone has reasons to feel joyful without some assistance. If we can all pitch in, even a little bit, maybe we can make sure another family has a merrier Christmas or a happier holiday and a more prosperous new year.

The countdown is on, but there's still time to be generous towards others. We'll be glad we did.

Lastly to quote from Milton's Masterpiece, "When we've been there ten thousand years/ Bright shining as the sun/ We've no less days to sing God's praise/ Than when we'd first begun."

The Christmas story is forever the story of grace. And so, I take this time to wish each and everyone a very happy holiday season and a merry Christmas — A time of serious thankfulness to God for His amazing grace: the greatest gift of all

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo,
Via email

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Telangana promised an edge of the seat suspense. But by 9 pm when primetime TV talk shows were in full slanging match-mode, the exit polls were showing the Congress ahead by a mile and more, leaving BRS behind — and the BJP way, way behind. Will the promised rout of the BJP and the BRS come true, vindicating the exit polls? For Telangana, two exit polls have predicted big Congress wins while a couple have held back with the prognosis of a "tight contest".

Party. Earlier, during the day and up until 6 pm, Telangana voted without pause and the predictions of the exit polls were expected for not only Telangana, but also for the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Mizoram.

Telangana promised an edge of the seat suspense. But by 9 pm when primetime TV talk shows were in full slanging match-mode, the exit polls were showing the Congress ahead by a mile and more, leaving BRS behind — and the BJP way, way behind. Will the promised rout of the BJP and the BRS come true, vindicating the exit polls? For Telangana, two exit polls have predicted big Congress wins while a couple have held back with the prognosis of a "tight contest".

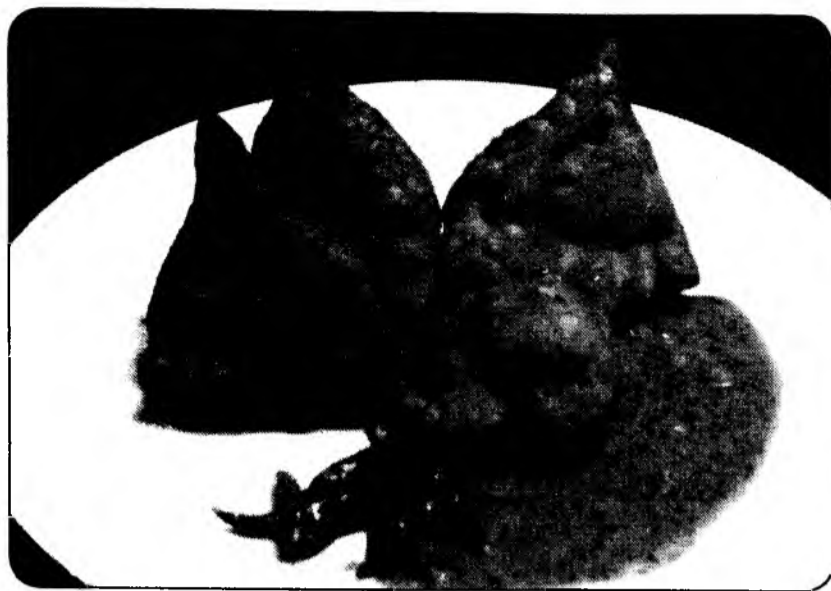
The youngest state of India is in a tri-cornered contest. The outcome on December 3 will set the stage for the next five years. Both KCR and his party BRS had set their eyes and expectations on a hat-trick. Now KCR must be on tenterhook. If the BRS tastes dust, KCR's national ambitions would fly out the window. Who does not know

five years. The south Indian states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala account for up to 150 Lok Sabha seats.

The BJP must go to state Congress President Revanth Reddy, who will be challenged for the Chief Minister's post, assert some Congress insiders.

The Congress had 22 MLAs in the outgoing assembly compared to the Bharat Rashtra Samithi's 88. Of the 17 MP seats, the Bharatiya Janata Party had 4 and the BRS 9, leaving one for the AIMIM and '3' to the Congress. A Congress victory in these assembly elections will leave the 2024 general elections in Telangana wide open with the Congress getting into the battle with a psychological edge over the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi. (IPA Service)

Exploring India's snacking legacy



Snacking is not just about satisfying hunger between meals; it is also about enjoying flavors, socializing, and exploring a diverse range of tastes. Furthermore, in India, snacks hold significance across various moments, forging deeper connections among Indians.

Indians share an enduring affection for snacks, indulging in a variety that spans from the crispy samosas and aloo bhujias to flavorful masala papads, nuggets, and fries.

These delectable treats have seamlessly integrated into the fabric of Indian culinary culture, becoming an indispensable part of daily life. Moreover, being a snacking nation with an ancient snacking culture that has evolved because of its unique geography, climate, and history, India has a vibrant segment of snack offerings.

Providing an interesting and comprehensive analysis of the evolving culinary landscape, showcasing Indian snacks and Indian love for snacks, Godrej Food Trends Report 2023 mentions some of the iconic snacks of India like Samosa, Vadapav, Idli, Kabab, Momos, Littti, Chow Mein, and Pav Bhaji.

Samosa: Samosa, despite of be-

ing a non-Indian snack, is one of the favourites amongst Indians. Samosa was introduced to India during the Delhi Sultanate by the cooks and traders from the Middle East and Central Asia where accounts of Sanbosag and Samsa from Turkish and Persian cuisine can be found in as early as the 10th century.

Chef Ajay Chopra believes, "Post COVID, well-being has become non-negotiable, and the world is moving towards health in a greater way. We are a country that loves fried food and will still have the vada pav and samosa, but people are turning towards more healthy options like nuts and non-fried options."

Vadapav: The popular Mumbai snack was invented in 1966 by Ashok Vaidya, a Marathi snack vendor in Mumbai. The snack was an instant hit wherein he created vadapav with batata vada and ladi pav - two city staples. When mills started closing in 70s and 80s many unemployed mill workers opened vadapav stalls thus exploring the new street food culture.

Idli: Food historian believed that Idli was adapted from the Indonesian kedli around 800-

1200 CE, when it was ruled by Hindu Kings of Shailendra Isayana. The ancient texts of Karnataka like Vaddharadhane of 920 CE and Manasollasa of 1130 CE mention similar dishes called Iddalage and iddarika.

Kababs: Kababs are believed to be originated in Turkey. They were introduced to India by Afghan invaders and popularized by Mughals. However, according to Ibn Battuta, Kababs were found in the royal Indian kitchens in as early as 1200 AD.

Momos: Momos came to India with Tibetan refugees in the 1960s and are savoured across the country today.

Litti: Littti was first introduced in Magadh, an ancient kingdom in Southern Bihar. Later during the reigns of Tantia Topce and Rani Lakshmbai, it became an important wartime meal. Today, Littti Chokha is a staple in Bihar.

Chow Mein: Several Chinese workers migrated to Calcutta in the trade route from China to Britain in the 18th century. Many would then sell the food of their homeland including Chow Mein in the city adapting their

dishes to suit Indian tastes.

Pav Bhaji: Pav Bhaji was a result of the American Civil War. Since the war caused spike in the demand of cotton there. Therefore, the hungry traders collected the excess bread from Jesuit priests, added a spicy bhaji of assorted mashed vegetables and thus this iconic snack was invented.

Rushina Munshaw Ghildiyal, Managing Director, a Perfect Bite Consulting and Curating Editor of the annual Godrej Foods Trends Report says, "Indian snacks are more than just food. They are a way for us to express our love of spices, our nostalgia for childhood, and our joy of community. When we eat Indian snacks, we are not just satisfying our hunger, but also celebrating our culture and our shared heritage."

As I have said in the 2023 edition of the report, with the pandemic having impacted how we consume food, today, it is all about the food of our ancestors, nostalgia-driven dishes, and local, regional foods of India. Health has become the cornerstone of all our food-related decisions, but we Indians still love to snack especially Vada Pav or Samosa." (IANS)

Unlocking a wonderland of digital storybooks

By Priyanka Shah

Every successful person ends up having one thing in common- their thirst for knowledge. And what do they do to gain such intellect? They read! They read and read about everything on god's green earth and then form their own thoughts about the many things they've read. Sounds easy enough, right? However, it is not.

Let's be honest, none other than habitual readers can pick a book and start reading it. Developing this habit is a lot harder when you are 30 years old.

Reading storybooks should be a part of every child's life and it should start as early as possible. One can even start with reading board books to one's 6 months old baby. In fact, reading books early has many lesser-known benefits such as:

Reading plays a crucial role in a child's development and overall well-being. The importance of reading and exposure to storybooks cannot be overstated, as they contribute to a wide range of cognitive, emotional, social, and educational benefits. Reading stimulates brain development by encouraging critical thinking, imagination, and problem-solving skills. Exposure to books and reading from a young age lays the foundation for early literacy skills, such as letter recognition and understanding the structure of written language. Storybooks often address emotions, feelings, and social situations that children might be encountering for the first time.

However, the screen time dilemma has become every parent's nightmare. No matter how much parents try, the screens dominate every child's life and it is close to impossible to keep them away from screens all the time. Finding the right balance and managing screen time effectively is crucial for the healthy development and well-being of children.

Here is a list of platforms that took this challenge head-on. These platforms are constantly working on bridging to make screen time worthwhile by helping kids develop cool reading habits in a digital playground:

JUMBAYA: Jumbaya brings a curated library of just the best storybooks from around the world covering genres like folktales, mythology, adventure, animals, morals, sci-fi, bedtime stories and many more! All their storybooks are done in a thoughtfully animated read-along format with SLS (Same Language Subtitling) that can help significantly improve a child's reading abilities as well as develop vocabulary and language skills. They also have storybooks in Hindi and plan to bring storybooks in other Indian and global languages.

EPIC: Epic is a platform dedicated to bringing storybooks from the page to the screen. This app makes books more accessible to kids. A lot of their books have a read-aloud feature that makes it easier for kids to follow the words while reading.

STORYWEAVER: An initiative by Pratham books, this is a free library of multiple books from around the world for kids. Most of their storybooks are also available in many Indian and international languages. They even follow a unique system of 'Levels' which can be used to map out a book to a kid's reading ability.

In a world where screens beckon from every corner, finding meaningful experiences becomes a need of the hour. But with moderated content and platforms you'll soon find that your child's screen time can be a source of smiles through the pleasure of reading! In the digital playground, let literature be your guide to a more fulfilling and enriching use of technology. With these cool reading habits, the digital world becomes a playground for the mind and soul. (IANSLife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 3, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

On your solar return chart Moon trine Rahu as handle all that comes your way with dexterity and finesse; this ensures that your image will enhance and so will your reputation. Something exciting can catch your eye and awaken the desire to follow your heart and your head backs your decision so go ahead. Finances will be stable but additional expenses could arise from time to time. People come to you with warmth and affection resulting in strong bonds and emotional ties. You also look to build and improve your approach and attitude and keep an open mind. Romantic relations come to the fore. You remain in a positive frame of mind which helps you attract opportunities.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are committed, bold and adventurous right now. You are more effective in general, in attempts to express your creativity. You have a stronger ability to hold the attention of an audience. Love, love affairs, and other social activities help to enhance a healthy self-image. You may spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant, and work that needs to be done in and around the home becomes a priority. You may find yourself in a position in which there is a blending of the financial with social or public affairs.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) By the present planetary combination you would focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. A love affair may become a little more serious now. Spending time with someone special is a focus. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or brand new subjects. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally. You derive pleasure from your health regimen.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This is an excellent time for travel, education, communications, and higher learning. You might consider furthering your education and hobbies; it is a fabulous time to do so or simply broadening your knowledge in a more informal manner. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership during this period. Some form of pleasant results in your education or profession brings rewards and recognition.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This phase brings fabulous results for domestic and work related matters. Sports person also benefit from this planetary alignment as they are infused with positive energy and gain recognition for their talents and hard work. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional and your ideas are original and progressive now. This is a time to follow your dreams and ideas, and to plant a seed in the form of a wish for the future. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. Speculation, as long as it's reasonable, may prove worthwhile. Your creativity is stronger than usual, and children can figure prominently in your life.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This period enhances funds, brings monetary gains and you may earn from previous investments. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. You are far less inhibited when it comes to expressing yourself creatively, and you are a lot more fun to be around. Children, romantic trips, hobbies and other forms of communication and making connections would strongly appeal.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You would enjoy making things that are beautiful and you succeed in areas that require an aesthetic sense as well as artistic ability. Matters concerning your career come to the fore. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship and love.

This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't get caught up in the past. You are physically fit and on top of things.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This is a period of romance, creative activities, entertainment and children. There would be cooperation and harmony in relationships and this is the time in which you can work on resolving differences with loved ones. You are in a position to inspire others through your work. Income from foreign sources could also figure this time. You work on your effectiveness and examine exactly what has been holding you back from achieving the results you want. The challenge here is to capture the newly found and defined self-confidence you have gained. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This phase brings responsibilities, seriousness and sensitivity in relations. The purpose of this combination is for you to make the connection between your own feelings of self-worth and what you produce in the real world or get back from the real world. Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this time. Health issues will settle down as you get back into your normal rhythm.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) The planetary configuration brings financial gains and profits from business. This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel is possible now. It is more about how you express yourself than the specifics of what you are saying that helps away others to your position. More contact with authority figures is likely at this time. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the forefront of things. Finding a balance between your public life and your private life is in focus.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love and relations. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in several aspects of your career. This is an especially spiritual time for you. You enjoy doing things with others at work and home, as synergy and cooperation are available to you now.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Taking care of business is primary during this phase. You need the energies, companionship and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. You are called upon to deal with the details and practicalities of everyday life, to become more organized, and to take charge of your routines. It's time to formulate some clear goals and plans. Circumstances are such that you need to develop some healthy habits, routines, and schedules.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or at a place where you are a volunteer. Your job could become rather tedious and boring, or working conditions may be poor, demanding, or frustrating. Believing in a grand plan is fine, but practical concerns need to be dealt with as well. Recognizing your personal limitations in terms of just how much you can give to others and just how much compassion and understanding you can show is essential now. It's time to structure your life. Issues of guilt, worry, and anxiety could crowd your mind - relaxation techniques and drawing on your inner strength would be beneficial.

Green homes for a sustainable future

By Shrenik Siroya

Gen Z, born in the era of climate awareness and digital revolutions, is not just seeking comfortable living spaces but is also deeply conscious of its ecological footprint.

This awareness has led to a shift towards green homes - sustainable living spaces that not only cater to their comfort but also align with their environmental values.

As the world grapples with climate change, Gen Z is taking up the mantle of responsibility, advocating for a more sustainable and mindful way of living. This cultural shift is visible in their choices, right from the brands they support to the way they choose to live.

Green homes, with their emphasis on energy efficiency, reduced carbon footprint, and sustainable design, resonate perfectly with Gen Z's aspirations.

Design with Nature in Mind: The architecture of green homes in parts of India is a harmonious blend of modern aesthetics and traditional wisdom. Gen Z is increasingly gravitating towards homes designed with nature in mind. Incorporating elements like large windows for natural lighting, cross-ventilation to reduce the need for air conditioning, and rooftop gardens for urban farming, these homes embrace the climate and culture of India.

Embracing Technology: Gen Z is the tech-savvy generation, and they're embracing eco-friendly living with the aid of technology. From smart thermostats that optimize energy consumption to solar panels that harness abundant sunlight, technology is turning green living into a modern marvel. Apps that monitor energy usage and water consumption empower residents to make informed choices, fostering a culture of responsible consumption.

Sustainable Materials and Practices: Green homes are constructed using sustainable materials, emphasizing durability and energy efficiency. The concept of 'upcycling' is catching on, where discarded materials are transformed into chic furniture and decor. Gen Z is drawn to the authenticity of such spaces, appreciating the stories behind each piece of furniture.

Energy Efficiency: The Heart of Green Living: Energy efficiency lies at the core of green homes. Gen Z understands that traditional energy sources are finite and contribute to environmental degradation. By choosing homes that utilize solar power and energy-efficient appliances, they're not just reducing their energy bills but also contributing to the nation's clean energy goals.

The Art of Recycling and Repurposing: Recycling isn't just a buzzword for Gen Z; it's a way of life. Green homes incorporate recycling bins, composting units, and rainwater harvesting systems, transforming waste into valuable resources. This aligns perfectly with the Gen Z ethos of minimizing waste and maximizing utility.



Community and Collaboration: Gen Z is known for its collaborative spirit, and green homes are fostering this sense of community. Shared spaces, community gardens, and workshops on sustainable living create a sense of belonging. These spaces become hubs of learning, with residents sharing tips on composting, gardening, and eco-friendly practices.

Beyond Four Walls: Sustainable Living Extends Outdoors: Green homes in parts of India often extend their sustainability efforts to the outdoors. Xeriscaping - a landscaping technique that reduces water consumption - is gaining popularity. Gen Z's preference for green homes is not just about interiors; it's about the holistic integration of sustainability into their lifestyles.

Investment in a Green Future: For Gen Z, investing in a green home isn't just a financial decision; it's an investment in a sustainable future. As the generation that has witnessed climate-related disasters and environmental upheavals, they're determined to leave a better planet for future generations. Green homes, with their lower operating costs and reduced environmental impact, offer an avenue to contribute to this mission.

Gen Z's affinity for green homes goes beyond trendiness; it's a conscious choice to adopt a lifestyle that's in harmony with nature. By investing in green homes, they're shaping a legacy of sustainable living for themselves and the generations to come. As they redefine urban living, Gen Z's guide to eco-friendly living isn't just about homes; it's about inspiring a cultural shift towards a greener, healthier, and more mindful future. (IANSLife)

(The author is the CEO and Founder of Legend Siroya Realtors)

Results in 4 states on Sunday as BJP, Cong face ordeal ahead of 2024 polls

Rajasthan: Cong, BJP reach out to independents, smaller parties

NEW DELHI, Dec 2: Counting of votes will be held on Sunday in assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Telangana in what is seen as a semi-final contest ahead of the general elections in less than six months.

The Congress, which is in power in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, and the BJP, which is ruling Madhya Pradesh, are locked in a straight fight in these three states, while K Chandrashekar Rao-led Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) is hoping for a hat-trick in Telangana.

Pollsters have been divided on the outcome, with quite a few exit polls putting the BJP ahead in Madhya Pradesh and giving it an edge in Rajasthan while predicting that Congress has an advantage in Telangana and Chhattisgarh.

Starting with postal ballots, counting will commence at 8 am amid tight security for 230 seats in

Pollsters have been divided on the outcome, with quite a few exit polls putting the BJP ahead in Madhya Pradesh and giving it an edge in Rajasthan while predicting that Congress has an advantage in Telangana and Chhattisgarh

Madhya Pradesh, 90 seats in Chhattisgarh, 119 seats in Telangana and 199 seats in Rajasthan as polling on one seat in the desert state was put off due to the death of a candidate.

A three-tier security arrangement has been put in place and only people holding valid passes will be allowed to enter the counting centres, election officials said. After wresting Karnataka from the BJP in May, the

Congress is eyeing Madhya Pradesh and Telangana and is hoping to retain power in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.

An impressive performance in these polls will boost the party's standing in the opposition INDIA alliance which has been formed to take on the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP is seeking to replicate the winning streak of Gujarat, where it has been ruling since 1998, in Mad-

hya Pradesh with four-time Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan hoping to form government again.

The party is also keen to win back Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh as it seeks to regain its hold in the Hindi heartland states ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

"The face of the Congress has been exposed. Only the results are to come tomorrow. The good governance that the public wanted will

be found under the BJP government," Union minister Anurag Thakur said in Jaipur, adding that the people want the "double-engine" government of the BJP.

With several pollsters predicting a close fight, there were reports claiming that parties have decided to herd their winning candidates swiftly to prevent any poaching.

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, however, dismissed reports that he has been asked to bring winning Congress candidates from the states to resorts and hotels in Karnataka. "No MLAs will be going anywhere. Nobody has given me a responsibility or called me. ... I am confident that we will win all the states," Shivakumar, who had made similar arrangements to bring 44 Gujarat legislators during the August 2017 Rajya Sabha elections, told reporters in Bengaluru. (PTI)

JAIPUR, Dec 2: On the eve of the counting of votes in Rajasthan, both BJP and Congress have started reaching out to independent candidates, including rebels, and smaller parties.

Nearly 40 rebels from both parties have contested elections after being denied tickets and have put up a tough fight. With several exit polls predicting a tight race between the BJP and the Congress, MLAs from this group could play a crucial role. Sources in the two parties said preparations have been made at different levels to ensure that independent and rebel candidates who win elections are brought to their fold in case of a split verdict.

Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot met Governor Kalraj Mishra on Thursday soon after exit poll predictions were released. On Friday, former chief minister Vasundhara Raje also met the governor.

While most pollsters predicted an edge for the BJP, three exit polls in their upper limit forecast a Congress win in the desert state.

"The party leaders are in touch with the independents and rebels," a Congress source said while expressing confidence that the party will win the government.

Similarly, sources in the BJP also said that the leaders were approaching the party rebels who contested elections as independents.

Apart from the rebels, the parties are exploring the possibilities of post-poll alliances with smaller parties, if required.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP), Bhartiya Tribal Party (BTP), Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP), CPI (M) are among the parties contesting elections in the state.

While BJP has not formed any pre-poll alliance, Congress left one seat (Bharat-

pur) for its partner Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD).

Some of the BJP rebels are Ravindra Singh Bhati (Sheo), Chandrabhan Singh Aakya (Chittorgarh), Yonus Khan (Deedwana), Kailash Meghwal (Shahpura), Asha Meena (Sawai Madhopur), Ashu Singh Surpura (Jhotwara), Rohitashv Sharma (Bansur) while Virendra Beniwal (Lunkaransar), Gopal Baheti (Pushkar), Ramchandra Saradhana (Virat Nagar) are among other Congress rebels.

In the 2018 assembly elections, Congress had secured 99 out of 199 seats that went to polls and formed the government while its ally RLD also won one seat.

The Congress later won the one seat (Ramgarh) where elections were held later because of the demise of the BSP candidate.

In September 2019, all six BSP MLAs defected to the Congress. (PTI)

National nuggets

NIA raids several locations to bust FICN rackets

NEW DELHI, Dec 2: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Saturday seized fake notes, currency printing paper and digital gadgets in raids in four states to bust fake Indian currency note rackets, an official said. The raids were conducted as part of the NIA's probe into a case registered on November 24 that relates to a larger conspiracy hatched by suspected individuals for trafficking Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) from across the border and promoting their circulation in India, a spokesperson of the agency said. Teams of the NIA searched the premises of accused Rahul Tanaji Patil alias "Javed" in Kohapur district of Maharashtra, Vivek Thakur alias "Aditya Singh" in Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh and Mahendran Ballari district of Karnataka. Premises of suspects Shiva Patil alias "Bhimrav" in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra and Shashi Bhushar in Rohtas district of Bihar were also raided, the official said. The searches led to the seizure of Fake Indian Currency Notes of face value of Rs 6,600 (in denomination of Rs 500, Rs 200 and Rs 100), along with currency printing paper, from Thakur house, the spokesperson said. (PTI)

Bihar School threatened for asking girls to remove hijabs

SHEIKHPURA, Dec 2: A government school in Bihar has received threats from family members of female students who were asked by teachers to take off their "hijab" inside classrooms, an official said on Saturday. Om Prakash Singh, the District Education Officer of Sheikhpura, said a complaint in this regard has been made by the principal of the Utkramit Madhya Vidyalaya secondary school at Charuwan in Sheikhpura district. According to a written complaint from the principal Satyendra Kumar Chaudhary several family members of girls belonging to a religious group stormed the school on November 29, Singh said. "They were livid at the girls being asked, by the teaching staff, to take off headscarves inside classrooms. They told the principal that they would not allow the school to run if their girls were not allowed to follow their customs," said the DFO. He added that they also warned that those who did not pay heed to their demand would be "beheaded". (PTI)

BRS govt planning to pay out Rythu Bandhu funds to favourite contractors: Congress

HYDERABAD, Dec 2: The Congress on Saturday alleged that the BRS government in Telangana was planning to disburse large payments of Rs 6,000 crore from the 'Rythu Bandhu' scheme to their 'favourite' contractors in an "illegal manner" when the Model Code of Conduct is still in force.

The MCC came into force on October 9 for the assembly polls that were held on November 30. The counting will take place on December 3.

In a memorandum addressed to the Chief Election

Commissioner and submitted to the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Vikas Raj here, the Congress leaders urged that the state Chief Secretary be directed to follow proper and due process to ensure that the present BRS government does not misuse its powers during MCC.

"The BRS government is in (its) what is likely, the last two to three days," the memorandum, signed by leaders including PCC president A Revanth Reddy, said. "The model code of conduct is in place in Telangana. Since ECI did not permit disbursement of Rythu Bandhu

under the period of MCC, the government of Telangana is planning to disburse the same amount to favoured contractors for receiving commissions/kickbacks," it said. Large payments of Rs 6,000 crore are being made to their favourite contractors on an out of turn basis and not in serial order of those waiting for payment, it said. "In the last two-three days in power, when MCC is in place, the government of Telangana is disbursing Rs 6,000 crore to selected contractors in an illegal manner," it said.

The party also alleged

in the memorandum that the Dharani integrated land records management system is being misused to change land title records. "As regards thousands of acres of assigned lands in Ranga Reddy, Sangareddy and Medchal districts which were assigned lands as per previous land records, Dharani portal is being misused to change land title records. These properties are being transferred to the benamis of the chief minister's family members," it said. "Assigned lands" refer to pieces of land given by the government to the landless poor. (PTI)

Our stand of not going with BJP was always very clear: Sharad Pawar

PUNE, Dec 2: Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) president Sharad Pawar on Saturday said his party's stand of not joining hands with the BJP was always very clear, and even if any suggestion to the contrary came up, he did not approve of the idea.

The veteran politician's statements at a news conference here came a day after his nephew and rebel NCP leader Ajit Pawar targeted him.

"If anyone did suggest that we should support the BJP contrary to the stand we had taken, (even) then many in the party including me did not agree with that (suggestion). Our stand not to go with the BJP was very clear," Sharad Pawar said.

In a jibe at Ajit, the NCP chief further said that if anyone who had taken the oath of office in the wee hours of morning was claiming that it was the party's policy, that person "should not be taken seriously".

On Ajit Pawar declaring that his faction will contest the Baramati Lok Sabha seat - currently represented by Supriya Sule - Sharad Pawar said in democracy any person

is free to contest from anywhere.

The Ajit Pawar faction, which joined the government of the BJP and Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena in Maharashtra in July this year, has claimed in the past that Pawar senior too was in favour of forming alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party at one point.

In 2019, Ajit Pawar had taken an early morning oath of office as deputy chief minister along with Devendra Fadnis who was sworn in as chief minister amid a deadlock over alliance formation after the assembly elections. But the Fadnis-Ajit Pawar government collapsed within four days for want of numbers.

Speaking at a conclave of his faction at Karjat on Friday, Ajit Pawar, now a deputy chief minister, claimed that the Sharad Pawar-led group had been reaching out to him for a patch-up, and one meeting for this purpose was arranged on August 12 at businessman Atul Chordia's Pune house. If Pawar senior did not like the decision to join the Shiv Sena-BJP government, why did he seek such a meeting, Ajit Pawar asked. (PTI)

Opp for debate on report on Mahua Moitra in Parl's Winter Session

NEW DELHI, Dec 2: The impending expulsion of Trinamool Congress (TMC) member Mahua Moitra from the Lok Sabha, three bills to replace criminal laws and a proposed law for the appointment of election commissioners are issues set to dominate the Winter Session of Parliament, with the government urging the Opposition to ensure a conducive environment for discussions in the House.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh presided over a meeting of floor leaders of political parties in Parliament on Saturday, which was attended by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi, Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh, Gaurav Gogoi and Pramod Tewari, TMC leaders Sudip Bandyopadhyay and Derek O'Brien and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Fouzia Khan, among others.

The results of the Assembly elections in four states - Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana - on Sunday are also expected to have a bearing on the Winter Session of Parliament that begins on Monday and will continue till December 22.

The report of the Lok Sabha Ethics Committee recommending the expulsion of Moitra from the Lower House over a "cash-for-query" complaint is also listed for tabling in the House on Monday, the first day of the session.

At the all-party meeting on Saturday, TMC leaders demanded a discussion in the Lok Sabha on the Ethics Committee report, before any decision is taken to expel Moitra from the House.

Tewari said the Opposition also insisted on a discussion in Parliament on issues such as the situ-

ation in Manipur, rising inflation, "misuse" of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the "imposition" of Hindi through the names of laws, particularly in reference to the three bills to replace criminal laws.

"We are ready for a discussion on any issue. But when you seek a short-duration discussion, you also have to ensure an atmosphere conducive for a debate in the House," Joshi told reporters.

Shiv Sena leader Rahul Shewale said the House should discuss the issue of reservation for the Maratha and Dhangar communities, which were a subject of a hot debate in Maharashtra.

The government has listed 19 bills and two financial agenda items for the Winter Session of Parliament. (PTI)

UAPA charges dropped against seven Kashmiri students

SRINAGAR, Dec 2: The J&K government on Saturday dropped charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) against seven Kashmiri students who were earlier booked under the stringent act. The seven students of Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences & Technology (SKUAST) were booked under the UAPA after they resorted to sloganeering and celebration after Australia's victory over India in the ICC World Cup final on November 19.

The parents of the students, political leaders and civil society members had appealed to the authorities to take a lenient view, so that the careers of the students were saved. The parents had also tendered unconditional apology on behalf of their wards. (IANS)



Forest department officials set up a cage after a leopard was spotted at Sainik Farm area, in New Delhi, on Saturday. (PTI)

39 years on, horrors of Bhopal gas tragedy continue to haunt survivors

BHOPAL, Dec 2: The toxic gas leak from the now-defunct Union Carbide factory on the chilly night of December 2 not only killed thousands of people in Bhopal but continues to give nightmares to the survivors 39 years since the tragedy.

At least 3,787 people were killed and more than five lakh were affected physically after a toxic gas leaked from the pesticide factory on the intervening night of December 2 and 3, 1984.

"I shudder in fear and tremble on December 2 nights. I saw people collapsing dead on that chilly night," Mahendrajeet Singh (79), a gas victim and retired chief reservation superintendent of railways, told PTI on Saturday.

Recalling the fateful night, Singh said, "My family was

asleep around 2 am when shouts and cries of people in the railway colony some distance from the Union Carbide factory woke us up. We ran out of the house and fled on a scooter and on foot to escape the gas emanating from the killer factory." His family spent the night at a hotel 4 km from their house, said Singh, the president of All India Retired Railwaymen Federation Western Zone.

Some years later, Singh lost his mother and younger brother who were exposed to toxic gas.

"Three days after the gas leak, I noticed the leaves of a peepal tree near our house had fallen and it appeared dead and lifeless," he said, adding that the effect of the toxic gas on trees and plants was noticed in other parts of

the city as well.

"After the tragedy, there were rumours that the remaining toxic gas would be released from the factory. In light of such unconfirmed reports, we sought refuge in the neighbouring Hoshangabad district," Singh said.

The former railwayman said he had lost several of his colleagues in the tragedy and those who survived, were living with ailments, especially breathing problems.

Rambali Prasad Verma (83), a retired assistant station master, said he was lucky to survive the disaster.

"My duty at the railway cabin located close to the boundary wall of the Union Carbide factory ended at 10 pm on the night of December 2," he recounted.

Around midnight, when the gas leaked from the factory, Verma was at his house in the railway colony near the railway station.

"We ran helter-skelter to escape the poisonous gas and found refuge in an Army vehicle at a far-off place," he said.

Verma and his family returned home at daybreak, but again left their home a few hours later as there were rumours that the remaining toxic gas would be released around 11 am on December 3.

After some days, Verma's family went to Indore and returned when things settled down.

"When I think of that chilly night, I start shivering. I have breathing problems and asthma as I was exposed to the gas," the octogenarian said. (PTI)

Delhi HC notice to Centre on woman's plea to visit Yemen, save daughter on death row

NEW DELHI, Dec 2: In a special hearing held on Saturday, the Delhi High Court issued notice to the Centre on a plea filed by a Kerala woman seeking facilitation of her travel to Yemen to negotiate with the victim's family about paying blood money to save her daughter who's on death row in the West Asian country.

The plea filed by the mother of Nimisha Priya, an Indian citizen who has been sentenced to death in Yemen for the murder of a Yemeni national, stated that the Union government did not grant permission to the petitioner and advised her and other accompanying persons not to go to that country at this juncture.

A bench of Justice Man-

meet Pritam Singh Arora was apprised that now the only way to save daughter's life is getting pardon from the family of the victim by paying 'blood money'.

It needs to be mentioned that a travel by the Centre is in place preventing Indian nationals from visiting Yemen.

In an earlier hearing, the Centre's senior standing counsel had orally apprised the high court that the Supreme Court of Yemen had dismissed the appeal filed by Priya on November 13.

Priya's mother believes that the only way to save her daughter from death penalty is to negotiate with the deceased's family by offering 'blood money'. However, she is currently

unable to do so due to the travel restrictions.

It is alleged that Priya, who worked as a nurse in Yemen, had injected Talal Abdo Mahdi with sedatives to retrieve her passport, which he had in his possession.

She had reportedly suffered abuse and torture at the hands of Mahdi.

Last year, a Coordinate Bench had disposed of a petition requesting the Central government to facilitate negotiations with the victim's family to save Priya from death penalty by paying 'blood money' in accordance with Yemeni law.

Subsequently, an appeal against the single-judge bench's order was dismissed by a division bench. (IANS)

"Glory, built on selfish principles, is shame and guilt."

— William Cowper

The Shillong Times

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State polls: Advantage BJP

THE Congress took a hit and the BJP triumphed yet again in the Hindi heartland. The results of the assembly polls released on Sunday made it amply clear that the road ahead for the INDIA alliance, approaching the 2024 Parliament Polls, would be a tough one. The Congress lost two states – Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh – and won one, namely Telangana. It failed to grab Madhya Pradesh. The BJP laughed its way through the vote counting in Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh states after establishing early leads. The electorate has given a decisive verdict in all these states, leaving no scope for horse-trading. The failure of the Congress to win at least two states could now be used by INDIA alliance partners like Mamata Banerjee to rubbish Rahul Gandhi and seize control of the alliance itself, or euphemistically revisit the theme of "collective leadership" at the December 6 meeting.

Several satraps who put their future PM hopes in the freezer could now extricate it and throw their weight around. Not Telangana's overambitious K Chandrashekar Rao, who took a hit below his belt, however. The Congress in Telangana formed part of a grand strategy devised by the powerful Reddy community to call KCR's bluff and send him packing. His hopes of becoming PM in Delhi and leaving the CM chair for his son, minister KT Rama Rao, went awry in one sweet go. A 'dynasty' fell by the wayside. By foisting his family at the top of the governance system, KCR sought to take the people for granted. The BJP that adopted a soft approach to KCR lost an opportunity to harness the anti-KCR feelings in the state to its advantage. A change of state BJP chief – from a backward class (BC) to a Reddy -- at the last minute by itself did not help either.

In Madhya Pradesh, the 77-year-old Kamalnath proved to be no match to the relatively young BJP chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. Under Chouhan, the BCs reasserted their clout and backed him. Kamalnath's corrupt image failed to help the Congress. The tribal belts in Chhattisgarh sided this time with the BJP and the Congress could not do proper groundwork for the polls despite being in power there. So was the case with Rajasthan, where the fight between Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot played spoilsport. While Telangana saved the Congress party's face to an extent, it could not match up with the money power of the BJP on the campaign front. The present win for the BJP in the Hindi belt is not necessarily a guarantee to its victory in the 2024 parliament polls. Nor does this victory have too much to do with PM Modi's charisma. Several other factors were at work, better organisational strength, for instance.

Understanding the lives of visually impaired persons

By H H Mohrmen

Despite December 3 being celebrated as the International Day for Persons with Disabilities, this section of the population continues to be the most neglected in society. They do not always appear on the radar screen of any government scheme and are overlooked even by the public. The Society of Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE), taking advantage of the Meghalaya State Skill Development Society's training programme, planned a training programme for the visually impaired section of society. While planning the training, we thought it would be a typical training; we never expected that we would learn so much from them. The training was a great learning experience for me personally and for the staff of the organization in general.

"The Blind Lead the Blind"

It was a significant milestone in the annals of the NGO SURE as it embarked on a month-long special training programme catering to the visually impaired segment of our society. There is a saying, "The blind cannot lead the blind," but what makes this initiative truly remarkable is that Kelvin Suting of the District Commerce Industries Centre (DCIC), a Jowai award-winning master trainer, is himself a visually impaired person.

The one-month training for seven visually impaired trainees from the district covers trades such as making broomsticks, mats or bamboo brooms. The training was an innovation in itself, specially designed with the visually impaired person in mind. Kelvin Suting, the master trainer, recalled his past experiences with training and highlighted the struggles that he had to overcome when trained by instructors who were not visually impaired. The trainers could not understand the challenges faced by blind trainees. Based on this observation, the training was designed by Ialsiewdor Gashnga, Programme Coordinator Skill, SURE, in collaboration with Kelvin Suting, the master trainer, and Lamobormi Suchen, Skill Development Officer, to create course content specifically meant for differently-abled individuals. The training was conducted using only the sense of touch, and

the training module has been tailored to meet the needs of the visually challenged.

They too have their own dreams and aspirations

Krishna Phawa, one of the trainees, expressed his aspiration to follow in Kelvin's footsteps and hoped that the training would not only enable him to earn a livelihood and find success in life but, more importantly, to be able to train others. Initially, when we planned this training, we were a little uncertain; we were not sure if this would work, but deep in our hearts, we knew that it would in some way or another help our visually impaired friends. And we realized that it has somehow helped them gain at least one skill to help them earn their livelihood.

The most important lesson that I learned from spending time with them is that all of them yearn to be independent. The training had helped them, in some way, break out of the monotonous life that has confined them to their homes. After being together for one month, it has also helped build camaraderie among them.

They don't want to live on the sympathy of their parents and their loved ones. They don't want to continue depending on their parents or relatives, even for small things; they want to live an independent life as much as they can. In some way, we have been able to enable them to achieve their dream. Hopefully, society will also listen to their wishes and provide an enabling system and an environment that will help them live an independent life. One also hopes that the government will make roads, footpaths, and even government institutions that are much more accessible for the differently-abled citizens of this state.

Learning from a day out with the visually impaired

A few days before the training ended, the visually impaired master trainer asked me if we could arrange a picnic or an outing for them to Loomkyntoor Resort. Although no funds were allocated from the scheme for the excursion, we still decided to give them the opportunity with our own funds. But the question really is, what does an outing really mean for a

group of visually impaired people? What does a trip really mean when one can't see anything? The organization's staff never thought that the outing would make them happier than the visually impaired. It is said that there is no bigger reward than seeing the people you care for, happy. Going for a picnic is one thing, but for them, going together as a group of visually impaired people is something that cannot be explained. One can see the camaraderie that they have built among them. It was a joy to see them happy and to help explain to them about the place, and for some of them, it was the first time in their lives that they ate out or in a restaurant.

Visually Impaired Taking Photographs

One would wonder why they would want to take a photograph of themselves or with their friends when they cannot even see. What will they do with the photographs anyway? All visually impaired trainees, except one, have a smartphone and at least a WhatsApp account. The moment the photograph is taken, it is immediately uploaded to their status. Even if they are blind, the app on the device also helps them take photographs. It tells them if the photo is within the frame or not. You can see the joy in their faces when they upload their status on WhatsApp. Thanks to the smartphone device, they can also make the best use of technology. Smartphones, in some way, have become extensions of their being and help them access other services, a feat that would have been impossible to achieve had it not been for the device. Their eyes are closed, but their hearts are open, and they long for independence to live the life they wish to live.

How They Made the Best Use of the Smartphone

Among the visually impaired people we had close interaction with, Krishna Phawa stood out as one of the most experienced in making the best use of the smartphone device. Krishna not only uses WhatsApp and email, but also uses G-Pay to send and receive money. Although he is 100 percent blind but because he also lives in Shillong he can also

book a Rapido ride to travel in the city. He even has a YouTube channel of his own. Krishna, who has somehow mastered the use of a special app on his smartphone, wishes he could be of help to his fellow visually impaired people and help them make the best use of smartphones. Apps that are commonly used by visually impaired people are 'Be my eyes' and 'Lookout', which help them read books, medicines, prescriptions, and even scan documents for them. There are also apps for the visually impaired, like 'Kybo, 4 percent, and Keep Note', which help them text, and they can use it as a reminder.

Demonetization or Note Ban

The National Democratic Alliance government's note ban, or demonetization, has had a huge impact on visually impaired people. The note ban has affected them greatly, but the general public was not aware of it because their stories were never told. How does the Modi note ban affect the visually impaired citizens of this country? One would remember that the old notes have different sizes according to their value; for example, the size of a one hundred rupee note varies from the size of a fifty, twenty, ten, or one rupee note. The notes are easily distinguishable by people, even if they cannot see them. Because of the different sizes of the notes, visually impaired people can easily identify the currency by merely touching it. After demonetization, almost all the currency notes are of the same shape and size, which makes it difficult for people who cannot see to differentiate one from the other. Now they have to use an app like 'Mani' to help them identify currency notes.

International day for persons with disabilities

December 3 is celebrated the world over as a special day for persons with disabilities, but let us ask ourselves if we have been able to provide them with an environment and a space in which they can live as independently as we all are? Isn't it true that we only look at them with sympathy or even look down at them? Has the government been able to make even government buildings easily accessible to differently-abled people? This is a million dollar question.

Indian foreign diplomacy in a mess despite all the talk of Vishwaguru

Latest brush with US over Pannu a big humiliation for Modi

By Sushil Kutty

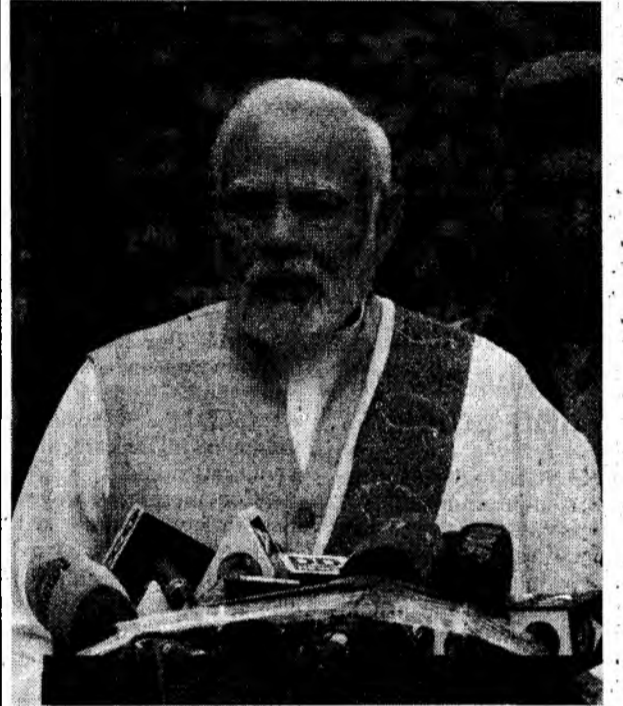
There is some confusion on whether India should consider itself "Vishwaguru" or be wise and hold back on the boast? One view is why go the extra mile with the "present government's exaggerated sense of the country's global power and indigenous capability", i.e., Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "macho manner" and muscular foreign policy, which has rubbed off on External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, too.

The brusque handling of India's foreign affairs has of late become a matter of concern to the world. It is banded

not matter if India's adversaries say it is false pride.

India is not about to go to war with them. No Indian government, this one or the next, should stop flaunting India's economic and strategic power. India is not a minion, neither in the BRICS, nor in the QUAD. The point is at least now, when the Congress has only succeeded in winning one state out of five state elections the opposition parties shouldn't give the impression that the INDI-Alliance is "against India".

The BJP and the lapdog media have been doing their



about that Canada is the enemy and Pakistan is powerless in the face of India's robust diplomacy. What follows is that a major portion of Indian citizens believe "Modi government's tall talk" and

best to lend currency to this impression. It is time to distinguish between Narendra Modi and Tejas, the two are not the same. The INDI-Alliance has less than six months to change the impression that opposition

"Latest is the humiliation at the hands of the US state department over the US based Sikh Khalistani leader Pannu who was the target of assassination by the Indian agents, according to the US filing in New York Court. Further, the US foreign relations committee of the Congress will be holding a hearing on this Indian action."

when a Modi minister brags about the potential takeover of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "bhakts" need no more convincing.

Latest is the humiliation at the hands of the US state department over the US based Sikh Khalistani leader Pannu who was the target of assassination by the Indian agents, according to the US filing in New York Court. Further, the US foreign relations committee of the Congress will be holding a hearing on this Indian action. Such is the treatment meted out by USA to the country which it considers as strategic partner and main ally in South Asia against China.

One of the reasons why the Bharatiya Janata Party scored a brute majority in 2019 was the growing belief among voters of Modi's invincibility and the grandiose claim, "if there's Modi, the sky's the limit." The fact is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political adversaries should disregard Modi's reach among the average voters at their own peril.

So-called experts on "what's happening" should refrain from dismissing talk of the feeling of "India rising" under Modi rule. Prime Narendra Modi waving from a Tejas LCA shouldn't be swept aside with a snide sneer. "Modi the Pilot" is now embedded in the psyche of not just Modi "bhakts"; Tejas has become a national emblem after Prime Minister Narendra Modi "flew the Tejas" and took India's "indigenous capabilities" sky-high.

Does that mean India will stop importing foreign made fighter aircraft? Nope. The point is making Indians take pride in, "Made in India" never fetched negative points to any political party. Unless the product is a proven dud. Projecting India's self-reliance is half the domestic political fight won, and it does

parties are against India. It is a tricky proposition, but it has to be done.

The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Modi government are clever foes. December 3 has already debunked the exit polls. There are a plethora of varied apprehensions that there's mischief afoot, especially considering that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the BJP's "name and face" of the Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan elections and how can "Modi hai toh Mumkin" lose, impossible?

So, the reality of December 3 could be different, vastly different. There's a feeling that the huge margins of victory/defeat established by the exit polls were to create a perception, for the perception to settle down that the "BJP victories" in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan were because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi alone.

The problem with the Opposition, for the Opposition, is that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has built around himself a credibility of trust with the coating of pride in India, however false or untrue. The Opposition is seen as anti-India. The December results have also established that the mighty Muslim vote-bank was not able to stand up to the BJP and Modi's Hindutva redoubt?

Taking pride in India, and taking pride in being a Hindu were crucial to these elections. For 10 years the Opposition made sure to equate Prime Minister Narendra Modi with India. The opposition, especially the Congress, fed that narrative and wouldn't stop. Today, the BJP is reaping what the Opposition had sown. The BJP fought the elections on Modi and Modi alone because the Congress struck up the conversation "Modi is India, India is Modi". (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Of religious assimilation

Editor

The last paragraph in Bhogtoram Mavroh's article, 'Religion and Indigenous identity' published on November 29 needs to be addressed. To state that the followers of Niam Khasi Niam Tre may get assimilated by larger religions is the most naive and outrageous assumption ever! We stand strong and firm in our own faith with full respect for all denominations.

Yours etc.,
Bijoya Sawian,
Via email

Rhino Point traffic issues

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I would like to seek clarification from the Shillong Traffic Police on the modalities and instructions on the "No Right Turn" (for vehicles coming from Harrison Bridge direction) at Rhino Point.

1. Apart from Ambulances and Fire Engines, which other vehicles are exempted from the "No Right Turn" and can freely turn right at Rhino Point at their convenience often blatantly allowed by the cop on duty?
2. Are all ML01 and ML02 vehicles and those of defence services vehicles (especially when the driver is the only occupant of such vehicles) exempted from the "No Right Turn" regulation at Rhino Point as well? If so, is there a specific order to that effect in place?
3. Are all Boleros and Scorpios, Innovas and For-

turners and other so called very important types of vehicles with tinted glasses (with or without the VIP beacon or the so-called VIP himself/herself inside the vehicle) also exempted from the said regulation?

These are three simple questions, which I am sure, will be answered suitably by the STP through this newspaper, without anyone ever having to seek recourse to the RTI Act, in the foreseeable future.

Yours etc.,
Tanu Dasgupta,
Shillong.

Confusion over uniform

Editor,

The directive of a renowned Salesian institution - St. Anthony's College to students proceeding into the next academic semester to wear uniform seems to have irked a number of students and teachers alike. However, a closer look within most educational institutions in the urban and semi-urban areas reveals that the uniform has been a rule for those in classes 11 and 12 though there are institutions that don't impose uniforms for the above section. The direction by the said college has come a bit too late, because if this is to be a 'good' initiative it has to be standardized before admissions and not in the middle of the semesters as this is an additional burden for parents. I suggest that uniforms be implemented from the new session for new batches seeking admission into the college. Those protesting should understand that institutions are not fashion platforms to flaunt around an individual's

background. There are many who come from different economic and social strata and the disparities show in the clothes worn. If the uniform is to be made compulsory the opinion of students and parents should have been solicited. Having said this let us remember that the quality of teaching and educational outcomes are the most important factors that mould a student and not clothes.

Yours etc.
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Via email

Muslim brothers help

Editor,

In the last decade or so, we are seeing divisive forces gaining ground and trying to divide Indian society along Hindu-Muslim lines. A prominent Hindutva party and its leaders are catalysts in this process. This has transformed into a major sectarian violence, especially in the Northern states of India. Many lives have been lost as a consequence, and many more are rendered homeless, and have lost their livelihoods.

However, there is hope and a silver lining. One example of this is the rescue operations of the 41 workers trapped in the collapsed Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand. First of all, the technique used to rescue the trapped workers was primitive i.e. rat-hole mining technique used for coal mining, which the National Green Tribunal has made illegal. Further, of the twelve rescue team members involved, seven were Muslims. They did not hesitate to help the people in distress, irrespective of religious affiliations. This in-

stance shows that, in general, Indians do not discriminate against any religion. This, definitely, is a bright spot.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia,
Guwahati - 24

Give peace a chance

Editor,

With reference to James M Dorsey's article, "Mirror image of divide among Israelis, Jews, Muslim leaders and scholars" (ST, November 27, 2023), in the song, 'Blowin' in the Wind', Bob Dylan asked, "Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows that too many people have died?" This question is now blowing in the wind in the killing fields of Gaza.

Indiscriminate bombing by Israel in Gaza even on hospitals, schools and refugee camps killed 15,000 Palestinians including over 6,000 children and 4,000 women and caused some 7,000 people including over 4,000 children and women missing under the rubble. Now that the ceasefire is on, world leaders need to take diplomatic initiatives for its extension and for a permanent two state solution of the Palestine problem as per the Oslo Accord.

After the Hamas attacks on southern Israel on October 7 this year, the United Nations secretary-general António Guterres said that Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. We need to go back to the background of Palestine crisis to judge whether his comment was correct.

The partisan plan of Great Britain's Palestine was adopted to create an Arab state and a Jewish state and

an independent Jerusalem under a UN trusteeship in 1947. Israel proclaimed its independence and the Arab - Israeli war erupted. Palestinian people failed to get a separate state. In November 1967, United Nations Resolution 242 called for the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories.

But that resolution could not force Israel out from their occupied territories in Palestine. In September 1978, Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt were signed. But it contained no mention of self-determination for the Palestinian people. It even excluded relevant elements of the UN resolution 242 passed in 1967.

After his tenure as the President of the USA, Jimmy Carter admitted in his 1985 book, "The Blood of Abraham" that he did Palestinian people a disservice by lending his support to the Camp David framework as it, "removed Egypt's considerable strength from the military equation of the Middle East and thus gave the Israelis renewed freedom to pursue their goals of fortifying and settling the occupied territories and removing perceived threats by pre-emptive military strikes against some of their neighbours."

Then came Oslo -1 Accord in 1993. In May 1994, an agreement concluded in Cairo arranged for the first stage of withdrawal of Israeli security forces and their transfer of authority to the newly created Palestinian Authority. The withdrawal from the cities of Gaza and Jericho was completed. In September 1995, Oslo-2 Accords were signed. It contained details of Palestinian self-rule in the areas other than Gaza and Jericho.

But even their wait for freedom from 1947 to 1995 was not enough for the Palestinian people. When they were near the finishing line after a marathon manoeuvre to get their legitimate right, a Jewish extremist killed the Prime Minister of Israel, Rabin. Thereafter, the Jewish people elected Benjamin Netanyahu, an outspoken critic of the Oslo Accords. The people of Palestine who had been promised self-governance within a timeline of 5 years, were deprived of that, courtesy, the Israeli politics.

So, we see that the comment on the Hamas attack by Antón Guterres was as right as the observation that Indian Rebellion of 1857 did not take place in a vacuum. The truth is that 15 million Palestinians have been suffering the brutality of Israel's oppression for decades. The American government needs to reflect on what Khaled Abou El Fadl has said, "The people in the United States don't like to hear it, but puritanical Islam has been on the rise because of our unequivocal policy of absolute support for Israel, regardless of what Israel does - even if they invade Lebanon and bombard a major city like Beirut, full of civilians."

The USA should take a neutral role and help the United Nations to effect a permanent two state solution for lasting peace in West Asia. Yes, all we are saying is give peace a chance.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"Perhaps nature is our best assurance of immortality."

— Eleanor Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

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Mizoram bucks the trend

THE election results in Mizoram were along expected lines. Anti-incumbency was imminent and the Mizo National Front (MNF) was tried and tested and found wanting. The Zoram Peoples' Movement (ZPM) a conglomerate of regional forces was a movement for a new thinking which the progressive new generation of Mizos desirous of change have voted for. The ZPM have accused outgoing Chief Minister Zoramthanga of corruption and nepotism. Of course Mizoram benefits from having an educated and near literate population at 91.93% and a largely informed electorate. The only district that has the lowest literacy rate is Lawngtlai with just 65.88%. If there is one thing that marks out the present Mizoram and for which the capital city of Aizawl is the indicator then it is the entrepreneurship spirit. Several young women and men who have studied or been trained outside the state are now back nursing their own little start-ups.

This is also for the first time that Mizoram has elected 3 women MLAs – 2 of them from the ZPM and one from the MNF. The Congress has unexpectedly done very poorly with only one candidate winning while the BJP succeeded in getting 2 MLAs which is one more seat since the last election in 2018. The Mizo National Front (MNF) which has been ruling the State for two terms is now reduced to 10 MLAs. Political observers from Mizoram say that they are rather chary that the ZPM a new party with several new and young faces and with an absolute majority would not have to contend with a strong Opposition. Their views are that a strong Opposition is better for the people of Mizoram and to ensure better checks and balances.

Leader of the ZPM, Mr Lalduhoma, a former IPS officer who first cut his teeth in Goa and later became the security in charge of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Delhi is now all set to be the new Chief Minister of Mizoram. In 1984 he was first elected to the Lok Sabha but became the first MP to be disqualified under the anti-defection law. Again in 2020 Lalduhoma faced disqualification as MLA but returned after winning the Serchhip seat. Overall, therefore Lalduhoma has quite a chequered political career. In an interview with a section of media, Lalduhoma said the ZPM was formed in 2018 to bring an alternative for the people of Mizoram. He said that people have had enough of the MNF and the Congress and were ready for a change and ZPM would bring that much needed change in government and administration. In his interviews post his win, Lalduhoma said his priority would be to address corruption and bring in financial reforms. He also said that the farmers would receive due attention from his government.

Awareness on crop insurance the need of the hour

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The sudden onslaught of inclement weather adversely impacting upon farm produce is becoming more frequent. Meghalaya experienced it again on November 17, 2023 when cyclone Midhili (meaning huge tree in Maldivian) resulted in a depression lasting for 24 hours. Just as in other instances, this time too social media was filled with concern for the farmers and the damage done to the crops. One media clip that showed paddy being washed away by the rain as the farmer looked on was quite distressing. It is against this backdrop that measures are required to safeguard against crop losses. The most effective intervention available against such uncertainties is crop insurance. However, as

losses for the farmers. In Meghalaya the awareness about these schemes is almost non-existent and this reflects on the degree of participation of rural farmers in policy-initiation and decision-making. One of the reasons is the requirement of a valid and authenticated land ownership certificate which most of the farmers do not possess.

In Meghalaya, PMFBY can be availed by the farmers by applying in plain paper through the nearest Community Development Block/Agriculture Circle. Although the process of accessing crop insurance under PMFBY is simple, the

scheme. Just the thought of these institutions and how they operate in terms of collateral/security can be overwhelming for the farmers. This is the thought-barrier that has to be broken for any increased participation in crop insurance. In a recent discussion held at Asian Confluence, Shillong with Self Help Groups (SHGs), a group coordinator narrated how group members were afraid of the term 'bank loan'. As a result she had to change the nomenclature to 'ka jingshim/jingai kyliang kabanai' (a systematic way of borrowing and repayment) so as to make any headway with the members. Now,

children. Apart from farming the farmers do not see any other alternative modes of employment. A grandmother aged 66 narrates on how she still has to toil every day in the field while also suffering from health problems and that when extreme weather events happen her family is sucked into even deeper levels of poverty. This is the status of farming and crop insurance. It can be said that these stories from the farm resonate with many farmers of Meghalaya.

While looking at solutions to creating awareness, the starting point would be to capture the attention and imagination of the farmers. Unless this happens no headway will be made. Farmers should be able to realize the



ground realities show, a lot of work is required even in the context of awareness.

The flagship crop insurance scheme under Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GOI for FY 2016-17 till FY 2019-20 shows that the crop insurance coverage in Meghalaya is one of the lowest in India across all parameters. On the two important parameters, namely, sum insured and gross premium the figures were Rs. 47 lakh and Rs. 4 lakh respectively for FY 2016-17. This increased to Rs. 2.31 lakh and Rs. 9 lakh respectively in the FY 2019-20. This might be seen as progressive. However, when computed in terms of linear growth rate (LGR) for the period 2016-17 to 2019-20 it portrays a decline of -13.22% for sum insured and -16.67% for gross premium. The numbers clearly show that the concept of crop insurance has not taken off in Meghalaya. On the contrary, it is on the decline and this is a worrying trend as climate studies warn that extreme climatic events are only going to increase in the years to come.

Further, the maximum premium payable by the farmers is 2% for Kharif (summer) crops, 1.5% for Rabi (winter) crops and 5% for annual commercial/horticultural crops. Incidentally, the broad features of Weather-based Crop Insurance Scheme (WBCIS) are similar to PMFBY. The outline of the schemes highlights their potential value towards mitigation of crop

number of farmers who avail of it is less. The four years PMFBY data available in Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GOI for FY 2016-17 till FY 2019-20 shows that the crop insurance coverage in Meghalaya is one of the lowest in India across all parameters. On the two important parameters, namely, sum insured and gross premium the figures were Rs. 47 lakh and Rs. 4 lakh respectively for FY 2016-17. This increased to Rs. 2.31 lakh and Rs. 9 lakh respectively in the FY 2019-20. This might be seen as progressive. However, when computed in terms of linear growth rate (LGR) for the period 2016-17 to 2019-20 it portrays a decline of -13.22% for sum insured and -16.67% for gross premium. The numbers clearly show that the concept of crop insurance has not taken off in Meghalaya. On the contrary, it is on the decline and this is a worrying trend as climate studies warn that extreme climatic events are only going to increase in the years to come.

One of the reasons for poor participation in crop insurance is that the farmers are fearful of the organised financial system. They are scared of banks and in this case the insurance company listed by Government of Meghalaya to execute the

crop insurance involves the payment of premium. This thought of paying money for some calamity that may or may not happen can be difficult to process when they are mostly living in poverty and engaged in subsistence farming only. Efforts are made to educate that premium payments are not an expenditure, but rather an investment which would secure their livelihoods in case of unforeseen events.

In recent conversations with farmers of East Khasi Hills it was found that the majority do not have any awareness about crop insurance. They have not the faintest idea as to what it is and how it benefits in case of calamities. Some farmers were aware of it and this was due to the initiatives taken by the village headman through the Block offices. But again, they were just aware but had no knowledge about the process involved in participating in crop insurance schemes. For many farmers, even writing an application in plain paper was problematic. One farmer pointed towards the cyclonic rain of November 17, 2023 and how it has damaged most of his crops. He laments that this would drastically reduce his seasonal income and thereby adversely impact upon the health and education of his

value of crop insurance and what it can do for them. For this to materialise, massive awareness drives at the localised/unit levels are required. These may be conducted at village/cluster levels. They may be conducted in the late evening hours or night when the farmers are back from the field and more relaxed. What is needed is a sort of a surgical strike on crop insurance – specific, targeted and to the point. Further, skits and short plays on crop insurance can be conducted on market days at different locations. 'Kasngi iew' (market day) is a day when farmers converge at one place for trading of their produce. There can be no better place to create awareness on crop insurance and other agriculture-related matters. In addition, songs and documentaries on crop insurance can be developed in local dialects to really gain traction with the targeted farmers. Even bio-pics of success stories can be screened in the evening/night.

In the end, the current status of farmers and crop insurance in Meghalaya is a matter of grave concern when 67% of the population depends on agriculture for livelihoods. It is time to reverse the trend! (The writer teaches at NEHU. Email - benjamin@nehu.ac.in)

Pradhan Mantri Jana Arogya Yojana: A view from the frontlines

By Nachiket Mor and Shuchin Bajaj

Just over five years have now passed since the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), launched in 2018, came into being. During this period, it has issued over 27 crore insurance cards and has financed over 5.75 crore hospital admissions with an average payout of about Rs. 12,250 per admission, with almost 27,000 empanelled hospitals nationwide. This is an impressive track record and needs to be celebrated. However, any program or scheme, no matter how well-designed and executed, has both strengths and weaknesses. Five years is an excellent time to review some of them so that the scheme builds further on its strengths and works towards filling any gaps that may exist.

Of the 27,000 hospitals that are empanelled and about 20,000 that are active, 15,000 are in the public sector. While this has not yet been formally evaluated, anecdotal evidence suggests that these public sector hospitals outperform those not part of the scheme. One of the challenges of the public sector, not just in India but globally, is its non-responsiveness. Starting in the 80s with the UK, governments worldwide, including Thailand, Turkey, and, most recently, Vietnam, have moved to finance the public sector based on outcomes. They have gradually moved away from automatic financing based on annual expenditure budgets. This change has allowed them to improve the performance of the public sector, and it is not surprising that something similar is being seen in India when PMJAY pays the government hospitals based on outcomes. Over time, the full power of this can be realised if all financing to the public sector moves in this direction, including at the primary care level.

Given its funding limitations, PMJAY has not yet moved towards total health system financing in any part of the country, but its move towards paying hospitals on a package basis and not on a procedure-by-procedure basis has shown beneficial impacts. For example, increasing the length of stay after a successful surgery in a hospital is often due to poor infection control at hospitals. A fixed package approach has persuaded hospitals to pay particular attention to this and control it so patients can be discharged quickly.

The low package rates offered by PMJAY have come in for much criticism. However, there is global evidence which suggests that merely because package rates are low, it does not mean that quality needs to be low. Hospitals and entire health systems can respond to controlled pricing by innovating, bringing down costs, shedding unnecessary frills, and keeping quality high. When Japan moved to a fixed-price regime, Switzerland enacted its comprehensive health care legislation, and Germany instituted strict price controls, there was a fear that their health systems would be unable to cope. These proved unfounded. As a negotiating strategy, the approach adopted by PMJAY has been optimal – start at the lowest point and then revise prices upwards selectively based on actual experience (not lobbying). If they had initially started with higher package rates, these rates would have become sticky, and any downward revisions would have proved impossible.

Significant Room for improvement

While the scheme has many empanelled hospitals, over 25% are inactive, and the number varies significantly across the country – from over 500 active hospitals per crore population in Karnataka to only about 60 per crore in Bihar. As a direct result, hospitalisations under the scheme have been mainly concentrated in the southern States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala and range from almost 16,000 admissions per lakh population in Kerala to only about 600 in Bihar. The case of Uttar Pradesh is particularly noteworthy – at over 18,500 cards per lakh population, it has issued nearly as many cards as Kerala's 21,500. However, it has only

about 1200 hospitalisations per lakh population compared to Kerala's 16,000.

These large differentials are a reflection of the lack of availability of hospitals in lower-income States. This can also be seen from the fact that in over 200 districts of India, all based in the north and the northeast, total C-section rates are well below 10% – these low rates are now the principal reason why pregnant women and their newborns are dying in these districts. In order to address this, there is a need to build and staff more public sector hospitals in these districts and, where appropriate, devise incentives for the private sector to set up facilities in these remote regions. The UDAN ("Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik") scheme of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, which has done something similar with private airlines, could provide an excellent learning model. The highly successful Advanced Market Commitment (AMC) schemes that spurred vaccine development in the Indian private sector could also provide helpful lessons.

Putting aside concerns relating to low rates, while the move towards package rates within PMJAY has been a helpful development, it still falls within the ambit of what is referred to as a fee-for-service payment model. The danger of insurance schemes funded in this way, as the US discovered with its own version of PMJAY, Medicaid and Medicare after it was too late, is that it leads to massive price inflation in the healthcare sector. The only durable way to address this is, with adequate funding, to move towards total health system financing based on population norms, as Thailand has done with the public sector and Israel has done with the private sector. Research suggests that in several Indian States, including Delhi, Goa, Kerala, and Himachal Pradesh, current government expenditures are already adequate to finance all the necessary healthcare. If, in these States, the independent State Health Authorities could be given charge of the entire State health budget, they would have sufficient funding to implement district-level total health systems financing strategies and take responsibility for overall district and State-level health outcomes.

The durability of tax-financed purchasing schemes for health like PMJAY both at the Central and State levels speaks to the continued political and mass appeal of such an approach towards financing healthcare. Over time, stable structures like the National and State Health Authorities, which now run these schemes, have evolved, albeit with varying levels of capability. These schemes have also successfully built navigation capability, allowing them to purchase services from the private sector without getting embroiled in one or the other corruption scandals. This durability, stability, and ability to navigate is rare in the healthcare sector in India. It has set the stage for the next big move in the healthcare sector in India – the complete transfer of State health budgets to their State Health Authorities, which will pay the public sector and, where necessary, the private sector, based on defined outcomes and do away entirely with automatic-budget-based financing of the public sector.

There is also the opportunity to develop and launch schemes like UDAN and AMC, which will carefully fill gaps in the availability of hospital care in the more remote parts of India. More than two decades of experience with tax-financed insurance schemes in India has indicated that the availability of insurance schemes is a necessary but insufficient condition for a robust supply response from the hospital sector.

(Dr. Nachiket Mor is a Visiting Scientist at The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health, Chennai. Dr. Shuchin Bajaj is the founder of Ujala Cygnus, a chain of low-cost hospitals operating in the underserved parts of the country. (Syndicate The Billion Press) (editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Embracing college uniform for a positive learning environment

Editor,
I am writing to express my enthusiasm and support for the recent decision to implement college uniforms at St. Anthony's College. As a student of St. Anthony's College, I believe that adopting a uniform policy brings numerous benefits to our academic community.

Firstly, a standardized dress code fosters a sense of unity and equality among students. It minimizes socio-economic distinctions and promotes a more inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels a part of the larger St. Anthony's family. Moreover, uniforms contribute to a focused learning environment by reducing distractions related to clothing choices.

Additionally, college uniforms instil a sense of discipline and pride in one's institution. Wearing a uni-

form encourages students to identify with the values and traditions of St. Anthony's College, thereby creating a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie. This, in turn, contributes to a positive school culture and academic success.

While I appreciate the move towards uniformity, it is disheartening to hear about the controversy surrounding the Meghalaya People Human Rights Council's claim that the Principal is coercing students to wear uniforms. I would like to assert that, as a student, I have not experienced any undue pressure, and the introduction of uniforms has been embraced positively by the majority.

It is crucial to distinguish between reasonable uniform policies and alleged coercion. The Salesians of Don Bosco Provincial must thoroughly investigate the matter and ensure that the truth prevails. Removing the Principal based on unverified claims could have detrimental effects on the college's leadership and reputation.

In conclusion, the implementation of college uniforms at St. Anthony's College is a commendable step

towards creating a harmonious and focused learning environment. I trust that the appropriate authorities will handle the allegations with care and ensure a fair resolution that upholds the values of justice and integrity.

Yours etc.,
Rishotbaskhem
Kharlyngdoh,
Student of St. Anthony's
College,
Via email

On making uniforms mandatory in college

Editor,
St. Anthony College's decision to make uniforms mandatory for college students from 2024 triggered commotion! That one of the most prestigious institutes in the State has arrived at this decision must have been after due deliberations. Students may have their own reasons to push back. Let's be clear, greed must not be the motive here, especially for a college named after the virtuous saint Anthony

of Padua, as some are claiming. This thought offended me, being an alumnus of the college. A B.Sc. student from another college argues that upholding "academic values and environment" is more important than marching students into a fashion parade of uniforms. I think we should evaluate the pros and cons without bias.

Great minds like Pascal, Leibniz, Newton, Kant, Marie Curie that we have all studied, didn't need uniforms to shine. To say uniforms alone boost brainpower is as silly as claiming that eating food from a dining table alone gives us energy. Of course, uniforms do contribute to keeping students from straying into bad habits. I hope the college is concerned about that; if so, it is indeed commendable. College students might think twice about using tobacco products, which is quite prevalent, if they are in school uniforms. Whether one agrees or not, uniforms do bring in discipline and fear of transgression. Should we not guard our children from wrong influences, particularly in this digital age? Freedom without "wisdom" is always dangerous.

For all practical purposes, however, grown-up students want to shed those school uniforms like a caterpillar sheds its cocoon. In other words, they "eagerly await" the deadline when they can get rid of the mandatory school uniforms that they have been wearing ever since they were first taken to school by their parents.

Apart from craving for freedom from school paraphernalia, the young adults sorely desire the space that provides them with the opportunity to explore other interests. Many look for chances to balance their studies with other meaningful pursuits that fetch them extra income. Imagine the situation of poor students from distant villages who are forced to work part-time, like giving tuition to students studying in junior classes or working as salesmen in a shop to lighten the financial burden on their parents. A uniform will be a hurdle for them. This is what I am saying from my own personal experiences. Moreover, no one should undermine the financial strain on families, for whom even a few thousand rupees for uniforms can derail a student's academic

journey. It is a real fact.

On the contrary, the college could always insist on "decent and dignified" attire, regardless of its quality. After all, the label on a student's clothes do not determine how valuable they are. Albert Einstein never wore expensive clothes. Prioritizing quality education and encouraging, "creative and constructive," thinking over a strict dress code creates a more equitable and inclusive learning atmosphere. It allows students to be themselves, raising their confidence and sense of belonging. Of course, the institution may adopt appropriate measures to maintain dignified decorum on the college campus. The vibes in an academic institute should evoke thoughts of Pascal, Newton, Kant, Marie Curie, but not of Salman Khan, Shakira, or Beyonce Knowles. I'm sorry for being blunt.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gawali
Shillong-2

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"Throughout his life, Dickens cared passionately about orphans."

— Claire Tomalin

The Shillong Times

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Failure as orphan

SUCCESS, it is said, has many fathers; and failure is an orphan. No one now wants to accept responsibility for the Congress' failure to win the assembly polls in three Hindi-belt states. Hair-splitting arguments citing 'facts and figures' are trying to establish that the BJP victory in these three states, in one go, does not taste so sweet. It is easy to analyse the 'reasons' for the poll victories – and defeats – as long as one has the freedom to talk through his hat. Facts on the ground are that the Congress party failed to measure up to the general expectations of the people and the BJP triumphed over its principal rival. The rest could be conjectures.

Every BJP leader is going out of his way to give credit to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the sweeping victory for the party in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. True, the PM addressed a series of poll rallies and held road shows in the election bound-states. The same PM had also extensively campaigned for the BJP in Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and before that in West Bengal, but the BJP bit the dust in humiliating ways. State elections are fought on issues specific to the states. In every assembly poll, the fight is majorly between leaders therein. The fight in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, was between chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who ran the government for four terms and veteran Kamal Nath. In Telangana, the fight boiled down to a tug of war between chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao and youthful A Revant Reddy. In Rajasthan, Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot from the same party undercut each other and defeated their own party. In Mizoram, former Indian Police Service officer Lalduhoma emerged as the dark horse and outwitted chief minister Zoramthanga through a new alliance and grabbed power. In Chhattisgarh, chief minister Bhupesh Baghel's leadership of the state famously disappointed the tribal belts of southern Bastar and northern Surguja and they voted him out. The Congress could win just four of the 26 seats against its win in 25 seats there in the previous polls. The vote against Baghel was Advantage BJP.

To argue that national issues influenced the election outcomes in the Hindi belt is to ignore the ground realities. The Congress party, as a last resort, promised a Caste Census. But, larger state-specific issues exercised the minds of the people. When the Congress won Himachal Pradesh, the argument was that the government employees and their families helped in the win as the tricolour party had promised restoration of the Old Pension Scheme. The Congress having made the same promise in Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere this time courted defeat.

Regional Imbalance

Will finance panel bridge the gap?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

The BJP's victory in three states appears to suggest the promise of development via 'double engine' sarkar has takers. And the timing should make the task of the 16th Finance Commission, recently recommended by the Union Cabinet to be set up, easier. It is to decide on sharing of taxes between the states and Centre. States are entitled to 41% share of the divisible pool, which comprises all taxes, excluding the cesses and surcharges. However, they have been demanding a larger share of the pie, arguing they are burdened by many schemes announced by the Centre. On its part, the Centre believes it's funding several schemes, such as health and education is part of the States' mandate. The difference of opinion may steadily disappear now.

The existence of regional imbalance in India cannot be denied as there has not been balanced development. As in the case of literacy and educational attainment, where the states of southern India are far ahead than others, similarly in financial matters, states in the western part as well as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in the south are stronger than their counterparts. The pace of growth in the two southern states and in Maharashtra and Gujarat has been phenomenal in recent years and experts believe their performance may be even better in the coming years.

The per head income of states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha is far below the national average. In fact, the per head income of Bengal has been one of the lowest in the country in 2022-23 at Rs 141,373 whereas in Telangana, Karnataka and Haryana it's more than double. These are indicative of regional imbalances in economic development. The Centre's strategy of tackling this has not been successful enough and India suffers from a strategy of balanced economic development.

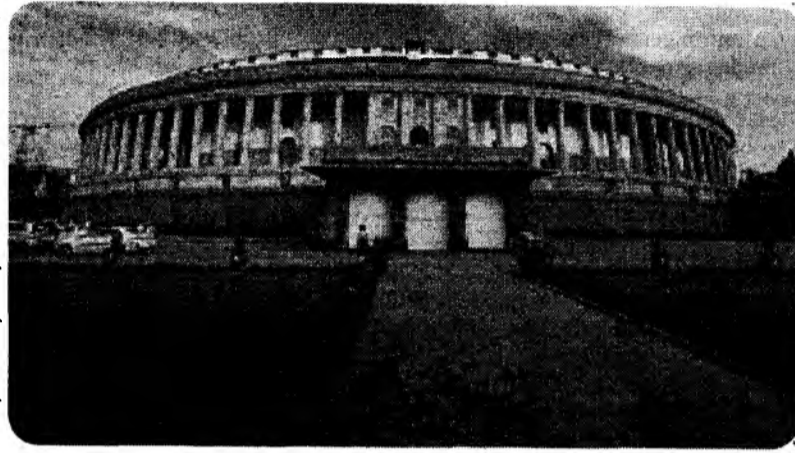
Prior to liberalisation, the Centre's efforts yielded some results with the economic emergence of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh (undivided), and Haryana and helped the hilly and smaller states to stand on their own. But presently, the government has hardly any means of restricting regional imbalances. If it is left on the market forces and in all likelihood imbalances in the standard of living of

people in different states shall reach a crisis proportion. By 2047, some states will be as prosperous as some East European nations while most others will be comparable to some central African nations.

According to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) estimate, the average GDP per head in India, based on purchasing power parity,

along with regional, spatial and gender disparities. Unless the laggard states can increase their incomes, even if the achievement becomes a reality, the development would not be balanced.

India's human development index, which is a composite of incomes, health and education, has been falling rapidly. The nation's current rank is 132 among 191



was \$9,073 in 2023 which came to around Rs 213,215. It is indeed distressing to note that an emerging country like India ranks 127th and is in the league of small and virtually unnoticed nations like Laos (125), Cape Verde (126) and Bangladesh (128).

Undeniably, in the coming years some parts of the country will be more equal than others due to the uneven nature of development. An average person in Telangana, Karnataka or Goa will be having more or less a similar

countries, which indeed is quite shameful since India is aspiring to be among the top nations of the world. A recent UNDP report found that India's economic inequalities in wealth and income to be among the highest in the world, which obviously goes against the concept of inclusive growth. Regionally, states comprising 45 percent of the population contain 62 percent of the poor.

Thus, the importance of the 16th Finance Commission comes into play. Obviously, the poorer states would be

in all states to redress regional development imbalances. Besides, there's the Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana (PMKKKY), launched in September 2015 for the welfare of tribals and tribal areas and others affected by mining. But all these have not had any significant impact in boosting up the said incomes.

India's geographical diversity and different levels of development across regions mean that location specific targeted action would be required in less prosperous regions to ensure a minimum acceptable level of prosperity. The NITI Aayog has a Three-Year Action Agenda which underlined specific action for north Himalayan states, North-Eastern states, coastal regions and islands, desert and drought prone areas. There is obviously the need for implementing this action plan in a diligent and judicious manner.

The belief that giving more funds to the poor states would result in a shift in the composition of India's GDP away from agriculture has not become a reality as movement of labour from agriculture and from rural to urban areas has not taken shape. Thus, the inequality among states remains a big challenge, which needs to be seriously looked into and, it would be better, if the responsibility is given to the Finance Commission to suggest ways of improving the per capita income of the laggard states.

Making agriculture more lucrative through value-addition and setting up agro-based industries may need to be considered. Though there may not be much scope for large-scale industrialisation and thrust on manufacturing in some states, they could concentrate on agro-based and cottage industries as also various types of ancillary products which may have a lucrative export market. Additionally, the electronics and IT sector could set up small hubs in various states as well as small pharma manufacturing centres to meet regional demands.

Economists and financial analysts are unanimous that merely providing funds will not help, unless it's supported by a plan, which the laggard states may be advised to follow. Accordingly, there's an urgent need to frame some mechanism to boost incomes of the non-performing states and bridge the gap. --INFA

"The per head income of states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha is far below the national average. In fact, the per head income of Bengal has been one of the lowest in the country in 2022-23 at Rs 141,373 whereas in Telangana, Karnataka and Haryana it's more than double."

standard like those living in the west, comparable to say today's Hungary or Croatia. Thus, the relative differences in the economic conditions of different states will be more differential than what it is today.

The present determination to make India the third largest economy of the world after the US and China is obviously a positive development. India's per capita GDP increased from \$442 in 2000 to \$2389 in 2022, which is considered quite impressive. But what has been of great concern is the widening inequality in incomes

given a larger chunk of funds compared to the performing ones but this strategy, adopted by the earlier Finance Commission, hasn't yielded expected results. The high growth states continue to make rapid strides in their incomes while only Odisha has shown some promise among the poor states.

Economic justice demands that the Finance Commission allocate tax proceeds in such a way that the rich states subsidise the poor. Then there is the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) which is implemented in 272 identified backward districts

including the United States of America have accepted the ideas of socialism in their policy of giving social security to people like health care and handsome allowance for the unemployed. As a matter of fact, a truly welfare state is more inclined to socialism than far right capitalism. The Indian Constitution has embraced the spirit of socialism in the Preamble and in the Directive Principles of State Policy, "to secure a social order for the promotion of welfare of the people."

Again Sri Aurobindo did not restrict himself by expressing his views against the Nazis but also used his force against it in the Second World War much to the dislike of many people in Pondicherry Ashram in particular and in India in general. They failed to understand why Sri Aurobindo who once suffered at the hands of the British, was opposing an enemy of the British and the Allies. As a matter of fact, many Indians at that time were happy that England was attacked because of their hatred of British domination.

But he clearly wrote in a letter, "Avowedly and openly, Nazi Germany today

stands for the reversal of this evolutionary tendency, for the destruction of the new international outlook, the new Dharma, for a reversion not only to the past, but to a far-back primitive and barbaric ideal (Letters on Himself and the Ashram, Page-215). He followed the second world war in every possible detail from reading newspapers to listening to the news bulletins of the BBC. He did whatever he could spiritually to defeat the Axis Powers. That Nazis used a phobia called antisemitism to kill 6 million Jews in the Holocaust was one of the many reasons to admire his foresight about the dangers of Nazism.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his long poem, Namaskar, "Aurobindo, take the salute of Rabindra." Tagore went on to describe him in the poem as the saviour with the lamp of God. That he really was!

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Victorious Losers...! Something that didn't look too good after the Finals of the World Cup was the way our cricket team and also most of us as a nation behaved as losers. It was pathetic seeing the behaviour of some of the team members as they acted so churlish to the winners and even refused to speak on TV.

We need to train our nation to be good losers even as we aspire to become winners.

Personally, this is not something I find easy to write about, because there have been innumerable times in my own life when I've not accepted defeat well. It isn't easy, especially when you have all your hopes bottled into the idea you are a winner, that you deserve to win, and life is unfair in making you lose.

I was just watching a video of one of the Oscars which took place a couple of years ago, and saw how the host announced the wrong winner of the Best Picture Award: Instead of announcing the prize for 'Moonlight' he announced,

gracefully! As we enter the month of Christmas and remember the Christ child, did we ever ponder and realise that His death at the age of thirty-three and our elections which have just got over have something in common? Was thinking of both these momentous events and realised there's much similarity there.

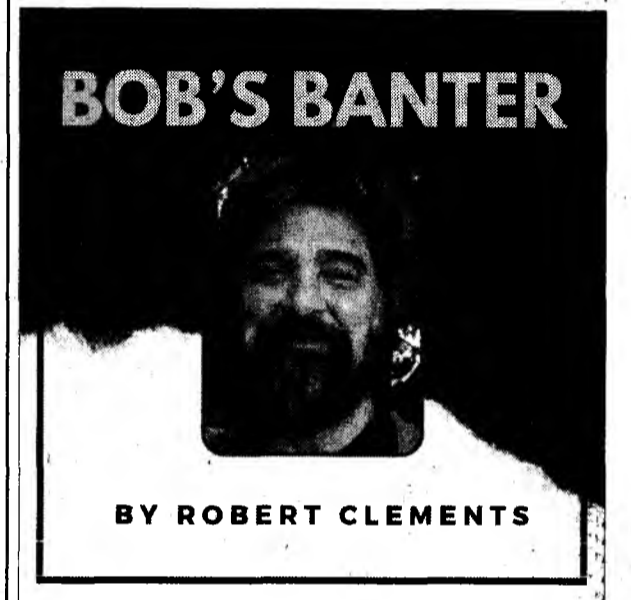
Both events, be it the death of Christ or Voting Day, apart from electing, are about rejecting!

"We don't like you! Good-bye!" say the voters.

The night before he was killed, Jesus was taken before Pilate the Governor of Judea, and Pilate turning to the people asked 'What shall I do with this man?' Which is exactly what the voting booth asks you when you go into the secret chamber to cast your vote!

And the people cried out to Pilate, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Most of the people who, shouted had seen Jesus doing miraculous things: They had,



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

'La La Land'. Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway then presented the award to the producers of the wrong movie. They started delivering the acceptance speech, when the hosts ran up and announced to the startled audience that the wrong winner had been announced and the award should go to 'Moonlight'!

But what was so beautiful was how the producers of La La Land, "gracefully" handed over their trophies to the winning team!

The word is 'graceful'! Can you imagine how they must have felt? One moment victory, the next moment, defeat! One moment absolute joy, the next deep disappointment!

But it's during this moment of defeat the world looks to see how you take it: In fact more eyes are focused on you the loser, then you the winner, and when you are graceful in defeat, you are a winner in the eyes of the world.

Like I said at the beginning, this is not a subject I find easy to write on, because more often than not, I have lost badly and been pretty angry about my defeat. I remember many years ago, twenty-five years ago to be precise, I was standing for the post of area chairman of an international organization. There was a tie, and the outgoing chairman threw his casting vote in favour of the other candidate. I was furious, disappointed and bitter, and till date it is that behavior of mine that my friends remember.

The post was only for a year, but the memories of my angry reaction are remembered to this day.

That's the time you are most vulnerable. That's the time, you have been hit on the head and you want to hit back like a wounded animal, but when you don't, when you get up from the depth of despair and shake hands with your opponent, that memory will remain in the minds of all forever.

As much as we train ourselves to be winners, train yourself diligently to accept defeat!

People may not remember who won the Oscar in 2017 ten or even five years from now, but they'll always remember how a defeated producer gave up his trophy

witnessed him giving sight to blind men, making the lame walk again and even seen him raise a man from the grave; someone who had been given up as dead.

And yet they shouted, "Crucify him!"

Likewise, many candidates in last week's hustings in the four states that went in for voting looked with disbelief at the final results, as they find they have been rejected outright despite projects they have completed, in spite of lifting their constituency out of poverty and even after having worked hard for their people.

They stare with disbelief as the results come in. They realize with horror, they have lost.

But.....the similarity ends there, because Jesus was triumphant through his death.

As you read books of history or religious texts, you may ask what triumph is this we speak of? How can a holy man dragged down the streets of Jerusalem, flogged by Roman soldiers, spat at by the public, even as he carried a heavy wooden cross, be called triumphant and victorious?

How could a man whose hands and legs were pierced with nails onto the cross, be called a winner?

Therein lies the truth: That only through his death could he be the liberator of you and me. That because he died taking on himself the punishment, for all my mischief, wrongdoing and sinning ways, today, I have direct access to God. That this is the beginning of the story of Christmas.

He died to liberate me from the power of evil, and gave me instead, direct access to God's power.

His death was a victory, unlike the elections where a loser bows out. In this case on a Good Friday over two thousand years ago, He was a Victorious loser!

Can we also become victorious losers? Because when we do, the victory we win as the world sees our graciousness will be remembered forever.

I shudder at how I reacted as a loser and I hope the Indian team shudders with me...!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 Email: bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Uniform at St. Anthony's college

Editor,

It is really intriguing that a progressive and highly-rated college such as St. Anthony's College has thought it necessary to introduce uniform for its students from the current academic year. I consider it a highly regressive and undemocratic decision. The logic of imposing uniforms in a college which is inhabited by people endowed with critical and reflexive thinking stems from a certain worldview which wishes to homogenise and standardise. Of course, such a worldview is in perfect sync with the current socio-cultural and political climate which speaks of one language, one culture and one religion which we all know has serious implications for the very idea of India as embodied in our Constitution. This worldview justifies growing restrictions on the food we take, the dress we wear and the way we want to express ourselves stifling creativity and diversity.

While imposition of uniform clearly involves huge

financial implications for students, many of whom may not be in a position to afford it, what is equally important to understand is that it constitutes an attack on the very idea of democracy which celebrates diversity and multiple forms of expressing oneself. The college is the space where critical imagination and questioning spirit need to be promoted. Higher educational institutions should be liberating and empowering ones and not seeking to restrict choices of the students in terms of what they wear and what they eat. Energies should not be wasted in unimaginative and unproductive steps such as imposing uniforms.

In fact, from a larger perspective, the very idea of uniformity in uniform in higher educational should be questioned. Uniformity should be in terms of ensuring high uniform academic standards across different colleges and universities. Instead of focussing our attention on that, it is unfortunate some of our colleges and universities are focussing on uniformity in uniform.

Yours etc.,
Prof. D. V. Kumar, (Dept of Sociology, NEHU)
Via email

Sri Aurobindo the visionary

Editor,

On December 5, 1950, Sri Aurobindo left his body in Pondicherry. He lived in Pondicherry from April 1910 to December 1950. During those forty years, he engaged in a new system of spiritual development which he called the Integral Yoga. As evolutionary progress being central to his philosophy, he let his spiritual force work for it and categorically stated his opinion on many national and international issues.

His far-sighted views on many issues are still relevant and deserve our attention. Now, let us focus on two of them where not only did he declare his stand clearly but also worked for what he viewed would help evolutionary progress.

He had the foresight about the necessity of socialist revolution for our evolutionary progress. He wrote, "There is to be equality of opportunity for all, but also of status for all, for without the last the first cannot be secured; even if it were established, it could not endure (The Human Cycle:

The Psychology of Social Development - page 201). On October Revolution he said to AB Purani that he was one of the influences that worked to make it a success (Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo - Page 474).

We cannot deny the contribution of October Revolution towards human evolution. That brute capitalism made poor children die young after working as chimney sweepers, gives us enough reason to tip our hats to his foresight. Let us recall a line of William Blake's poem, "The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died, I was very young", "So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep."

As a result of the October revolution many socialist states emerged to take care of the potentialities in every human being. Human evolution again discarded dictatorship of the proletariat of socialism as it had earlier thrown out laissez-faire liberty of market players. But contribution of socialism in human evolution can never be denied as modern welfare states have come to balance between liberty of capitalism and equality of socialism.

All modern welfare states

"Quality is not an act, it is a habit."

— Aristotle

The Shillong Times

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Alarming statistics of children smokers

MEGHALAYA seems to lead in some of the worst health indicators. That 96.4% of school going children in the State are into tobacco use is alarming because of the physical and mental health impacts of tobacco addiction. Meghalaya owes a debt of gratitude to a silent group of workers at SAN-KER who have been assiduously trying to create awareness about substance abuse of which tobacco is one. Dr Sandi Syiem and his team at SAN-KER have worked relentlessly in providing care to people addicted to substance abuse. It is also admirable that the Shillong All Faith Forum (SAFF) has, in collaboration with SANKER, taken up the issue of tobacco abuse as a priority.

Studies say that 90% of adult smokers started when they were kids. Hence, it's important for parents to learn all they can and to talk openly with kids early in life about the adverse impacts of tobacco use. Family conversations around these topics should not be "No Go" areas. Kids get their first life lessons from home and parents ought to be the first teachers. Unfortunately, in India parents tend to offload all responsibility, including that of communicating on social values and social skills to the school. This is where things go wrong. Kids learn from their parents. A father who smokes or drinks can hardly tell his child not to do the same. Smoke from burning tobacco contains harmful chemicals (such as lead, arsenic, and carbon monoxide) that can damage all body systems when breathed in. And this affects not only the smoker, but also passive smokers - people who are around the smokers. One chemical, nicotine causes a person to become addicted within days of first using it. In fact, the nicotine in tobacco can be as addictive as cocaine or heroin. Hence once a person starts to smoke, it's hard for him/her to stop.

Health problems linked to smoking include heart disease, lung disease, such as pneumonia, asthma and a host of other diseases. Smoking at a young age is even more harmful because nicotine can harm brain development. It is more difficult for kids who smoke to learn new things as their cognitive domain is adversely affected and they have short attention span. Besides, they are likely to become addicted quicker than adults. Nicotine is also linked to depression and anxiety in young smokers. Several studies show that young smokers are more likely to also try out alcohol and marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or other drugs. Kids might be drawn to smoking for many reasons. Many do it to look cool, act older, to appear tough, or feel independent. This is where parents come in. They can discuss smoking in a way that doesn't make kids fear punishment or judgment. Parents also need to ask the kids for their opinions on what appeals or does not appeal to them about smoking. It is through such non-threatening conversations that kids might be deterred from experimenting with smoking.

RSS's tribal connect helped BJP score hat-trick in 3 heartland states
Rahul Gandhi must transform Congress into a true social justice party

By Arun Srivastava

Hyperbole is one of the chief traits of Narendra Modi. For this reason his latest boast that BJP's "hat-trick" of victories in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh "is a guarantee for a hat-trick in 2024" and that he would get a third consecutive term in power in next year's Lok Sabha election, has obviously not come as a surprise. As the general of the saffron army, it is his duty to boost the morale of his rank, but his proclamation makes it clear that he has little understanding of the ground realities.

It is a very reductive explanation that Modi's magic caused Congress defeat; the loss of Congress has been BJP's gain. An analysis of the share of votes polled by Congress has on the contrary showed an increase in all the states, barring a few minor aberrations. It implies that Congress has not lost out of existing vote share. Instead, it failed to garner more votes to secure victory.

Modi must not nurse the illusion that the INDIA bloc lies shattered without any future. He also must not feel elated that the December 6 meeting to rejuvenate the INDIA could not take off. None of the four prominent movers of the idea of INDIA had boycotted the meet. Instead, the date overlapped with their pre-assignments. It cannot be denied that the leaders of INDIA bloc have no differences. It is there. But certainly not of a magnitude which could not be sorted out.

The high spirits of the INDIA leaders is evident from the tour itinerary of Nitish Kumar, the brain behind motivating the opposition leaders to form INDIA, to Uttar Pradesh, electorally the most important state. He is the tallest Kurmi leader and with launching of a number of schemes and increasing the percentage of reservation quota for the backward castes, he has emerged as the Mandal face of the country. Kurmi population in UP is more than their population in Bihar. The entire eastern UP has an overwhelming percentage of Kurmis.

The BJP is trying to project the postponement of INDIA's December 6 meet as a sign of trepidation. Unfortunately, the Congress leadership, in order to present a brave face and conceal the frustration, has convened the meeting again and did not put out the information in advance. Mamata Banerjee and Abhishek Banerjee have their assigned meets. Tamil Nadu is faced with the worst of nature's ravage due to cyclone and incessant rains. How could CM Stalin leave

the people in the lurch? Bihar CM Nitish and Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren had to fulfil their commitments made before. Mallikarjun Kharge should have given some time to the leaders.

Though for quite some months the Kurmis of UP have been persuading Nitish to contest from UP, recently the Kurmi leaders from UP and Bihar held a close-door meeting and resolved to field Nitish from UP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. In the prevalent political scenario, Nitish is being viewed as the capable leader to become the prime minister. Obviously, for the Kurmis of UP, it is a matter of prestige to have Nitish to represent their aspiration. Nitish will launch his tour to UP with a rally and public meeting from Varanasi, the Lok Sabha constituency of Modi. This is a strategic move to send the message that Modi is not invincible.

Nevertheless, the reality check of BJP's victory in three heartland states speaks otherwise; BJP owes its victory to the RSS. BJP's charismatic leader Modi would not have succeeded in recovering the three states from Congress. It was the strenuous efforts and door-to-door campaign by the RSS cadres and their mission to make the advisasis of the Hindi heartland states to discern their 'Hindu identity' that made them to identify with the saffron and vote for BJP, the saffron mascot.

There is no denying that the Adivasis and Dalits of the three states have massively voted for the BJP, which was why the BJP, notwithstanding other factors, could trounce the Congress in these states. Narendra Modi patting his own back and attributing his charisma and image for the party achieving the hat-trick is purely an exercise in regaining his standing within the RSS and among other BJP leaders and retrieving his slightly diminished ground inside the organisation.

Some leaders nonetheless nurse the view that the chest-thumping of Modi has enraged the RSS cadres and leaders as Modi is seen trying to hijack their hard-won gains. In all the three states, the RSS has been active for a long time. It was the call from Mohan Bhagwat to ensure the victory of BJP in the greater interest of the RSS's future plan and mission that they devoted themselves to.

It is due to the untiring work of the RSS that BJP could secure 17 out of 29 seats reserved for scheduled

tribes in Chhattisgarh in the assembly polls. The saffron party also registered a win in four seats reserved for scheduled castes in the state. The BJP secured the ST/SC seats in Bastar, Surguja, and central plains. Congress which had won nearly 19 ST seats in the state in the last elections could only secure 11 ST and six SC seats. Congress faced a complete rout in Surguja.

The constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes also saw a swing in favour of the BJP. Of the 98 SC-reserved constituencies in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Telangana, the BJP won 57, while the Congress managed 40. In 2018, the BJP had won 32 of these seats and the Congress 45. However, one development was quite noticeable. Average winning margin of the Congress was more than the BJP on these seats. On six seats, it won by a margin of more than 23,000 votes in each seat. The BJP's wins came with a smaller average margin of just over 17,000 votes in each seat. The highest vote share in an SC seat was recorded by the Congress in Saraipali at 59.6%. In Madhya Pradesh, out of 35 SC seats, the BJP won 26 this time, up from 18 in 2018. Congress dropped to 9 SC seats from 17 in 2018.

The Hinduisation of Adivasis in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, is a significant factor that contributed to the tribal vote shifting to the BJP, with leaders of the Sangh Parivar's Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram crediting themselves with on-ground efforts to bring Adivasis into the Hindu fold by making inroads among tribals.

Out of 113 ST reserved seats in MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh & Telangana, Congress won 47 while BJP got 58. Besides, tribal votes were also proved to be decisive in 40 general seats. As per the 2011 census, tribals form 21 percent of the population in the state. Chhattisgarh has a tribal population of 31 percent. The results show that RSS's tribal outreach has worked.

The main thrust of the RSS has been on asserting the identity of the adivasis. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has been consistently harping on 'janjatiya gaurav' (tribal pride) as 'dharma gaurav' (religious pride). His message was precise; "The pride of tribals is the pride of India. Tribals' pride is the core of our pride and our way of living. People should understand this and stand with tribals to protect their pride

for the country, religion, and culture". It is a shrewd attempt of the RSS to make the adivasis accept the RSS line that they were Vanvasis not Adivasi.

Leading dalit protagonist S R Darapuri holds that the RSS calls Vanvasis (forest dwellers) not Adivasis, because calling them Adivasis would create a compulsion to consider themselves as Aryans and Adivasis as non-Aryans (natives). This will destroy the Hindutva model of the RSS which talks about integralism. That is why the RSS is constantly engaged in Hinduizing the tribals. Yet another factor which helped RSS prepare the electoral turf for BJP was its demand for delisting of tribals who had converted to other religions. This appealed to the common tribal people.

Though Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi held a number of rallies and public meetings in the Adivasi belts of the three states, they did not succeed in winning the trust of the tribals. The basic reason was the state Congress leaders never tried to identify with their aspirations. The worst has been the case with the Congress leadership of Madhya Pradesh. Kamal Nath completely ignored the Adivasi, SC and OBC populations and their leaders.

With the Congress leaders of MP and Chhattisgarh prostrating before the Hindu Gurus who openly endorsed the Hindutva Line of RSS, the Adivasis got completely confused. It was interesting to see all the Congress believers in soft Hindutva assembling in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh for electioneering. The Congress leaders in these states had probably forgotten about the slogans of social justice and caste census that the Gandhis espoused.

Rahul Gandhi had promised to radically transform the Congress in a way that "people cannot even imagine". Time has come for him to act. But this does not appear to be happening. He must launch a rectification programme. The naysayers should be shown the door. His succumbing to the pressure tactics of Kamal Nath, Ashok Gehlot and Baghel questions his leadership quality and resolve to rejuvenate the Congress. All these satraps pressured him to nominate the MLAs who faced strong anti-incumbency and were despised by the people. He must induct and promote young pro-people leaders who are not for self-seeking. He must see what Mamata has to say: that the Congress is responsible for the BJP's sweep and poll results would have a bearing on the general election next year. (IPA Service)

It's height of stupidity to see state poll results as North-South divide
Congress must work on corrective measures before 2024 elections

By Sushil Kutty

Musk's 'X', which used to be Dorsey's 'Twitter', is aiding the sharpening of the south-north divide in Hindustan, which is now 'Bharat' north of the Vindhyas, and 'INDIA' south of the Vindhyas. And plenty of barbs keep the pot boiling. One user tweeted, "Hence proved - South is aware and North is still lagging far behind." Another posted "They vote for BJP in the Hindi Belt and then go down to the South for Work." Wow. Rahul Gandhi should undertake another Bharat Jodo Yatra - this time from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

Udayanidhi Stalin and Balaji Senthil did massive harm to the Congress while garnering Dravidian votes in the lakhs for the DMK. That said, the Congress won more

as Uttar Pradesh. Is Himachal Pradesh, which the Congress won against a larger Modi wave, a 'gaumutra state'?

Only a Balaji Senthil would be intelligent enough to answer. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK supremo MK Stalin has a lot to answer. Not too long ago, when Nitish Kumar was going around seeking opposition unity, there was talk of "MK Stalin for Prime Minister of India acceptable to all of India". Now, after Udayanidhi Stalin, A Raja and Balaji Senthil, which north Indian from 'gaumutra states' would vote for MK Stalin, or even Rahul Gandhi for Prime Minister?

The sad part is, MK Stalin cannot make amends. It is too late in the day. Besides, the harm has already been done. Actually, the times, they have

Certain INDI-Alliance stalwarts appear to agree with the DMK's Balaji Senthil that the BJP won only in "Gaumutra states". Don't INDI-Alliance leaders have an inkling that Ayurveda recognizes 'gaumutra' as a panacea for a variety of illnesses? Also, 'gaumata' is revered in glades across the length and breadth of India. Couldn't the excess popular votes that the Congress got be Muslim votes as had happened in Karnataka?

popular votes than the BJP did in the 5-state elections, a la Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump in 2016.

Certain INDI-Alliance stalwarts appear to agree with the DMK's Balaji Senthil that the BJP won only in "Gaumutra states". Don't INDI-Alliance leaders have an inkling that Ayurveda recognizes 'gaumutra' as a panacea for a variety of illnesses? Also, 'gaumata' is revered in glades across the length and breadth of India. Couldn't the excess popular votes that the Congress got be Muslim votes as had happened in Karnataka?

Some INDI-Alliance leaders are convinced that even in the 'gaumutra states', Hindu/

changed since the time MK Karunanidhi, Stalin's venerable father, was Tamil Nadu Chief Minister. The reality is, the INDI-Alliance faces a tough choice for projecting a "PM's face" unless Rahul Gandhi does a "dandavat pranam" to the "north" which had sent him packing from his Amethi pocket-borough to the Muslim-dominated south bastion of Wayanad.

Come to think of it, Rahul Gandhi contesting from Amethi would be an invitation for yet another Smriti Irani victory. Balaji Senthil's idiotic "Gaumutra states of north India" is the albatross round Rahul Gandhi's vulnerable neck. For whatever it is worth, unless there's a Con-

"Come to think of it, Rahul Gandhi contesting from Amethi would be an invitation for yet another Smriti Irani victory. Balaji Senthil's idiotic "Gaumutra states of north India" is the albatross round Rahul Gandhi's vulnerable neck. For whatever it is worth, unless there's a Congress apology, there wouldn't be movement forward for the Congress and the equally hard hit INDI-Alliance."

sanatani voters refused to vote for the BJP. Does that mean that the Congress lost because its vaunted Muslim vote-bank did not shift en masse to the Congress this time as it had in Karnataka? Should we conclude that the mass migration of Muslim votes did not help the Congress in the Hindi heartland?

The concern should be DMK politicians are taking the Congress for granted. Udayanidhi Stalin set the ball rolling and Priyank Kharge committed a self-goal. Isn't Priyank authentic south Indian and, therefore, of above average intelligence unlike Rahul Gandhi who is certified north Indian? All that Rahul Gandhi did was to go down south to secure a Lok Sabha seat, a recourse which Rahul's grandmother, Indira Gandhi, patented. And Indira was a bonafide north Indian, as was her father, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In fact, there are only two things common between Nehru and Modi - both are north Indians who became Prime Minister of India. Fact is, the south-versus-north divide has been coming a long time. Even Maharashtra considers itself as much north

gress apology, there wouldn't be movement forward for the Congress and the equally hard hit INDI-Alliance.

The north-south divide is more pronounced after the latest salvo against the north. It has spun out of control. And the driver of "Hindutva" is no longer the Sangh Parivar, the reins have passed on into the hands of parties like the DMK, which has no clue of the politics played up north; about the negative rhetoric which feeds a particular kind of frenzy that was absent till a decade ago.

The weakening of the Congress and the rise of the BJP are largely to blame. The DMK appears totally unaware of how far Hindu sentiments have travelled since 2014 with the onslaught of Hindutva. In fact, the extent of the "Hindutvaisation" of north India appears to be completely lost on south India. The south also forgets that the Prime Minister of India is selected/elected by "gaumutra states" with "gaumutra votes". The INDI-Alliance was not formed to make Rahul Gandhi Chief Minister of Kerala. Gaumutra states will decide the fate of General Elections 2024. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Touching story of Daphi

Editor,
Salil Gewali's letter in your daily titled "Why Daphi shouts for our attention" (ST November 27, 2023) is a real picture of a farmer's life. Discussed in touching words, the letter has revealed the simplicity of farmers and their hard struggle for the living. Gewali's narrative not only highlights the physical labour of Daphi but also her emotional strength and resilience despite her husband's terminal illness. This is one example, and there are many women living in such difficult situations. The price bargaining by the town people over a small bunch of mustard greens shows their complete lack of appreciation for the labour of poor farmers. Gewali's personal gesture of giving winter clothes and caps to Daphi's children shows empathy and kindness, setting an example for others.

Gewali has effectively used a simple narrative to deliver a deeper message: the need for empathy and respect for the farming community who toil to bring food to our tables. My question is why the leaders are so uncaring of farmers' suf-

fering. Bithon Sangma also in his letter "Give farmers their due," pointed out that leaders just give lip service but do nothing to address the hardships faced by the farming community. There is no point in occasionally purchasing vegetables from roadside vendors and sharing those photos on Facebook and Twitter. Our leaders have no vision. I believe the recent Farmers' Parliament is just hogwash. It will bring no relief to the poor cultivators. My request to the town people is to show your kindness by not exploiting the simple-hearted farmers. There is no harm in giving extra money to them because they will use that to purchase essential food items to feed their children.

Yours etc.,
Marbud Pyrbot,
Mawtneng, Ri Bhoi District

Restricting of road width at Mawiong Rim

Editor,
The indiscriminate dumping of excavated soil at a busy turn of the GS Road at Mawiong Rim in a particular stretch between the Rymbai petrol pump and the Toyota

showroom for some months now has become an eyesore besides restricting the road width of the busy national highway. This random dumping of loose soil which has encroached into the busy stretch of the road has gone unnoticed to the concerned authority for several months now and it has become a free for all in the unloading of excavated materials from construction sites at this particular spot. This highly irresponsible action has clogged the side drain running along the stretch of the road, thereby affecting the flow of rainwater which eventually spills onto the highway leading to a rapid deterioration of the newly laid road surface. Therefore, it is imperative that the concerned department take immediate steps to check such random disposal of rubbish by the roadside which may lead to accidents.

Yours etc.,
Stanley LK Diengdoh,
Upper Nongjri, Umsning

Transgression by two-wheelers

Editor,
The subject as cited above is what I believe many of the residents of our state

have been noticing over several years now since the burgeoning of two-wheelers on our roads and most recently after the fateful accident in Mawlai.

With the overburdened traffic situation in and around the city, commuters have rapidly started commuting on two wheelers. Although it may have advantages (such as avoiding traffic), there is also a downside to it's usage. Users are seen violating certain laws. To be more specific, breaching of 'No entry, locations, over-speeding, their lack of patience and lack of proper documents i.e. a driver's license, and above all, being ill-mannered and adopting a couldn't care less attitude.

This does not only pose a threat to the daily pedestrians but also to themselves. As seen in the most recent unfortunate events, parents should have second thoughts before letting their child own a two wheeler or a car if that child is still under-age. It is also important to implement speed limits that are actually enforced so that all abide by the rules in order to avoid needless accidents and loss of lives.

Breaching of 'No entry' locations should be a punishable offense. As we try to find solutions that would

help ease the traffic, daily commuters have to learn how to adapt to these changes and respect the decisions put forward by localities and the Police department for a harmonious environment. A "hush hush" conversation over this matter won't do much good. It is time to come up with more stringent laws that must be enforced without hindrance.

A humble request also goes to the Police Department to bring back the daily checking of under-age drivers by ensuring that all documents are in order. The residents too should work unitedly for the avoidance of unfortunate events in the future.

Yours etc.,
C. Lyngwa Raptap,
Via email

Justice delayed is justice denied

Editor,
After Stan Swamy, Umar Khalid has become the face of the legal maxim, justice delayed is justice denied. He has already spent over 1,170 days in jail after being arrested in connection with the Delhi riots on September 14, 2020. Given his bail plea has again been adjourned to

January 10, 2024, his stay in jail waiting for justice is going to cross at least 1200 days.

Earlier Stan Swamy, the 84-year-old Parkinson's disease patient, was arrested on October 8, 2020. He moved court seeking permission to allow a straw and sipper on November 6, 2020 so that he could drink liquid. He had to wait for a month to get them on December 4, 2020. But he could not get bail in his lifetime. Ultimately, death liberated him from jail after 9 months of his wait for justice on July 5, 2021.

On the other hand, the half-yearly report of Hindutva Watch, a US-based research project, documented 255 incidents of hate speech gatherings targeting Muslims in the first half of 2023. As per the report, one third of these gatherings explicitly called for violence against Muslims. The judiciary, which is the only institution to redress political bias and excess, is unfortunately overburdened.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"Life isn't about finding yourself.
Life is about creating yourself."

— George Bernard Shaw

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 119 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2023

Terror as target

CLEARLY, the anti-India, pro-Kashmir militancy based out of Pakistani soil is faced with serious odds. The gunning down of high-ranking militant Muhammad Riaz by an unidentified person at a mosque in Rawalakot, close to the de-facto border with India, the Line of Control, took place in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir region. This, curiously, falls into a familiar pattern by now and underpins the security failures inside Pakistan. The Islamic nation can no longer guard its own agents of terror. Riaz hailed from Surankote in Kashmir Valley and "migrated" to the Pakistani side over 20 years ago to organise anti-India militant activities there. The killing might be seen as a 'targeted' attack involving state actors from the Indian side. He was among the prominent militants wanted in India mainly because of his association with Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which together masterminded the 2008 serial attacks on Mumbai that killed over 160 persons. Notably, this was the third targeted attack on militants linked to the pro-Kashmiri militancy in recent times.

The liquidation of Bashir Ahmed Peer, a former commander of Hizbul Mujahideen, took place in the high-security military headquarters city of Rawalpindi in February last. Another wanted militant and commander of the pro-Kashmir Al Badr Mujahideen group, Syed Khalid Raza, was exterminated in the port city of Karachi. This apart, the founder of JuD and LeT, Hafiz Saeed, who camouflages himself under charity and educational initiatives with the bundles of money he took as ransom from the 1999 hijack of the Indian Airlines flight 814, himself narrowly escaped a liquidation attempt at his base in Pakistan last year. Very little is heard about Dawood Ibrahim, the Mumbai-based don who allied with Hafiz in masterminding the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008. He has been under the protection of the Pakistani military establishment after the 1993 blasts in Mumbai that killed over 250 persons. He is still beyond the reach of India thus far.

A similar scenario is developing in Canada, where pro-Khalistani militants are being targeted by unidentified gangs/agencies. The US claims to have evidence to show Indian involvement in the liquidation of some Khalistanis in Canada. The UN and top global players like the US can hardly take such investigations forward as these offensives are seen as part of the global fight against terror. A precedent had been set by the US itself in reaching up to Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, close to the military capital of Rawalpindi, and liquidating him in a covert operation. Notably, however, the US took responsibility for the midnight air raid and Pakistan could not speak a word against it. India effected a few military-induced surgical strikes as well, in Pakistan and Myanmar in the past. The fight against terror continues.

Letters to the Editor

Uniforms for unity, discipline & tomorrow's leaders!

Editor,
In a recent decision that has sparked discussions across social media platforms and garnered attention in letters to the editor, St. Anthony's College has taken a bold step by implementing a uniform policy for its students. This move is commendable, as uniforms play a crucial role in fostering a sense of equality among students, transcending socioeconomic differences. By eliminating visible distinctions in clothing choices, the college aims to create a cohesive and inclusive environment that nurtures a collective spirit and pride in being part of the institution.

The decision holds promise in addressing issues such as peer pressure, as all students will adhere to the same dress code, reducing the impact of fashion trends on the student body. Furthermore, the standardized dress code is expected to minimize distractions in the learning environment, enabling students to concentrate on their studies without unnecessary disruptions. Emphasizing the

importance of discipline and responsibility, wearing uniforms also prepares students for their future professional lives.

While some may argue that uniforms restrict individual expression, the benefits of promoting equality, fostering school spirit, and creating a focused and secure atmosphere demonstrate the multifaceted advantages of such policies. It is hoped that other colleges will take inspiration from this initiative, recognizing the potential positive impact on campus culture and learning environments. However, it is equally important that the same fervor is directed toward discussing pressing issues such as petrol and edible price hikes, unemployment, traffic jams, and the government's challenges in providing basic facilities like ration cards, education, and water supply. Initiating these conversations will contribute to a well-rounded discourse on the challenges our society faces.

Warm regards
A Sarki
Shillong Meghalaya

India must remain a secular nation

Editor,
No kudos is enough for

Farmers' Parliament? Who's Representing Farmers?

By Patricia Mukhim

I begin this article with a disclaimer. It's written with malice towards none but seeks to call out attempts at obfuscating the tangible and often cruel plight of farmers.

Farmers' Parliament in luxury locales

A farmer's parliament in the plush state convention centre is an oxymoron. The very word 'parliament' is misleading but merely because some high-flying consultant came up with this word, it has now become common currency. That's how devoid of thinking we have become here in Meghalaya. By default, a farmers' conference should have been held closer to the farmers' field in the rural outback where farmers are in their elements and can demonstrate their problems in real time. Also in that case only real farmers and not their 'representative/s' would be the attendees; not the well-heeled townsfolk who "represent" farmers. Calling a rural farmer who lives a hand to mouth existence to the State Convention Centre where the lunch prepared was of 5-star quality is an insult to genuine farmers who continue to live at subsistence level. There is an unbridgeable chasm between what is discussed in the Farmers' Parliament and the realities on the ground.

Politics of Representation

In Meghalaya the 'politics of representation' has become a stinking reality. People whose hands have never touched the soil; people with manicured nails and dainty hands remorselessly claim to be farmers. It's true that they have the wealth to acquire farmland and have become absentee farmers whose farms are looked after by underpaid hirelings. But that does not make them farmers because they don't suffer the pangs of losing crops to the vagaries of weather, especially now with climate change being a stark reality.

The politics of representation is the contested space between the subject, the representation of the subject and self-representation. This conceptualisation leads us to ask: is there a right way to do representation? And most importantly, who gets to decide what is 'right'? What is being discussed in the farmers' parliament? Is it the correct depiction and a true representation of the situation on the ground? Are there case studies and evidence of the statistics presented by government officials who took the stand one after the other to make their case that they have done a phenomenal job of addressing farmers'

issues? This "representation" is dangerous because it is aimed at justifying government spending. It is the farmers who know what it means to lose their crops for one of many reasons and the absence of crop insurance schemes because most rural folks still don't have an Aadhar card or a bank account.

Farmers as pawns in the electoral game

Last year around this time farmers were wooed to vote for the ruling party at the time - the NPP, UDP, PDF combine by paying Rs 5000 per farmer with the distant dream that the farmers would pool the amount and do something as a collective. That never happened. The Rs 5000 was used for consumer goods because no one from the Government is really monitoring how the farmers have utilised the amount. In simple language that money became a dole. I am not so sure that they will get a similar dole this year since there is no general election but perhaps they might get something before the Lok Sabha polls in May 2024.

That's what farmers are reduced to not just in this state but across the country. But whereas farmers in other parts of India have a loud and strong voice and can bring any government to its knees, here farmers are "represented" by 'high level' representatives, some with claims of being in several international organisations who are here for a flying visit and who need the 'Farmers' Parliament' to buttress up their CVs, just so they climb further up the ladder of personal achievement by riding piggy back on the poor farmers of Meghalaya who actually don't know they are being led up the garden path. Sadly, there are no critical voices to call out these pretentious self-seekers. One wonders why governments buy these schemes and plans which ultimately turn into incubators of disillusionment.

Who is sitting at the high table?

The presence of the India representative of AstraZeneca while it can give the "Parliament" a leg-up and some credibility, this is an international bio-pharmaceutical research company. One can understand the company's interest in medicinal plants but what is its interest in discussions on agriculture or horticulture or animal husbandry and veterinary? If AstraZeneca was here on a conference organised by the Forest Department

jointly with the ADCs under whose watch the forests and medicinal plants are then one can understand the connection but their presence in a farmer's parliament defies logic unless farmers abandon their traditional farming practices and switch over to growing medicinal herbs. I hope the Organisers of the Parliament would deign to explain this disconnected piece of puzzle.

What's there to celebrate about being a farmer in Meghalaya?

Other than the GI tag for Lakadong turmeric that was recently procured after much effort and due credit must be given to the movers and shakers of this achievement, there's nothing really to celebrate for the small and marginal farmers who are left to lick their wounds after a natural calamity such as unseasonal rain. Since the first Parliament what has been the outcome? What are the success stories on the ground? Is there an orange farmer who has been able to turn the tide of fungal or mildew attacks besides a host of diseases that destroys his whole tree? We see a whole tree dying when we visit the orange orchards in Laitkynsew etc. But other than spraying dangerous chemical pesticides there is as yet no known organic pesticide to heal the trees.

In the third year of the Farmers' Parliament, what has changed since the first one? Are farmers getting their returns for their blood sweat and tears? Is the Government looking after the marketing aspects - the gaps between production and marketing? Should the pineapple farmer also have to process and market the processed product? Where are the marketing agencies? Please don't tell us that MECOFED is a marketing agency. It does that on a very small scale. Most farmers growing tomatoes are under pressure to sell it below the rate at which they would break even. We are buying tomatoes at Rs 80 a Kg from the market. Ask the farmer at what rate he is selling it and then try to bring this challenge to the Farmers' Parliament.

Need for a dedicated Farmers' Market

When we talk of farmers we are not talking of just the successful turmeric farmers who have received adequate assistance from the state and are now well placed to brand and market their products. We are talking of the voiceless farmers that grow radish,

cauliflower, cabbage, potatoes and rice and the myriad problems they encounter. Let these farmers have their say and not be "re-presented" by someone else who does not grow anything other than his/her personal career.

There are challenges galore staring at the farming community in Meghalaya. Have those been listed out? What are the action-plans that Government has in its armoury? Why can't Meghalaya think of creating space for a Farmer's Market in all the district headquarters so that the middle-man who takes away the bulk of the profit is eliminated? In western countries, farmers, especially those growing organic vegetables get a good price for their products.

Dependence on chemical fertilisers & pesticides

In Meghalaya farmers have been tutored that growing anything without chemical fertilisers is non-productive. What we have not looked at is the deep connection between politicians and the chemical fertiliser companies. Such deep-seated corruption in the system where the Agriculture Ministers in the past are known to negotiate deals with companies dealing in chemical fertilisers and pesticides are the bane of this state. But there is none to raise their voice on this! The farmer wants a quick profit from using heavy doses of fertilisers at the cost of the soil. The politician looks for his cut. At the end of the day the soil quality has depreciated so badly that the farmer must rely heavily on fertilisers even while water bodies are poisoned.

Loss of biodiversity and indigenous rice species

And let's look at indigenous rice species. On speaking to the farmers of Ri Bhoi one learnt that we have already lost a lot of indigenous rice seeds by becoming dependent on high-yielding variety of rice seeds provided by Government. These high-yielding varieties of seeds are, however vulnerable to climate change. Some species of the Joha rice which used to be grown in that district are no longer available. They are lost forever. Indigenous species of seeds as found by agricultural researchers are much more resilient and can withstand pests and climatic uncertainties. Does our State Government even care enough to create seed banks for indigenous species of seeds? Was this a talking point at the Farmers' Parliament?

We want answers to the above questions.

PM Modi's meeting with new Maldives president in Dubai significant Modi has to contain 'India out' policy of Muizzu to protect investments

By Girish Linganna

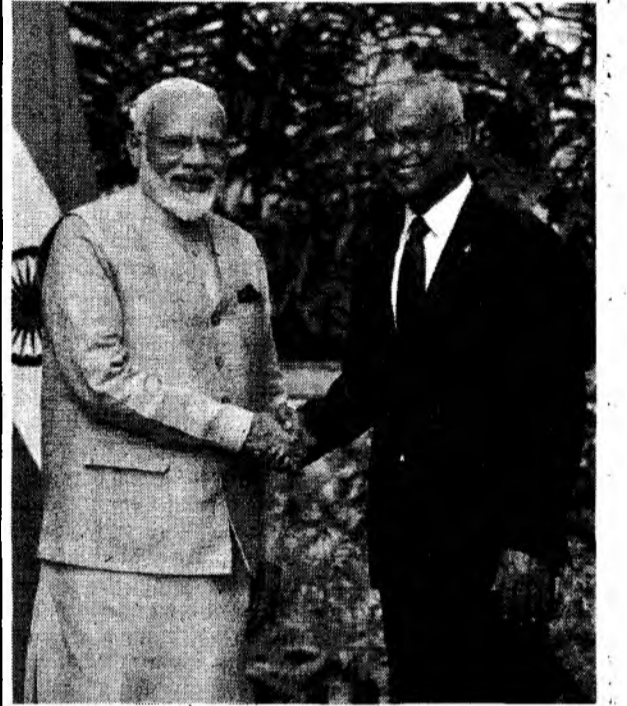
India has, finally, agreed to withdraw its troops from the Maldives, the president of the strategically located archipelago has said, fulfilling a promise he had made to the country's electorate ahead of the recent presidential election in the archipelagic nation. Indian government sources said the two sides had agreed to discuss workable solutions for continued cooperation and that India respects the democratic mandate of the Maldivian people.

A day after he took oath as the eighth president of the strategically located island nation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) last month, Mohamed Muizzu, 45, of the People's National Congress (PNC), had put forward a

the Maldives in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change.

India had deployed its troops in the Maldives in 2020 at the request of the then President, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who was seen as more favourably inclined towards India. The deployment was part of a defence cooperation agreement between the two countries, which also included joint training, maritime security and surveillance.

The presence of Indian troops in the Maldives irked China, which has been expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean Region through its 'Belt and Road Initiative'. China had invested heavily in the Maldives during the tenure of former president Abdulla



formal request to the Indian government to pull out its military troops from the country. India's Earth Sciences Minister Kiren Rijiju, who represented India at Muizzu's inauguration ceremony held on November 17, conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's greetings to the new president and reiterated India's commitment to further strengthen the bilateral cooperation and people-to-people ties.

"Privileged to call on President HE Dr Mohamed Muizzu. Conveyed greetings from Hon'ble PM @NarendraModi and reiterated India's commitment to further strengthen the substantive bilateral cooperation and robust people-to-people ties," Rijiju posted on X (formerly Twitter), after the meeting. Muizzu, on his part, had passed on the request for troop withdrawal to India through Rijiju, whom he met in Malé on November 18. An official statement by the president's office had made the request public.

"The President noted that at the presidential election held in September, the Maldivian people had given him a strong mandate to make the request to India and expressed the hope that India will honour the democratic will of the people of the Maldives," a statement released by the President's office read. "When President Rijiju called on President Muizzu, the President brought up the issue of Indian military personnel present in the Maldives for operating aircraft for medical evacuation and counter drug-trafficking purposes," the statement added.

President Muizzu was elected on September 30, 2023, as a proxy for a pro-China predecessor who had been jailed on corruption charges. He had campaigned on a pledge to evict Indian military personnel from the island nation, but asserted that he would achieve this through diplomatic means.

India holds key maritime interest in the Maldives, a significant neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region and bilateral ties, especially in defence and security, have seen an upward trajectory in the past few years. India has also provided assistance to

Yameen, who was ousted by Solih in 2018. Yameen was later convicted of money laundering and sentenced to five years in prison.

With New Delhi and Beijing both vying for influence in the region, Muizzu's victory marked a significant shift in the nation's foreign policy and raised concerns about the delicate balance of power in the region. Muizzu, who was Yameen's running mate in the 2018 Maldivian presidential election, had accused India of interfering in the internal affairs of the Maldives and violating its sovereignty.

Muizzu recently went on record saying that the Indian soldiers would not be replaced by troops from any other country and his decision in no way indicated that Chinese, or any other country's military troops, would be allowed to be stationed there. He had also vowed to review the defence agreement with India and renegotiate the terms of Chinese loans and projects.

Prime Minister Modi and President Muizzu met for the first time on the sidelines of the COP28 World Climate Action Summit in Dubai on December 1, 2023. They discussed ways to enhance the India-Maldives friendship across diverse sectors, such as economic relations, development cooperation and people-to-people ties. They also agreed to set up a core group to further deepen their partnership. The meeting came days after President Muizzu's request that India withdraw its 77 Indian military personnel from the Maldives and decision to review more than 100 bilateral agreements between the two countries.

The Maldives is India's key maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region and occupies a special place in the Prime Minister's vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy'. The Maldives' strategic importance to India and Muizzu's potential nuanced foreign policy were also highlighted during the meeting. (IPA Service)

(The author is a Defence, Aerospace & Political Analyst based in Bengaluru.)

ify their religious identity. They just lifted them on their shoulders. It was a picture of the secular, inclusive soul of India. This is my India!

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Shocking statistics on children smokers

Editor,

I am shocked to learn through your editorial, "Alarming Statistics of Children Smokers," that in Meghalaya the figure is a whopping 96.4% and even more alarmed that except for a few NGOs no one else, not even the Health Department is initiating steps to arrest this dreaded social menace which can destroy the health and faculties of young and growing minds. Action on a war footing is actually called for from all sections of society to salvage a generation from catastrophe.

Yours etc.,
Tanuj Goswami,
Assam

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model for her students, asked students to hit their seven-year-old Muslim classmate at a school in Uttar Pradesh in August this year. An RPF constable who is supposed to protect rail passengers, killed his supervising officer and three Muslim passengers on a train running from Jaipur to Mumbai in the same month.

A Jawan who is supposed to protect our secular country, was arrested in Kerala for allegedly faking an assault by a banned Islamist outfit for publicity and to get a transfer in September this year. In the same month, a fruit vendor's specially-abled son, Mohammad Isaaq, was tied to an electric pole with saffron cloth and beaten to death in the national capital on the suspicion of stealing prasad from a stall near a temple. The victim was mentally ill and could not provide satisfactory answers when confronted by the attackers.

Amid such horrific incidents the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel rescue act literally made India see the light at the end of the tunnel. After machines failed, the 12 rat-hole miners saved 41 trapped workers by opening up the unyielding mountain debris by their courage, skill, patience, endurance and perseverance. Their heroic act freed 41 trapped workers after their 16-day ordeal

inside the tunnel.

But the rat-hole miners wanted nothing in return as one of them said, "Labourers have saved fellow labourers. May be someday we will be trapped somewhere during work and these rescued workers will save us." The 12 rat-hole miners got enough satisfaction after rescuing 41 trapped workers.

They did not want to know the religion of the 41 trapped workers. The 12 rat-hole miners from Munna Qureshi to Monu Kumar, from Jatin to Nasir Khan, from Feroze Qureshi to Debender Kumar, from Saurabh to Wakeel Hassan, from Irshad Ansari to Ankur and from Naseem Malik to Rashid Ansari gelled as a close-knit family to make the seemingly impossible become possible.

The 12 rat-hole miners worked at a stretch for nearly 24 hours squatting inside a narrow steel pipe of 800mm diameter on their toes, crouching as low as possible with their knees folded to clear the debris to rescue the 41 trapped workers from the tunnel.

Amid the cloud of hate campaign and lynching, those 41 plus 12 workers show us a silver lining. When the 41 trapped workers first saw the rescue team of 12 rat-hole miners, they did not look at their clothes to iden-

"Love cannot save you from your own fate."

— Jim Morrison

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 120 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2023

Mohua Moitra expelled from Lok Sabha

TRINAMOOL Congress MP, Mahua Moitra was expelled from Lok Sabha on Friday in the cash for query case after the lower house voted in favour of her expulsion. The motion was put to vote by Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla after the Parliamentary Ethics Committee's report was tabled and discussed in Parliament. The Committee had recommended Moitra's expulsion. Considering that the BJP has a rude majority in the Lok Sabha this was only to be expected. Barring 4-5 MPs, none spoke in support of Moitra. Mohua Moitra was accused of asking questions to target Prime Minister Modi in relation to favours granted to businessman Gautam Adani. Moitra it is alleged was acting at the behest of another Dubai-based businessman, Darshan Hiranandani. Allegations are that Hiranandani gave her expensive gifts and also repaired her Delhi residence. In a volte-face Hiranandani gave an affidavit accepting the charges which Moitra claims was got from his under duress which is that Moitra demanded expensive gifts as a favour for asking pointed questions in Parliament to target Adani.

Much before the Ethics Committee headed by BJP MP, Vinod Sonkar had submitted its report, Moitra had accused it of targeting her personal life which amounted to character assassination. She had even walked out in the middle of the Committee's deliberations. It remains to be seen as to what action Mohua Moitra contemplates following her expulsion. According to Constitutional expert and former Secretary General of the Lok Sabha, PDT Achary, Mahua Moitra has the option of challenging the decision in court based on three primary grounds: the denial of natural justice, gross illegality, and the unconstitutionality of either the House's decision or the Parliamentary Committee's process. Achary pointed to Mohua Moitra's request for the cross-examination of individuals, which was not conducted. He also referred to Moitra's allegations of 'filthy questions' posed by the Ethics panel and the walkout by Opposition MPs, noting that despite these issues, the report was prepared.

Achary is of the opinion that Moitra could argue the denial of natural justice based on these instances. Moitra's other option is to invoke Article 20, which speaks of the disproportionality of the punishment in relation to the offence. Stating that there are no rules or provisions in the Information Technology Act which prohibits the sharing of passwords and that many MPs do not submit questions in their personal capacity but give out their passwords in case their constituents wish for important questions of national importance to be raised in Parliament. TMC MPs have cried foul and called Moitra's expulsion the 'death of democracy' since the proceeds of natural justice have not been followed. Moitra was not allowed to defend her case in Parliament. Hiranandani, the businessman whose evidence is imperative in this case was never questioned. This is clearly another instance of the BJP riding roughshod over parliamentary procedures to teach anyone who dares to question the Prime Minister or any of his crony capitalists, a lesson they will remember. In the past, protesters against the CAA and other issues too have been languishing in jail, thereby sending out a clear signal that any dissenting voice will be silenced either by unleashing the Enforcement Directorate on them or by arresting them under different sections of the law. Clearly this government is out to silence all dissent inside and outside Parliament.

COP28 ignores impact of militarization on climate change

By Dr. Arun Mitra

Cooperation and human security should be at core of decision-making

It is welcome that over 80,000 participants from around the globe have gathered in Dubai to deliberate on the strategies to mitigate the climate crisis which if not checked would be catastrophic. The event is happening at a time when just at a distance of 2600 kilometers an appalling humanitarian crisis is unfolding as a result of bombing on the innocent civilians by Israel in Gaza. This has killed over 16000 Palestinians of which 70% are women and children and it has caused total destruction of the infrastructure making the people homeless.

Any military activity adds to the climate crisis. It is by now well known that military activity is estimated to contribute 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. In recent years we have witnessed substantial increase in military spending world-

million tons of CO2, as much as Belgium produced in the same period.

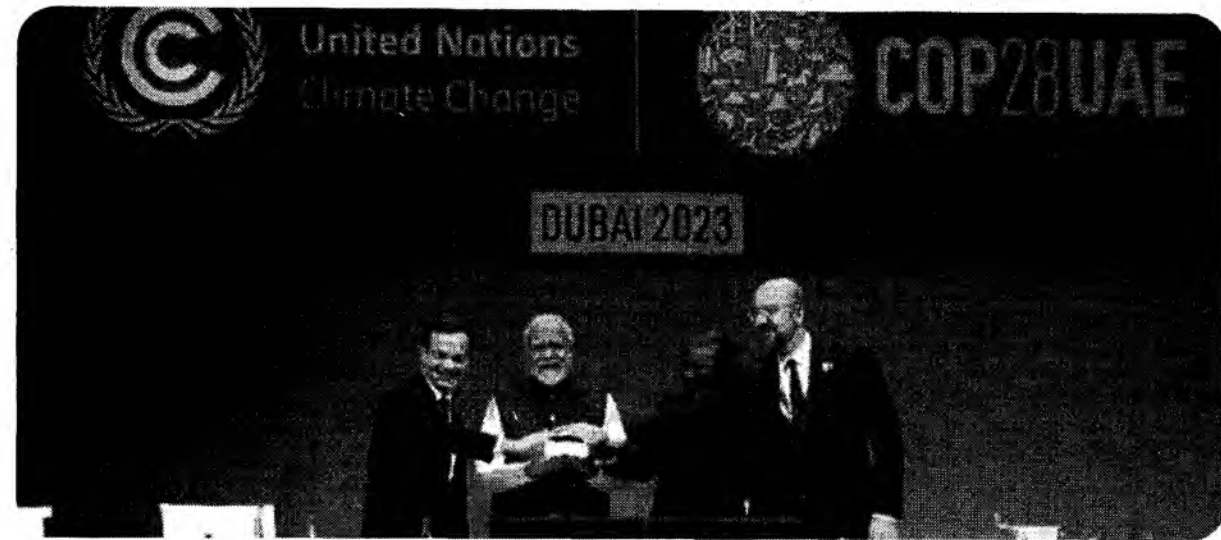
This emphasises the urgent need for concerted action to be taken both to robustly measure military emissions and to reduce the related carbon footprint - especially as these emissions are very likely to be growing in the wake of the war in Ukraine and Israeli aggression in Gaza.

It is therefore imperative that disarmament should have taken a front seat during the deliberations at COP28. The last COP27 failed to issue any statement on disarmament and it appears that a similar end result will be there this time too. However this time some organisations including the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) made it a point to highlight this issue, if not

and Alan Robock from the Department of Environmental Sciences, Rutgers University, USA has pointed out that the present nuclear weapons present on earth pose a serious risk to climate and thus risk to all life forms. A nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan using 100 Hiroshima size nuclear weapons would put two billion people at risk; Any Nuclear exchange between the major nuclear powers could be end of modern civilization built through thousands of years of human labour. Soot and debris injected into the atmosphere from the explosions and resulting fires would block sunlight from reaching the Earth, producing an average surface cooling of -1.25°C that would last for several years. Even 10 years out, there would be a persistent average surface cooling of -0.5°C. This will

of cost-effectiveness and output and is hence out dated. Therefore it is required that the world ceases the creation of new nuclear power plants, enact the rapid phase-out of nuclear energy generation, and shift to a just renewable energy transition.

We need to cut emissions by half by 2030 to stay within the 1.5 degree limit and thereby ensure planetary and human health. UN Secretary General's video message on Glaciers from the Mount Everest Region "We must act now to protect people on the frontline and to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees, to avert the worst of climate chaos" speaks of billions of people's voices around the world who knowingly and unknowingly are being adversely affected as a result of climate crisis. "This is a sickness only you, global leaders, can cure," he said, calling on the leaders to end the world's dependence on fossil fuels and to fulfil



wide. Presently it is higher than ever. In 2022 world military expenditure rose to \$2240 billion out of which \$82.9 billion were spent on nuclear weapons alone.

The reporting on military expenditure by the governments is always a secret matter and there is no transparency in reporting the military related activities for the 'security reasons'. Dr Stuart Parkinson and Lindsey Cottrell of the Scientists for Global Responsibility and Conflict and the Environment Observatory respectively, in a study 'Estimating the Military's Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions' point out that if the world's militaries were a country, this figure would mean they have the fourth largest national carbon footprint in the world - greater than that of Russia. Researchers found that the first 12 months of war in Ukraine accounted for 119

in the main forum, at least on the side lines among the participants.

It is strange that a declaration was adopted at the COP28 calling upon the nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in the health sector swiftly, sustainably and substantially. This has happened when as compared to 5.5% of total emissions by military activity there is generation of 4.4% by the global health care sector. Whereas the military activity is meant to kill, the health care sector is to sustain life.

The IPPNW has further warned that continuation of wars could threaten the use of nuclear weapons which would be catastrophic. A study, "Climate Consequences of Regional Nuclear War" by Ira Helfand former Co-President International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

reduce rainfall globally by 10% and lead to crop failure further leading to starvation and deaths.

It is therefore important that the COP28 should give a call for complete abolition of nuclear weapons and promote negotiations to encourage the nuclear weapons possessing countries to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

When there are talks of shifting to non-fossil fuel sources of energy, there is a lobby within the COP28 which speaks on the importance of nuclear energy. This is a false and dangerous narrative. Nuclear power is no solution to climate change; it has serious health consequences and increases the risk of nuclear proliferation. Nuclear power is expensive and unreliable, is losing importance relative to overall electricity production, lags behind renewables in terms

the long overdue promise for climate justice.

That on the opening day of COP28 delegates reached a deal on the operationalization of a fund for loss and damage to help the world's most vulnerable countries pay for the devastating impacts of climate disaster is a welcome step to an extent. This is however not the final solution. This leaves a lacuna for developed countries to move ahead but leaves the developing world behind in the race of development for its own citizens.

The global arms race threatens health and the climate. Disarmament and demilitarisation can help finance climate mitigation. Cooperation and human security should be at the center of politics and decision-making. The COP28 should at least form a commission to discuss the issue in detail for the COP29. (IPA Service)

Constructing a Himalayan challenge

By Ashwin Pundalik

Frequent landslides, the Kedarnath tragedy, a sinking Joshimath and the most recent Silkyara tunnel collapse are among the disasters that have kept the spotlight on the Himalayan region and the debate about the dangers of construction in this fragile mountain terrain. The Himalayas are young and still under the mountain forming process or orogeny, resulting in stability issues and complex geological conditions. A situation which in this case is also aggravated by earthquake occurrences as it is an active seismic zone. These have led to the question repeatedly being asked, "how safe is it" to construct here.

It is a situation and a question that India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan, countries located around these mountains, are constantly confronting. However, balanced with the need for roadways, tunnels, hydropower projects to harness the continuous water supply from perennial snow-fed rivers, there is no let-up in construction here.

Drawing attention to the hazards involved is the latest event, Silkyara. The Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel was being constructed as part of the Char Dham project, which is intended to connect the Char Dham pilgrimage sites with two-lane, all-weather paved roads. The tunnel located on the Yamunotri end of NH134, connects Dharasu with Yamunotri.

"The construction of this tunnel will provide all weather connectivity to Yamunotri, one of the dhams on the Chardham Yatra, encouraging regional socio-economic development, trade and tourism within the country," said a Press Information Bureau release announcing clearance of the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs chaired by the Prime Minister in February 2018. The tunnel was approved as part of the Chardham Mahamarg Paryojana, the PIB release said. The little over 4.5km long tunnel shortens the route by about 20 kilometres and travel time by about an hour. On November 12 while work was in progress a section of the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel collapsed trapping 41 construction workers inside. As everybody now knows, after a rescue operation that lasted 17 days and drew global attention, all 41 workers were safely rescued.

The tunnel cave-in has raised multiple questions about the reasons for the collapse. There have been many media reports on the collapse and often a recapitulation of earlier events. But most of them have made vague and generalised statements about the Himalayas being a 'young' and 'fragile' mountain chain and the terrain being 'unsuitable' for large infrastructure projects.

Many media reports have also blamed 'tectonic faults' for the collapse. However, these are generalisations and such reports do not provide a good understanding of the geological setup which is extremely important in comprehending the reasons for such mishaps. An understanding of geology would offer an insight into what went wrong and help prevent such occurrences in future. So, in cases like the Silkyara-Barkot tunnel, a better approach is to look at the local geological picture rather than making general remarks about the fragility of the Himalayan-mountain chain, which doesn't really convey anything significant.

The tunnel passes through the Garhwal Himalaya, west of Uttarkashi. This region is characterised by multiple superimposed thrust faults. The most important among them is North Almora Thrust, which

is known for neotectonic activity and earthquakes. The North Almora Thrust itself is displaced by two steeply inclined, near vertical tear faults known as Koteswar and Barkot Faults which are close to Barkot. The broad lithology (general type of rocks) of this area consists mainly of metamorphic rocks such as phyllites and metavolcanic rocks.

These rocks are known as the Chandpur Group in stratigraphy which is the branch of geology concerned with the order and relative position of strata and their relationship to the geological timescale. According to geologists, these metamorphic rocks are tightly folded, cut by faults at places, foliated and the foliation has a steep dip (38 to 550). It is not known for sure whether the tunnel cuts across a major fault, but it probably passes through the tightly folded and deformed metamorphic rocks.

A geological report before the commencement of the Silkyara tunnel project has shown that the proposed tunnel could encounter weak rocks and adequate support structure would be needed to prop up the weak rocks.

According to the report, the "rock type to be encountered along the diversion tunnels would be 20% good (Class 2), 50% fair (Class 3), 15% poor (Class 4) and 15% very poor (Class 4)". The report has also highlighted the possibility of wedge failure or rotational failure in the tunnel. When rotational failure occurs, the failed surface will begin to move outwards and downwards. It occurs when rotation by a slip surface causes the slope surface to curve.

This draws attention to the need and extreme importance of detailed geological investigations in such situations. A detailed geological mapping followed by several exploratory drill holes and detailed core-logs help in deciphering the lithology and structure of the location and safety/precautionary measures, if any, can be put in place. This is followed by RMR (Rock Mass Rating) classification of the rock types which assigns ratings to the rock mass based on properties such as the number of discontinuities (such as fractures) in the rock, spacing between discontinuities, nature of the fractures, groundwater, and rock quality designation (RQD) index. RMR classifications help in understanding the possible behaviour of the rock and then engineers can decide the kind of construction and precautionary measures that need to be put in place.

Speaking about the tunnel project, in an interview to a newspaper, Prof. Navin Juyal, a prominent and respected geologist, has said "First of all if the 4.5 km road tunnel project in the sensitive Himalayas region was taken up based on this geological report, it is insufficient. One cannot know the type of rocks by just three exploratory drillings. Further, the report clearly says there was no very good quality rock in the area where the tunnel was being built. Only 20% of rock is of good quality, the rest is fair and poor and very poor. The report admits that the area was not geologically stable." This statement clearly points out and highlights the need for a meticulous geological survey, besides geological investigations, before undertaking any construction project in terra infirma like the Himalayan-mountain chain. A number of such disasters could have been avoided if local geology was understood or warnings from experts had been heeded.

(Dr. Ashwin Pundalik is a noted geologist) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Outsourcing of recruitment process at NEIGRIHMS

Editor, NEIGRIHMS had recently released various posts for recruitment. However, the candidates have received their admit cards with the exam city and centre just 3 days before the exams. Many of our local candidates have even been allotted exam centre outside the state. I fail to understand how an institute like NEIGRIHMS cannot arrange for exam centres in and around Shillong for local candidates. I also fail to understand how an institute that has its own examination department and Controller, must outsource the recruitment process to an outside agency from outside the state. Further, I fail to understand how, even if it is outsourced, NEIGRIHMS cannot make proper arrangements for the local candidates. Moreover, such short notice of 3 days announcing the examination centre makes it difficult for candidates to travel to the exam centres outside the state, or for those studying and working elsewhere in the country.

NEIGRIHMS must take this seriously and ensure that sufficient exam centres are set up in the state, otherwise it would be better to hold offline examinations. I am forced to believe that there is something shady about the whole examination process and that there are hidden motives, either for selfish gain or an attitude that is

anti-local. Yours etc., Amia Kharthomi, Shillong

NEIGRIHMS and exam centres

Editor, Once again, NEIGRIHMS has released the admit cards and centres for examination for various post. But what is discouraging is that the same thing that happened with the Nursing examination is being repeated all over again. Candidates from Meghalaya again are given centres outside the state in spite of the fact that they have applied very early. Is there some reason behind this decision of the Director? Various organization like Staff Selection Commission (SSC) SBI, ICAR, IBPS etc., successfully conducted Computer Based Test (CBT) on many occasions for thousands of candidates on a regular basis. It seems like NEIGRIHMS Director is taking people of the state for granted. I applaud the Institute for having centres outside Meghalaya for the sake of other candidates from the rest of the country but people from the State should not have to go outside since the Institute is located in the state.

Also, there are posts in which there are overlaps i.e. exams being held on the same date and same time (Assistant Accounts Officer and Junior Accounts Officer) which means that a candidate who is qualified for both posts would have to forfeit

either one but had already paid for both posts. Other posts like LDC, Accounting Assistant and Record Clerk might also overlap for some candidates. For an Institute which is supposed to be at par with AIIMS this is unacceptable. The Director of the Institute should rectify the problem as soon as possible. I request all stakeholders to take up the matter. This is not the first time and it certainly won't be the last if not intervened.

Yours etc., R. Lyngdoh, Concerned candidate, Via email

Maintain the sanctity of Parliament

Editor, It was expected that the recommendation of the Ethics Committee of Parliament vis a vis the Mohua Moitra case would be tabled on the very first day of Parliament but it was tabled on the last day of the first week of Parliament. During the discussion only 4 or 5 members participated and the Speaker gave a ruling for expulsion of Mohua Moitra. It is notable that the present Speaker followed the practice adopted by previous Lok Sabha Speaker Som Nath Chatterjee.

There is an unmistakable perception, not without basis, that Moitra is being cut h down to size for her unrelenting attack not only on Prime Minister Narendra Modi but on his proximate relationship with billionaire industrialist Gautam Adani.

Moitra has repeatedly called this out on the floor of the House. Her party colleagues have been rather silent as are many others. At the meeting of the LS Ethics Committee, which called her for questioning and oral evidence before it probed Dubey, Moitra claimed that the chairperson Vinod Kumar Sonkar, BJP MP, read out "undignified questions" which focused on her personal details and seemed, in her words, "an orchestrated cheerharan designed to humiliate," her. She and Opposition MPs on the panel walked out.

This is unfortunate and condemnable. The Committee has a solemn duty to not only get to the truth but also appear fair and just. Instead, it appears to have acted like a bunch of overgrown boys who have been given the license to demean and debase a woman, that too an elected representative. This is yet another reminder that rank misogyny and sexism exist in every nook and corner of our society, in our hallowed institutions such as the Parliament, and women are seen as fair game all over. What is as shameful as the panel's behaviour is the stunning silence from the women of the BJP who are otherwise loud about their gender agenda. Speak up, women.

The personal and the political can intersect in illuminating ways in Indian politics. The charge of cash-for-query is undeniably serious: it is a breach of privilege and is tantamount to contempt of the House. Probity is synonymous with Parliament and parliamentar-

ians and any transgression, if proved beyond doubt, should attract punitive action. But the enquiry must also be fair and transparent. Conflicting political motives must not be permitted to influence the panel's investigation and subsequent decision. Already, Ms Moitra has alleged that the Privileges and Ethics branch of the Lok Sabha has exhibited double standards: Ms Moitra's request for an extension in appearance was denied, even though such a privilege was given to a BJP parliamentarian in connection with another case. The panel must be immune to prejudice, respect Ms Moitra's privacy.

The outcome of the proceedings will be known in time. But the panel's decision, whether in favour of Ms Moitra or not, should not deflect attention from the questions that the TMC leader has been raising consistently in Parliament against the Adani Group. Those questions need to be answered as well because they pertain to alleged irregularities committed by the business group that not only have economic and ethical ramifications but also raise the spectre of crony capitalism.

But the episode involving Ms Moitra should not become that diversionary tool. To maintain the sanctity of parliament Mahua Moitra has been expelled from the Lok Sabha after fulfilling the proper norms as prescribed under the rule book of Parliament.

Yours etc., Yash Pal Ralhan, Via email

Opium wars

Editor, Meghalaya going 'aggressive' against drugs will be a long war ahead. Past operations against couriers or mules have not stopped the inflow of contraband in the state. A recent example of the Noida seizure shows how the metrics of supply and demand have triumphed over law enforcement.

The vexed South Asian corridor of the Golden Triangle (Thailand, Burma and Laos) and the increasing intensity of Golden Crescent (Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan) are complex geo-political problems involving power players within government, warlords, military and judiciary once headed by the CIA under orders from Washington. Roberto Saviano in his book 'Zero Zero Zero' outlines the dangers of capitalism in the world of narco-trafficking and Shillong is definitely slipping like Central America shadowed by rival cartels.

The current MDA government should at a multi-pronged approach such as rehabilitation of addicts, tackling social problems like poverty to lack of opportunities and drug education programs which could curtail the dragon.

Yours etc., Christopher Gathphoh, Shillong-10

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

THE HOLIDAYS AND OUR BRAIN

- A neuroscientist explains how to identify and manage our emotions

Just as the shift to shorter days and colder weather can bring with it mood swings and other emotional challenges, the holiday season can also bring about somewhat predictable changes in mood and behaviour.

Around this time of year, many of us experience more stress, anxiety and frustration than usual. These stressors have been linked to higher levels of heart failure and alcohol poisoning and an increase in deaths from stroke.

Learning how to recognize what brings about stress and what parts of the brain are actively involved can help with managing the stress response.

Biologically speaking, there are ways to manage our responses to holiday stressors through awareness of why they happen.

Harnessing the hypothalamus

Delays in itineraries, crowded airports and congested highways can easily lead to frustrations for those travelling to spend time with family or friends.

One region of the brain involved in your response to these types of stressors is the hypothalamus, a structure deep in the brain that is involved in trying to keep the body in a stable state, known as homeostasis. The hypothalamus works to regulate the autonomic nervous system, a system that coordinates involuntary responses such as heart rate, blood pressure and respiration. It is the key component of the fight-or-flight response to real or perceived threats.

When you are under stress, such as when you learn that your flight has been delayed or even cancelled, your hypothalamus stimulates the release of stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine.

These hormones in turn trigger physiological responses like increased heart rate, perspiration

and feelings of irritation and frustration.

When you experience these stressors, deep breathing exercises can help stimulate the body's parasympathetic nervous system. This is known as the "rest and digest" system because it is responsible for helping your body relax and recover from stress. By taking slow, deep breaths, you can engage the parasympathetic nervous system, which can in turn calm your nerves and reduce frustrations.

Family dynamics and interactions

Getting together with family during the holidays can bring about complicated emotions when there are conflicting personalities, unresolved issues or awkward family dynamics.

Frustrating or aggravating conversations with relatives often trigger a region of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex. The anterior cingulate cortex has a unique position in the brain, establishing connections with both the "emotional" limbic system and the "cognitive" prefrontal cortex.

This brain region is involved in monitoring and regulating cognitive processes, conflict resolution and error detection. It plays a role in processing frustration by signalling when there is a conflict between expectations and outcomes.

The anterior cingulate cortex is also involved in what's known as action-outcome learning, where you evaluate the consequence of an action and adjust your behaviour based on feedback.

When you are feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, taking short breaks to step away from the situation can provide a fresh perspective and allow you to return with a clearer mindset.

This break will allow you to reinforce this action-outcome learn-



ing, helping you learn to associate an action - a short break - with the outcome of the action, which is more relaxed breathing and a clearer mind.

Financial worries

The holiday season can put an unnecessary burden on those who are experiencing economic or financial hardship. The cost of hosting a holiday meal, buying gifts or travelling can contribute additional financial strain during an already stressful time.

The brain region primarily associated with memory and learning is the hippocampus. When you recall past experiences, such as how much you spent last year during the holidays or remember that the credit card bill is coming soon, you activate your hippocampus. The hippocampus is critical in the interplay of memory formation and recall and retrieval of individual episodic memories.

Some ways to reduce stress may

be to make gifts for friends and family instead of purchasing them. To help cut down on travel costs, perhaps take a virtual holiday visit now, followed by an in-person visit later when it is less expensive or when financial strains have eased.

When reminded of stressful experiences, the hippocampus sends signals to the hypothalamus and other brain regions to help restore balance in your mind.

The hippocampus also aids in your adaptation to these stressors by helping you learn how to adjust your expectations. In the end, you have to remind yourself that it truly is the thought that counts most.

Loneliness and isolation

Feelings of isolation and loneliness can arise for those of us who may not have family or friends to celebrate with, or perhaps are unable to travel to see those we love.

This is where the "default network" of the brain plays a role. This network, made up of brain

regions including the amygdala, is involved in thoughts of future planning, reminiscing and imagining. The amygdala is a part of the limbic system and is associated with processing of negative emotions to stimuli, such as the irritation from not being able to travel, and how you react.

Studies have shown that you can help improve your mood and reduce feelings of frustration and irritation by having a regular exercise routine. Physical activity can be an effective outlet for releasing built-up tension and stress.

Aerobic exercise can also modulate connections between and within the amygdala and help reduce feelings of depression.

As an added bonus, if you work out in a gym or park, you have an opportunity to be around others, which can help you feel more connected with communities of people with similar interests.

Political discussions

Family gatherings can lead to discussions about current events or politics, which can result in heated debates and disagreements among family members. These conversations can be very frustrating and even upsetting, especially in today's polarized world.

The prefrontal cortex is an area of the brain involved in impulse control, decision-making and emotional regulation. It plays a crucial role in assessing certain situations, such as supercharged conversations, and it helps you evaluate and consider your potential actions and temper your emotional responses. Understanding what triggers your frustration in these situations is crucial to developing proactive strategies to manage or avoid them.

For instance, this might take the form of empathizing with the opposing side or perhaps stepping away from the table when voices start to rise or you feel your emotions building.

The prefrontal cortex plays a dual role in regulating the relationship of your initial emotional reaction and the shift to your empathetic emotion. Your ability to build empathetic perspectives and increase cognitive control helps to further develop your prefrontal cortex, potentially making it easier to de-escalate the next time around.

One step at a time

Reducing frustration is a gradual process, and different strategies work for different people.

It is important to identify the root cause of your stress and frustration so that you can develop your own targeted coping strategies. Some examples include engaging in a hobby, listening to music, going on a walk or run, or simply practicing relaxation techniques.

It is essential to experiment with various techniques and not be afraid to move away from ones that don't work and toward ones that do.

The most important thing to remember is that retraining your brain is more of a marathon and not a sprint. It will include trial and error and open-mindedness, but if you focus on identifying your triggers and adapting your own coping strategies, it will almost certainly get better with time. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 10, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

On your solar return chart Moon semi-sextile Mars and will provide long-term options and excellent career opportunities. Efforts will pay off immensely as you combine logic and force. You tend to concentrate on self-nurturing as well as nurturing those close to you. It is a time to honor your roots, stabilize your home life, and build the connections you have with the family. It is also a favorable time to open up conversations with loved ones. This period augurs well for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Short trips, and other forms of communication to connect to others appeal strongly.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives. You are likely to see benefits and improvements in the areas of work and health, as well as daily routines. Your ability to handle the details required to do a good job is significantly enhanced and others increasingly become more aware of your skills. Benefits may come through co-workers or employees during this period. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success. There would be cooperation and understanding in professional and relationships. You might pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You would always be willing to work all the more harder to meet your new responsibilities. Your love life has been erratic for some time, and this trend continues. You could find that you invest in real estate. You would also bring a more playful environment to your home. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) The planetary configuration of this phase brings good results. Any type of service that you may provide is likely to go well. You are more successful in hiring people to work for you and improvements in your working environment are likely. You find more enjoyment in the work you do, and it is easier than usual to find employment now. You may get a new job during this period. Others will derive more enjoyment from the current job. Work tends to be very easily accessible to you. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. Practical matters are a large focus and are very strong. More security in your job is likely. You are more willing than usual to work diligently for money, and your natural talents are likely to be utilized more in the work you do and appreciated by others. You would enjoy some time in your family and there you find affection and love. This is altogether a happy and relaxed time for you. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Communication, creativity and authority in professional matters are highlighted as an exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion is possible. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You are ready to perform and express yourself and take charge and responsibilities on your shoulders. This is a very significant period when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. Romance could make you think along serious or practical lines and look to a more committed relationship.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be marked by hard work. Financial success may not be remarkable, yet it is generally steady, if slow

to come by. Matters of personal courage, confidence and independence are emerging. Issues surrounding income from foreign sources could also figure at this time. You should be careful not to over-analyze your relationships. You feel on top of things with good health and positive energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Turning a hobby or favorite pastime into a career could also figure. Partnership ups and downs continue to persist, as you struggle with matters of freedom and dependency. Children may require more discipline or attention. You may also bring more creativity into the work you do. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Good financial returns are on the cards. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You may visit religious places and strong feelings towards religion are enhanced. You learn to look inside of yourself with a newfound clarity and realism and ideally draw up considerable strength from within. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) The planetary combination opens new horizons in your romantic and love life. You would pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds. You are bound to experience your fair share of fun, and good times. Creative projects are likely to fare well, and could possibly even bring some type of recognition. Love and romance may enter your life or is enhanced with good humor and warmth, and social engagements abound. For singles, meeting a special person is highly likely. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or health programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would be more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Investments in stocks and other speculative matters could earn tidy profits, although care should be exercised with any dealings that tie you to other people and others' money. Your creativity and social life are stimulated, and plenty of opportunities to express yourself uniquely and creatively will present themselves. Relationships with your children may be especially fulfilling now. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be strong.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This is a fabulous period in which to take the vacation you have always wanted to take. Those with artistic or athletic talent can be especially prolific and prosperous at this time. You may find great joy and reward in your creative projects and hobbies, and could discover a new hobby or creative talent you never knew you had. Healthy risks are likely to pay off, but be careful of overconfidence in speculative investments. Pleasure-seeking activities, recreation, and amusement are increased. Health is likely to prosper.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You may visit and spend a lot of time in the company of your friends and loved ones. This is also a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. These positive circumstances will not necessarily fall into your lap, and are unlikely to come all at once. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life.

From yoga to dieting, how to deal with bone health problems in winters

The various activities we engage in throughout the day, whether it's walking, running, sitting, dancing, or climbing stairs, place demands on our bones and joints. Winter, in particular, can pose challenges to their health, especially for individuals dealing with conditions like arthritis.

It becomes crucial to prioritise the well-being of our bones and joints during this season. Vitamin D levels often decline in winter due to reduced natural sunlight exposure. Given the significance of Vitamin D in maintaining bone health, its diminished absorption from dietary sources during this period can contribute to the potential deterioration of bones and joints. It underscores the importance of proactive measures to support bone and joint health, particularly in the winter months.

Nutrient-Rich Foods for Robust Bone Health

The constant cycle of bone regeneration, with new ones forming and old ones breaking down, is a dynamic process in the body. During youth, this turnover is accelerated due to higher bone mass. However, as one ages, if proper maintenance of bone mass is neglected, it can lead to conditions such as osteoporosis. To fortify and sustain bone health, incorporating the following nutrient-rich foods into your diet is essential:

Milk & dairy products: Dairy products are rich in nutrients that are essential for good bone health, including calcium, protein, vitamin D, potassium, and phosphorus. Sustaining optimal calcium levels in the body is crucial, and a recommended approach is the consumption of fortified foods rich in vitamin-D is the key. At least three glasses of milk, especially if it serves as the primary calcium source. For those who find plain milk unappealing, incorporating it into smoothies or adding flavours can be a palatable alternative.

Spinach: Spinach emerges as a nutritional powerhouse, boasting a diverse array of essential nutrients, including calcium, iron, vitamins, and various minerals. When crafting your weekly nutrition plan, incorporating spinach into at least one daily meal proves beneficial. The versatility of spinach opens avenues for diverse culinary creations. From crafting nourishing spinach soup and flavourful vegetables to sandwiches and incorporating it into parathas, there are numerous delectable ways to make this nutrient-rich green a staple in your diet.

Nuts & Seeds: Opt for nutrient-packed alternatives when reaching for snacks during your free time. Ditch the junk and embrace the health benefits of seeds and nuts. Some of the highest calcium in seeds like sesame seeds, chia seeds, hemp seeds, pumpkin seeds, flaxseeds, lotus seeds, Brazil nut, and pistachio. Other calcium rich nuts are almonds; walnut, pecan and chestnut contribute to preventing osteoporosis. Incorporating a

handful of these nuts into your regular diet not only satisfies your snack cravings but also provides essential nutrients that support bone health.

Green Veggies: Elevate your bone health by incorporating a variety of green vegetables into your diet. Collard greens, okra, beetroot greens, broccoli, kale, Brussels sprouts, mustard greens, and turnip greens stand out as excellent choices. These seasonal veggies not only cater to your calcium needs but also contribute to maintaining bone strength. A notable advantage is that, unlike spinach, these greens are rich in absorbable calcium.

Beans and Lentils: Achieving a balanced and healthful diet involves incorporating a mix of lentils, beans, and whole grains into your daily meals. Beyond promoting bone health, this combination provides a wealth of proteins, vitamins, minerals, and a diverse array of nutrients essential for overall well-being. Moreover, the inclusion of legumes and whole grains contributes to maintaining heart health, highlighting the comprehensive benefits of this nutrient-rich combination in fostering a robust and thriving body.

Soya Beans: Soybeans, renowned for being a valuable protein source for vegetarians, also play a noteworthy role in promoting bone strength—an aspect often overlooked. Beyond incorporating soybeans, diversify your diet with other soy-rich products tailored to your taste preferences. Options such as soy drinks, soy milk, and tofu present versatile and delicious ways to introduce the benefits of soy into your meals, contributing not only to protein intake but also enhancing overall bone health.

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana or Upward Facing Dog

This weight-bearing pose actively engages and strengthens the muscles in the arms and legs, promoting increased bone density. Additionally, the elongation of the spine in the pose contributes to better posture and spinal alignment, fostering overall spinal health.

Setubandhasana or Bridge Pose

This pose actively engages and strengthens muscles along the spine, fostering better spinal health and alignment. Serving as a weight-bearing exercise, it stimulates bone-forming cells, particularly in the spine, hips, and thighs, contributing to enhanced bone density.

Utkatasana or Chair Pose

Utkatasana, commonly known as Chair Pose, is a dynamic yoga posture renowned for its potential to enhance balance and structural strength. Additionally, it has been suggested to offer relief for minor conditions such as shoulder stiffness and minor leg and foot deformities. *(ANSLife)*

Newly-elected MLAs take oath as 3rd Telengana Assembly begins

BJP MLAs, however, stayed away from the House, alleging that AIMIM MLA Akbaruddin Owaisi was appointed as Pro Tem Speaker in violation of rules

HYDERABAD, Dec 9: The first session of the third Telangana Legislative Assembly began here on Saturday with the oath taking process of the newly-elected MLAs getting underway.

The BJP MLAs, however, stayed away from the House, alleging that AIMIM MLA Akbaruddin Owaisi was appointed as Pro Tem Speaker in violation of rules.

Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy was the first to take oath, followed by Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhathi Vikramarka.

The House was adjourned to December 14 after several members took the oath.

Before the commencement of the session, Akbaruddin Owaisi was administered the oath by Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan as the Pro Tem Speaker at the Raj Bhavan and he presided over the proceedings in the House.



Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy and other leaders during the launch of free medical facility under Rajiv Arogya Padha - Cheyuta and Schemes, in Hyderabad, on Saturday. (PTI)

Owaisi was appointed as Pro Tem Speaker though there were other senior members in the House, Union Minister and state BJP president G Kishan Reddy alleged. "There is a tradition of a senior person being appointed as the pro tem Speaker in the Assembly. The BJP opposes the appointment of AIMIM's

Akbaruddin Owaisi as Pro Tem Speaker as per an understanding (of Congress) with AIMIM," Reddy told reporters.

Observing that the Congress has only a wafer-thin majority in the Assembly, he claimed that the government is faced with a situation of collapsing even for a small

pretext.

In view of this, the AIMIM member is made the Pro Tem Speaker as per a plan, he alleged.

"Because of the violation of the legislative Assembly's rules, we are opposing the appointment of the AIMIM person as the Pro Tem Speaker. Therefore, our members are boycotting taking oath with him in the chair," he said.

The Congress has begun its appeasement politics and violation of the traditions of legislative Assembly just three days after assuming power, Reddy alleged.

He pointed out that the BJP has already claimed that there is a tacit understanding between the Congress and the AIMIM.

During the recent election campaign, it was alleged (by Congress) that the BJP and AIMIM were one. Now, Telangana people should know

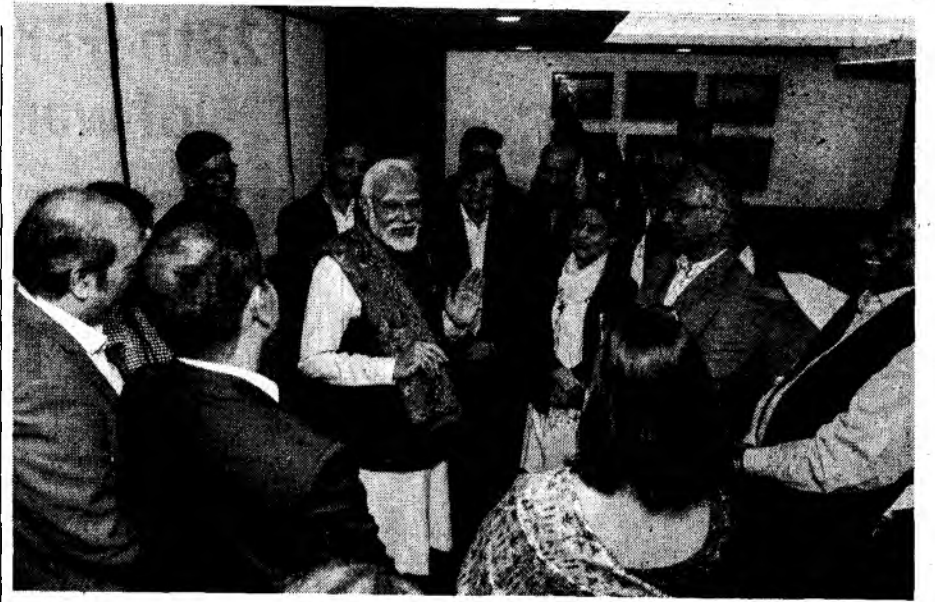
on what criteria Owaisi has been made Pro Tem Speaker in violation of rules; Reddy said.

The true colours of the Congress have come out again, he said.

The BJP would like the election of the Speaker to be held after the appointment of a senior member as Pro Tem Speaker.

The BJP MLAs would take oath after the regular Speaker assumes office, Reddy said.

The BJP MLAs later submitted a memorandum in the Raj Bhavan requesting Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan to set aside the nomination of Akbaruddin Owaisi as Pro Tem Speaker. As per the constitution, Article 188, a senior most member in terms of number of years in the Assembly be nominated as the Pro Tem Speaker, the BJP MLAs said in the memorandum. (PTI)



Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a discussion with PTI CEO and Editor-in-Chief Vijay Joshi (R) and other PTI head of departments, during an hour-long visit to the news agencies headquarters, in New Delhi, on Saturday. (PTI)

PM Modi says women one big caste, warns against attempts to create rift

NEW DELHI, Dec 9: In a swipe at opposition parties, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday cautioned women against "divisive politics" seeking to split them and said they are one big "caste" who can take on any challenge together.

"All women should remain together. Nowadays, some people are creating rift among women... All women have one caste which is so big that they can together take on any challenge," he said while interacting with women beneficiaries of the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY).

An official statement later added that he cautioned women to be aware of divisive politics seeking to create a rift among them.

The ruling BJP has assiduously courted women voters with several welfare schemes, some surveys have shown that they have voted for the party more enthusiastically in a number of state elections.

Modi's comments are seen as a swipe at the Congress and other parties which have been pushing for a caste census while the prime minister has asserted that the poor, women, youths and farmers are the four biggest castes whose progress will lead to a developed India.

He made the remarks while interacting with Priyanka Yadav from Darbhanga in Bihar as she noted as to how a number of welfare schemes of the central government helped her family tide over the financial crisis following the Covid-19 outbreak as they received free grain and cash benefit as well. He urged her to create awareness about government schemes in her village and expressed satisfaction that the "Modi ki Guarantee" vehicles is reaching every village in the country.

He stressed that any welfare scheme must reach every beneficiary for it to be successful and said such programmes were earlier

confined to papers and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Asserting that the recent assembly poll results have made it clear that "Modi's guarantee" resonates among people, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said some political parties do not understand that they would achieve nothing by making "false announcements".

In his remarks after interacting with the beneficiaries of the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra, Modi asserted that it is necessary to win people's hearts before winning elections and it is not right to underestimate people's wisdom. "We have established a direct relationship, an emotional bond between the central government and people of the country. Our government is not a 'mai-baap' government but a government that serves mothers-fathers. The manner in which a child serves his parents, in the same way this Modi works to serve you," the prime minister said. (PTI)

National nuggets

One held in Gogamedi murder case

JAIPUR, Dec 9: A man was arrested here for allegedly contracting shooters to kill Shri Rashtriya Rajput Karni Sena president Sukhdev Singh Gogamedi, the state police chief said here on Saturday. Jaipur Police Commissioner Biju George Joseph said Ramveer Jat, one of the conspirators in the Gogamedi murder case, was arrested on Saturday. Ramveer Jat is from Sureti Paliyan village of Mahendragarh district of Haryana, he said. Gogamedi was brazenly gunned down by two men, alleged to have been identified as Nitin Fauji and Rohit Rathore, on Tuesday. According to the police, Ramveer Jat had prepared the groundwork for Nitin Fauji, his friend, in Jaipur ahead of the killing. After the incident, Ramveer Jat took to road with Nitin and Rohit on a motorcycle and got them on a Rajasthan Roadways bus. (PTI)

Gang carts away ATM with Rs 26.58 lakh

LATUR, Dec 9: Four to five persons, including one wearing a tiger mask, stole Rs 26.58 lakh from an ATM machine in Latur in Maharashtra, a police official said on Saturday. The incident took place at 1:50am on Friday in Shirur-Tajband on Nanded-Bidar highway, Assistant Inspector Balaji Totewad of Ahmedpur police station said. "They tied the ATM machine with a cord and uprooted it by pulling it with a four wheeler parked by them outside the kiosk. They carted away the ATM with Rs 26.58 lakh in the four wheeler. One person was wearing a tiger mask, while another had a cap, muffler and gloves," he said. (PTI)

Kota schoolgirl hangs self

KOTA, Dec 9: A 15-year-old schoolgirl allegedly hanged herself from the ceiling fan of her room in Babu Colony here, police said on Saturday. The reason behind the suicide by the class 10 student of a government school is yet to be ascertained. According to police, Nikita Koli returned home after school Friday afternoon and went to her room, where she hanged herself from a ceiling fan with her 'chunni'. Nikita was rushed to MBS Hospital where doctors declared her brought dead, police said. (PTI)

Cash seizure in tax raids shows how Cong has kept tradition of corruption alive: BJP

NEW DELHI, Dec 9: The seizure of cash from some premises linked to Congress MP Dhiraj Prasad Sahu in Income Tax department raids shows how the grand old party has kept the tradition of corruption alive generation after generation, the BJP said on Saturday.

A huge pile of cash has been recovered so far in the searches conducted by the Income Tax department against Odisha-based Boudh Distillery Private Limited and entities linked to it. Premises linked to Sahu were also covered as part of the searches, according to officials.

The seizure amount is expected to reach Rs 290 crore, making it the "highest-

ever" black money haul by any agency in a single operation, official sources said Saturday.

At a press conference at the BJP headquarters, party leader and Union minister Meenakshi Lekhi said, "The cash seized from Sahu is the biggest haul of cash that has been seized from corrupt persons so far. This shows how the Congress has spread corruption generation after generation and the tradition of corruption has been kept alive." "Rs 300 crore recovered from just one Congress leader and counting is still on. Imagine if all the corrupt leaders of Congress are kept together, how many notes will be recovered," she said.

Congress leaders keep looking for the loopholes in the system to see how it can be manipulated for corruption, she added.

Lekhi said Sahu is a three-term Congress MP in Rajya Sabha from Jharkhand and claimed that he is "quite close" to former Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

"My question to Rahul is what was a person like him doing in your Bharat Jodo Yatra. He made him MP thrice. My question to Sonia Gandhi is how she allowed this person, who lost twice in Lok Sabha elections, to be elected to Rajya Sabha three times," the BJP leader said. They have "a lot of things to explain," she added.

"Generation after genera-

tion the tradition of corruption has been kept alive. And when you see the Congress family tree, it seems like family tree has branches made of corruption," Lekhi charged.

"When Rahul says blood is thicker than water, all I can say is that ink on the fraudulent contracts is what he is speaking about because that definitely is thicker than any other corruption," she added.

Lekhi alleged that the Congress leaders works like ATMs. "Whose ATM was Dhiraj Sahu, a liquor baron who has involved in deep corruptions and an amount of Rs 300 crore plus has been found," the BJP leader asked. (PTI)

ISIS module leader among 15 agents nabbed in Maha, K'taka, says NIA

NEW DELHI, Dec 9: In a massive crackdown on the ISIS terrorist organisation, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Saturday arrested its 15 operatives during multiple raids across Maharashtra and Karnataka, an official said.

The arrested accused included the leader of an ISIS module who was administering 'bayath' (oath of allegiance) to new recruits, a spokesperson of the federal anti-terror agency said.

Several NIA teams swooped down on as many as 44 locations in Padgha-Borivali, Thane, Mira Road and Pune in Maharashtra, and Bengaluru in Karnataka early Saturday morning, and apprehended the 15 accused for allegedly promoting terror and terror-related acts and activities of the

proscribed organisation, the official said.

Huge amounts of unaccounted cash, firearms, sharp-edged weapons, incriminating documents, smart phones and other digital devices were seized during the raids, conducted as part of the NIA's ongoing efforts to disrupt and demolish the attempts of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as Islamic State, to carry out violent acts of terror and take innocent lives, the spokesperson said.

The official said the accused, operating on the directions of their foreign handlers, had been actively involved in various terrorist activities, including fabrication of improvised explosive devices, for furthering the violent and destructive agenda of the ISIS.

"The investigations have revealed that the accused, all members of the ISIS Maharashtra module, were operating from Padgha-Borivali, where they had hatched the conspiracy to spread terror and carry out acts of violence across India.

"Pursuing the path of violent jihad (holy war), Khilafat, ISIS etc., the accused had aimed to disturb the peace and communal harmony of the country and to wage a war against the Government of India," the spokesperson said.

The official said Saqib Nachan, the main accused and the leader of the ISIS module, was also administering 'bayath' (oath of allegiance to the Khalifa of ISIS) to the persons joining the proscribed organisation. (PTI)

BSP suspends MP Danish Ali

NEW DELHI, Dec 9: The Bahujan Samaj Party on Saturday suspended its Lok Sabha member Danish Ali for "anti-party" activities.

In a brief statement, the party's Uttar Pradesh unit said Ali, the MP from Amroha, has been suspended for anti-party activities.

The move comes a day after Ali walked out of Lok Sabha proceedings along with other opposition members on Friday to protest against the government's motion to expel TMC member Mahua Moitra for "unethical conduct".

Other Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) members remained seated in the House. Ali has been actively joining opposition ranks in attacking the BJP and its policies even though the Mayawati-led BSP has maintained a distance from the ruling alliance as well as the opposition. (PTI)

Students suffer burns as teachers force them to pour hot oil on each other's palms in Chhattisgarh school

RAIPUR, Dec 9: In a shocking incident, few students of a government school in Chhattisgarh suffered burn injuries on their palms after they were reportedly forced to pour hot oil on each other's palms as an act of punishment. The incident was reported from a school in the tribal-dominated area of Bastar region. While some reports said at least 25 students suffered burn injuries, the District Education Officer put the figures at five.

After lunchtime on Friday, a few teachers found that someone had relieved himself outside the toilet in the school premises. When they questioned the students,

the latter couldn't speak out of fear. This made the teachers furious and they decided to punish the children in their own way. The students were asked to stand in a queue, while the class monitors were directed to pour hot oil on the palm of their classmates.

The parents, however, have alleged that the teachers compelled the students to pour hot oil - collected from the mid-day meal kitchen - on each other's palms. As per reports, there were more than 70 students present during the incident. Meanwhile, Kondagaon District Education Officer Madhulika Tiwari said that blisters were

Incident was reported from a school in tribal-dominated area of Bastar region. Sources said at least 25 students suffered burn injuries

formed on the palms of five students. Claiming that the school monitors committed the act, and the oil used was 'not that hot', she also denied reports that 25 students sustained burn injuries in the incident.

"Since the incident took place during school hours, the teachers are responsible for it. Therefore, we have suspended three teachers - Johri Markam, Mitali Verma and Poonam Thakur," she added. (IANS)

'There should be no politics on SC's judgment on Article 370 petitions'

SRINAGAR, Dec 9: There should be no politics over the Supreme Court or its judgment on petitions challenging the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution and its verdict should be respected by the entire country, BJP's Jammu and Kashmir unit chief Ravinder Raina said on Saturday.

The Supreme Court is scheduled to pronounce its verdict on December 11 on a batch of petitions challenging the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution which bestowed special status on the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The remarks of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader came in response to a reporter's question on PDP president Mehbooba Mufti's comments that it seems there is a "fixed match" as the Jammu and Kashmir police is planning to detain her party workers ahead of Monday's verdict.

"There should be no politics over the Supreme Court or its judgments as it is regarded as contempt of court. The courts of the country are supreme and there is nothing higher than that. I am sure that Jammu and Kashmir as well as the 140 crore people of the country will respect the decision by heart and

accept it," Raina told reporters here.

He said the entire country respects every decision of the Supreme Court. "Whatever decision the Supreme Court takes on the issue of Article 370 will be respected by the entire country.

The Supreme Court heard the matter online, a bench headed by the chief justice of India heard the matter and gave an opportunity to both sides. We will accept and respect whatever decision the court takes," Raina said.

Expressing hope that the Supreme Court judgment on Article 370 will meet the expectations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, Ghulam Nabi Azad-led Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) on Saturday flayed the BJP-led government for delaying assembly polls and restoring statehood to the Union Territory.

"Our party is fully confident that the apex court's verdict will do justice with the people of Jammu and Kashmir and address their expectations, sentiment and also take into account their welfare," DPAP general secretary and former minister R S Chib told reporters here. (PTI)

Marital rape not an 'offence' if wife is 18 or above: Allahabad HC

PRAYAGRAJ (UP), Dec 9: The Allahabad High Court has observed that marital rape cannot be considered an offence under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) if the wife is above the age of 18. The court made these remarks while acquitting a husband of charges of committing an 'unnatural offence' against his wife.

While holding that the accused in this case cannot be convicted under Section 377 of the IPC, the bench of Justice Ram Manohar

Narain Mishra stated that marital rape has not been criminalised in this country as yet. The High Court also noted that since the petitions seeking the criminalisation of marital rape are still

pending before the Supreme Court, there is no criminal penalty for marital rape when the wife is 18 years of age or older until the top court decides the matter.

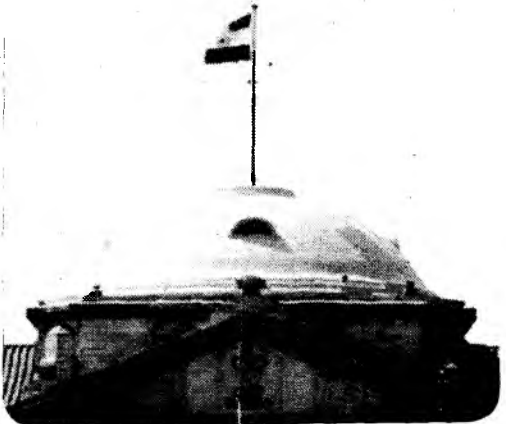
The Allahabad High Court, endorsing a previous observation of the Madhya Pradesh High Court, also stated that there is no place for any 'unnatural offence' (as per IPC Section 377) to

take place in a marital relationship.

In her plea, the complainant alleged that their marriage was an abusive relationship, and the husband allegedly subjected her to verbal and physical abuse and coercion, including acts of sodomy.

The court convicted him under sections related to cruelty by the husband or relatives of the husband (498-A) and voluntarily causing hurt (IPC 323) while acquitting him of charges under Section 377.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court agreed to list pleas to criminalise marital rape. The Central government had submitted before the top court that criminalising marital rape would have "social ramifications". (IANS)



"The best preparation for tomorrow
is doing your best today."

— H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Raids and seizures

OCCASIONAL raids and seizures of huge sums by Income Tax and other central sleuths make big news. So too with the haul of around Rs 300 crore from premises linked to Congress Rajya Sabha MP, Dheeraj Sahu in his home state of Odisha and also from Jharkhand and beyond. The seizures were punctuated with a statement from Prime Minister Narendra Modi that, "every penny looted from the people will have to be returned and this is Modi's guarantee." The high-sounding claims of the Prime Minister in relation to black money hauls do not match the ground realities. So much water has flown down the Ganges through these years and the overall scenario vis-à-vis sway of black money has only turned from bad to worse. Worse, those cornered in such raids had not learnt any bitter lesson. The well-heeled have argued their cases and managed to wriggle out of problems.

The income tax raids on Congress leader DK Shivakumar in Bengaluru made repeated headlines and huge sums had been seized from premises linked to him. Shivakumar argued the case, won subsequent elections and runs the present government there as deputy chief minister. Income tax raids linked to Andhra Pradesh's Chandrababu Naidu's close aides unearthed huge sums when he was chief minister. He not only remained unperturbed but also banned central agencies from entering AP for investigations. Like Naidu, Mamata Banerjee too got the central agencies out. Modi could only grin and bear with such situations rather than wielding the stick effectively. Investigations linked to some other opposition chief ministers by the central agencies too failed to reach a climax. Cases are going on and on for several years with able "assistance" from legal mechanisms too that often put a spoke in the wheels of justice by way of interpretation of law. Law, it would seem, has no teeth when it comes to dealing with the high and mighty. Cases drag on for decades in the guise of investigations and trials.

The point to ponder is what difference has Narendra Modi as Prime Minister made to strengthen the systems that have rusted over the years and developed so much of vested interests to even sabotage cases. The haul of over Rs 300 crore from a Congress politician is not an isolated case. Such amassing of black money is happening across the country despite the roll-out of new checks and balances. The big question is also how the BJP spends huge sums in election campaigns through hidden modes. The electoral bonds that fund elections for the BJP and beyond public scrutiny. The ruling party is therefore insulated from scrutiny by central agencies. Selective amnesia or aggressiveness in law enforcement coloured by political interests is as condemnable as a state of absolute lawlessness.

Letters to the Editor

Why adopt NCERT textbooks?

Editor,
The news item "Move to adopt NCERT books ridiculous: Mukul" (ST December 4, 2023) should be an eye opener for the present Government. I fully support the views of Dr. Mukul Sangma (Ex-Chief Minister). Any citizen of Meghalaya should be proud of MBOSE which came into being 50 years back in 1973. The MBOSE deserves all praise and appreciation from every quarter be it the public or the Government for its remarkable contribution towards education.

For the last 50 years, the MBOSE has worked tirelessly to cater to the needs of students of the state in particular. The textbooks adopted or being used under MBOSE are good enough although there may be scope of improvement under varying environments from time to time, the same holds true for any other boards textbooks too.

Meghalaya has a good number of well qualified and able authors/writers to write text books for its students by incorporating the culture, history and uniqueness of the state. The role of the state government should be to provide adequate upgradation to the authors/writers of text books by holding workshops under able experts which

may be imparted through government agencies or concerned departments. This would surely improve the state education system rather than adopting text books of other boards.

It is indeed said to note that the Government is not showing any trust on the abilities of the MBOSE and also the state authors/writers of text books.

The Government has a large role to play in setting up of higher educational institutions as lack of these higher educational institutions has been adversely affecting the students of the state who are compelled to move out to avail the education of their choice. In the process students from poor backgrounds are left behind. It is indeed a sorry state of affairs that despite more than 50 years of statehood Meghalaya has till date failed to set up a medical college of its own. The Government, if it is really serious, should act on this.

Finally echoing similar views as that of Dr. Mukul Sangma, I too like to request the Government to drop the idea of adopting other boards textbooks. Instead it should support its own education board i.e., MBOSE and the homegrown authors/writers of text books by providing valuable suggestions and guidelines as we need to be self-reliant.

Yours etc.,
Suman Chakraborty,
Via email

The Strength of the State is its Uniqueness

By HH Mohrmen

It is a proud moment for Meghalaya when the Lakadong turmeric, the pride of the State, received the Geographical Indication tag. As a concerned citizen of the Jaintia region of the State, this scribe has been following and raising questions about Lakadong's legal entity for many decades. In March 2021, in this same column, the issue was raised again. At that time, the challenges cited by the concerned officials were related to the name of the plant. They mentioned the difficulty of tracing the origin of the crop due to two villages in the West Jaintia hills sharing the same name. In a recent meeting, Comingone Ymbon, Cabinet Minister, and MLA of Shangpung, stated that Lakadong in Shangpung means male earring. Despite the controversy, this long-overdue news comes as a pleasant surprise. It is also heartening that along with Lakadong turmeric, Garo Dakmanda (traditional dress), Larnai pottery, and Garo Chubitchi (alcoholic beverage) were also awarded the GI tag.

Our strength is what we have, and it is ours too
Lately, the Government and its people have shown a penchant for things from outside; things foreign or belonging to others. We have festivals named after plants brought from outside the State or even the country. However, plants like 'Tiew rakot/Syntu tymmoh phare' - the pitcher plant, different varieties of orchids, Latuthing/Latuthiñ rhododendron arboreum, and others, which are exotic and endemic to the region, have not been considered by the Government. These flowers are not only special to the area, but they are also very beautiful and much more attractive than other flowers, with a close connection to the people of the area.

Forgetting our Local Ale
Our fascination with foreign things is also evident when the Government enthusiastically promotes winemaking from local fruits, which is praiseworthy. Unfortunately, rice beer "Sadhia and Yndem," a traditional beverage made from the fermentation of rice, is forgotten by the Government. Despite its significance in certain religious rites, which people still perform today, and its use in indigenous religious rituals, the

making of this ale is considered illegal except during festivals. If winemaking is promoted, it is high time that the Government also promotes the production of local rice beer and helps improve its production.

Ignoring Local Mushrooms
The Government should also be commended for promoting the growing of shiitake mushrooms, which has been practiced in Japan since time immemorial. However, it is not yet known how many farmers have benefited from this initiative. There are more than 20 varieties of wild mushrooms in the State, and farmers also cultivate button and oyster mushrooms. However, the government has not done much to promote these mushrooms. It is surprising that, although button mushrooms are more profitable, only the cultivation of oyster mushrooms, and not button mushrooms, is popular in the region. The question is, why is the Government ignoring these important delicacies that grow abundantly in the State? There is one variety of mushroom in the region similar to Shiitake. In fact, the same process can be used with Tit tung, which grows on tree trunks. Any farmer will know that Tit-tung grows on the trunk of 'dien sniñ', and in some places, if they find a tree trunk with mushrooms still growing on it, they will bring it home and keep it in the bathroom where it is wet and damp - conditions favorable for the mushroom to grow thereby enabling them to have a regular supply of mushrooms. Copying from the process of growing Shiitake mushrooms, the Government through the horticulture department only needs to do a simple study and then promote the same process among farmers. It is time for the Government to look into this process, which is already a tradition in some areas of Meghalaya and make it available for the farmers.

NCERT books and children's disconnection from their roots
One crucial news item that appeared in the media last week was regarding the issue of prescribing NCERT books for schools in the state. Former Chief Minister of the State Dr. Mukul Sangma raised this pertinent question

about adopting NCERT-prescribed textbooks in their entirety without considering the local context. It is easy to copy-paste from available sources than to take the trouble to come up with what is relevant for the kids. However, in the process, we are denying the future the opportunity to know about their roots. When one does not want to scratch one's head and work hard to make indigenous knowledge available for the children to learn from, learning becomes less interesting for the kids because they will not be able to connect with the lessons offered in the textbook.

The Planning Department of the District Administration of West Jaintia Hills District recently organized a winter camp for students in the district. The camp was aptly called "Spectrum of Life: The Future is yours to Decide." In one of the many sessions that this scribe shared with the youth, when asked during the interaction how many students in the hall knew the names of the different birds endemic to the forests in their neighbourhood, none of the kids raised their hands. Meghalaya, along with the other seven states of North-east India, is considered part of the Biodiversity hotspot. Unfortunately, we don't even know the names of the birds present in our own localities. In one of the interactions we had with the teachers of a few schools in the Sohra region, we found that one reason our kids do not connect with what they were taught in schools is because of the kind of teaching materials provided to the schools. It was found that there is a knowledge gap among the children regarding their understanding of local knowledge. The students are now distancing themselves from their roots, and it is all because of the kind of textbooks used in their schools. In the NCERT-prescribed textbook, in the lesson about the trees, the kids were taught about trees found in the plains areas and not those popular in their neighbourhood. Similarly, because the books were designed for use in the entire country, there is no scope for incorporating the learning of local knowledge.

Textbooks should help bridge the knowledge gap
The prescribed textbooks

may follow the NCERT pattern, but it is mandatory that local knowledge is incorporated into the text. If we use only NCERT books for schools from class 1 to 10, then the gap of knowing local knowledge will continue to widen. Besides, the NEP 2020 also provides ample scope for incorporating indigenous or local knowledge into the syllabus. Considering the importance of inculcating love for indigenous knowledge and culture among the future citizens of the State, it is crucial that the state education department ensures the inclusion of lessons on indigenous knowledge in the syllabus especially in the lower classes.

Showing indigenous knowledge and food systems

A friend once told me that when he asked his son the question, "Where do we get rice from?" he was shocked to hear the answer from his son, who said, "From the shop." Obviously, the answer is not only wrong, but it also exposes the lack of knowledge about our food system among our young people. The different food systems depending on where they are grown are in the region are paddy, bun, jhum field, home garden, plantations, and forests. The indigenous people get their food not only from the paddy fields but also from the other systems, including the forest. Our food system has stood by us since time immemorial, and it is essential that we protect and promote the system.

The MDA Government now has the opportunity to host a mega event where indigenous people from across the globe will meet at Shillong. The event, planned to be held by the end of next year, is expecting favourable consideration and support from the State Government. The event also aims to showcase the strength of the indigenous food system, which has not only survived the test of time but can also show to the world how indigenous food systems can be a game changer and help solve the food problems of the world. The event will no doubt also help show to the world the unique culture and identity of the people of Meghalaya. The question is who are we, if it is not for our unique identity? We are what we are because of our culture and identity.

Delay in selection of Chief Ministers does not speak well of BJP leadership Has Prime Minister got cold feet in exercising his diktat in three states?

By Sushil Kutty

Delay in picking Chief Ministers for Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan is telling on the mental agility of claimants for the post in all three states. Look at outgoing Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Chouhan who can't stand in one spot for more than an hour at a piece. He is all over the state in one-piece 'desi' suits without a stop, breathless and putting his health at risk, willing Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take notice and oblige. Then, there is former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia, another Chief Ministerial-aspirant on pins and needles, dying to catch the Prime Minister's eye.

But the Prime Minister appears unconcerned. He looks everywhere but at the aspirants. Actually, you have got all sorts, including a "mahant" like a Yogi Adityanath cameo. BJP insiders have no clue as to the headline claimant, though. The fact is, the Bharatiya Janata Party top brass is afflicted with decision-making slovenliness. Especially Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Recall how Modi could not get himself to take a decision on Manipur. He got off cheaply for that piece of lethargy.

But some people are born lucky. The number of times

Minister Rajnath Singh, central observer for Rajasthan, has Rajya Sabha MP Saroj Pande to assist him.

Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar is the central observer for Madhya Pradesh and central minister Arjun Munda is central observer for Chhattisgarh. The central observers have their tasks cut out. They are hand-picked by the top brass. But

it would be wrong to assume they are independent to take a final decision on who will be Chief Minister of their given state?

Point is, like with everything else in the current-day Bharatiya Janata Party, Prime Minister Narendra Modi must have the last word. Maybe Rajnath Singh went to Jaipur with the name of the next Rajasthan Chief Minister already in his pocket. Ditto with the central observers for Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh - Manohar Lal Khattar and Arjun Munda. They too must be armed with the name of a chosen Chief Minister.

The whole point is, why sit on the name? Why the sloth and the delay? What is stopping Prime Minister Narendra Modi from getting it all over, in one fell swoop? Why turn everything into a grand event? Now, after Telangana Chief Minister

"This time, Modi is in the dock for failing to name Chief Ministers for Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan despite time lapsing. Imagine if Telangana, too, had gone to the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi Sphinx-like squatting on the potential Telangana Chief Minister's file? The Modi show - which is what the Bharatiya Janata Party is - should know that people did not vote for the BJP to sloth over picking up Chief Ministers."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has found himself in sticky situations is only matched by how many times he got out of the quagmire without a scratch on the thick skin. This time, Modi is in the dock for failing to name Chief Ministers for Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan despite time lapsing.

Imagine if Telangana, too, had gone to the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi Sphinx-like squatting on the potential Telangana Chief Minister's file? The Modi show - which is what the Bharatiya Janata Party is - should know that people did not vote for the BJP to sloth over picking up Chief Ministers. All three states are now sorry spectacles of headless chickens. Some would call them orphaned states. Let's be clear - December 3 to December 9 isn't a short time. A couple of days more and Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan might as well secede from the Union.

The urgent thing to do is to step up to the plate. But that is not happening and the only consolation is Prime Minister Narendra Modi has found central observers. Will it help? Each central observer has a dedicated team. Defence

Revanth Reddy's grand coronation in Hyderabad, with the entire top leadership of the Congress in attendance, BJP President JP Nadda will be under tremendous pressure to outdo the GOP.

The BJP will go overboard with the coronations of all three BJP Chief Ministers. Money will not be a problem. After all, the BJP is the world's largest and richest political party. The BJP legislative party of the three states will be meeting and the Chief Ministers will be sworn-in by December 11, says a source, not himself certain but willing to gab. The problem is, there is a dilemma factor to contend with in all three states. Vasundhara Raje and Shivraj Singh Chouhan are blowing in the wind, and then there's the dilemma, whether to go with an OBC face or a tribal one in Chhattisgarh? The grapevine says Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants at least one woman Chief Minister and so that is locked. The BJP top brass will turn everything upside down if Prime Minister Narendra Modi desires so. If asked/required, top BJP leaders will even keep the choice of Chief Ministers hanging if that brings a smile on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's face. (IPA Service)

Don't break the hearts of farmers

Editor,

Let me extend my heartfelt thanks to Bithon Sangma, Sujit De, and Marbud Pyrbot for standing with Daphi, representing a farming community. It is completely unacceptable for us literate urbanites to take advantage of illiterate gullible farmers. If our hearts cannot feel the pain and agonies of the weaker sections of society, what good are our academic credentials? One gentleman rightly quipped, "We are literate with no hearts; that is why we can bargain with the poor farmer over the cost of a meagre bunch of mustard greens or a kg of carrots."

Bithon Sangma in his letter pointed out the sad reality: when night falls, people prey on the vulnerable farmers by the roadsides. That is the right time for those vendors to give the unsold crops away at a throwaway price. Yes, exhausted from shouting all day, what do you think they would do, who have no time but to rush back to their villages? Yes, amidst this merciless loot, our farmers have no one to fall back on!

In the special article, "Farmers' Parliament? Who's Representing Farmers?", senior journalist Patri-

cia Mukhim illuminates the hardships faced by the farming community with a mix of sharp wit and stark reality. She says, "We are talking of the voiceless farmers that grow radish, cauliflower, cabbage, potatoes and rice and the myriad problems they encounter. Let these farmers have their say and not be "re-represented" by someone else who does not grow anything other than growing his or her personal career."

It may surprise you to learn that countless farmers are compelled to sell their ginger at Bhoirymbong Mandi for Rs 25 per kg while within some hours the middlemen sell it all for Rs 50 or Rs 60 or even more, depending on the demand outside the state? This is just one example I am citing - the tip of the iceberg! Such malafe activities have been going on for decades. How long should cultivators sell their SWEAT for pennies? Should the government still wink at farmers' suffering while the middlemen mint money with just a few calls? I believe the government should appoint experts to justly evaluate the worth of eight months of labour in the cultivation of ginger and the like. The concerned administration should not linger on but pull up its socks to save our impoverished and illiterate cultivators who do not know the equation of profit and loss.

Please ponder deeply at the plight of farmers who feed the whole populace; are sweating blood to feed their own families. Should we remain mute spectators? Please stand up and raise your voices. No farmer should be left heartbroken any longer.

Yours etc.,
Saili Gewali,
Shillong

Fate of white-collared workers in jeopardy

Editor,

The latest victory of the saffron party in the Congress ruled states of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh was in no uncertain terms, beyond all expectations as it was reportedly against the run of play as per the exit polls exhibited by the channel India Today, Axis My India, which more often than not hit the bull's eye in its projections of the hustings. Even Mayawati, the BSP president referring to these results has concurred, thus "Considering the entire atmosphere of the elections, it is very difficult for people to accept such a strange result"

Be that as it may, the employees of the two former Congress ruled states of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh may have to face the axe

following the outcome of the 3rd December elections by way of being dispossessed of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), they have been hitherto availing under the Congress dispensation! These personnel will find themselves between Scylla and the Charybdis given the fact that the saffron government will in all probability never compromise on OPS options. Hence, now they are under the throes of an immense psychological dilemma as their privileged gift of OPS restored by the Congress government perhaps since 2018 in these concerned States looked certain to be expropriated by the powers that be, thus, reverting to NPS (New Pension Scheme). Taking everything into account, it may be concluded that the monetary contributions of the employees towards GPF and the other prerequisite obligations linked with the OPS may be stopped forthwith!

Additionally, the process of retrieval of such financial accruals contributed by the victims may be hanging in limbo indefinitely. Indeed, a retributive justice for the white-collared workers for no fault of theirs!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

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"Propaganda does not deceive people; it merely helps them to deceive themselves."

— Eric Hoffer

The Shillong Times

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Whither social audit in Meghalaya

IN India it has become the norm to set up institutions that ultimately wither and become mere secretariats that employ people and pay salaries. Not much is done to address the very reason for which the institution was formed. In Meghalaya, pressure groups demand all manner of institutions to be set up, which they profess will address governance gaps and human rights violations. Once these institutions are up and functioning these groups fail to follow up on the efficacy of the institutions created. The State Human Rights Commission is one of those; the State Women's Commission is another. But the one institution that needs to function with absolute robustness is the Meghalaya Society for Social Audit and Transparency (MSSAT) which was set up in 2013.

In Meghalaya the scope of the Act is vast. It is supposed to audit the function of several departments such as Education (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Midday Meal), Health (to monitor immunisation, services in Sub-Centres, Primary Health Centres and Community Health Centres), Power sector (to ensure that Village Power Committees are formed to audit the functioning of MeECL). In the Forest and Environment sector, the Society is to audit the Joint Forest Management Committees. In Water and Sanitation to audit the quality and quantity of water supply and the services of the PHE Department and the Swachh Bharat Mission. Insofar as Road and Transport is concerned the Society is to audit the functioning of the PWD and the PMGSY scheme.

The Society also has the brief of auditing what is happening in Agriculture and Allied Activities. In Community and Rural Development the audit is on MNREGA, PMAY-G NSAP schemes. In 'Security' the Society is to audit the role of local police and village defence parties, in Food and Civil Supplies it is to ensure that the Public Distribution System (PDS) is functioning well and people are getting their rations regularly. In the Social Welfare Department the Society is to audit the functioning of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The functioning of the Border Area Development Programmes also come under the purview of the Society. The Act states that the State Social Audit Council under the MSSAT is to be headed by an 'eminent individual' with experience in the development sector who will serve as the Chairperson while representatives from the Districts and line departments, local villagers and individuals from civil society organisations (CSO) are members of the Society. Nothing has been heard of the functioning of the State Social Audit Council. From all accounts this Council is all but defunct although a lot of work seemed to have gone into defining its agenda. This Council falls flat when the organisational structure (organogram) suggests that the Chief Minister is at the top of the ladder and the Chairperson of the Society is ultimately accountable to the CM. It is astounding how institutions are subverted to serve vested interests and not in the public interest and to bring transparency and accountability.

SC's historic Judgement on abrogation of Art 370

By Narendra Modi,
Prime Minister of India

On December 11, the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India delivered a historic judgment on the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35(A). Through its judgment, the Court has upheld the sovereignty and integrity of India, something that is cherished by every Indian. The Supreme Court rightly observed that the decision taken on 5th August 2019 was done with the purpose of enhancing constitutional integration and not disintegration. The Court has also recognized the fact that Article 370 was not permanent in nature.

Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh's breathtaking landscapes, serene valleys, and majestic mountains have captivated the hearts of poets, artists and adventurers for generations. It is a place where the sublime meets the extraordinary, where the Himalayas reach for the sky, and where the pristine waters of its lakes and rivers mirror the heavens. But, for the last seven decades, these places have witnessed the worst form of violence and instability, something which the wonderful people never deserved.

Unfortunately, due to centuries of colonisation, most notably economic and mental subjugation, we became a confused society of sorts. Rather than taking a clear position on very basic things, we allowed duality, leading to confusion. Sadly, Jammu and Kashmir became a big victim of such a mindset. At the time of independence, we had a choice of making a fresh start for national integration. Instead, we decided to continue with the confused society approach even if it meant ignoring the long-term national interests.

I have had the opportunity of being connected with the Jammu and Kashmir Andolan from a very early part of my life. I belong to an ideological framework where Jammu and Kashmir was not merely a political issue. But, it was about addressing the aspirations of society. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee held an important portfolio in the Nehru Cabinet and could have remained in government for a long time. Yet, he quit the Cabinet over the Kashmir issue and preferred the tough road ahead, even if it meant paying with his life. His efforts and sacrifice led to crores of Indians becoming emotionally attached with the Kashmir issue. Years later, Atal Ji, at a public meeting in Srinagar gave the powerful message of 'Insaniyat', 'Jamhooriyat' and 'Kashmiriyat', which has also always been a source of great inspiration.

It was always my firm belief that what had happened in Jammu and Kashmir was a great betrayal to our nation and to the people living

there. It was also my strong desire to do whatever I can to remove this blot, this injustice done to the people. I have always wanted to work to alleviate the suffering of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

In very basic words- Articles 370 and 35(A) were like major obstacles. It seemed like an unbreakable wall and the sufferers were the poor and downtrodden. Articles 370 and 35(A) ensured that the people of Jammu and Kashmir never got the rights and development that the rest of their fellow Indians got. Due to these Articles, a distance was created between people belonging to the same nation. Due to this distance, many people from our nation who wanted to work to solve the problems of Jammu and Kashmir were unable to do so even if they clearly felt the pain of the people there.

As a Karyakarta who has seen the issue closely over the last several decades, I had a nuanced understanding of the specifics and the complexities of the issue. Yet, I was crystal clear about one thing- that the people of Jammu and Kashmir want development and they want to contribute to the development of India based on their strengths and skills. They also want a better quality of life for their children, a life free from violence and uncertainty.

Thus, while serving the people of Jammu and Kashmir, we gave primacy to three pillars- understanding of the citizens' concerns, building trust through supportive actions, and prioritising development, development and more development.

In 2014, just after we assumed office, deadly floods struck Jammu and Kashmir, with a lot of damage in the Kashmir valley. In September 2014, I went to Srinagar to assess the situation and also announced Rs. 1000 crore as a special assistance for rehabilitation, signalling our government's commitment to supporting the people during crises. I had the opportunity to meet people from different walks of life and there was one common thread in these interactions- the people not only wanted development but they also wanted freedom from the rampant corruption prevailing for decades. The same year, I decided not to mark Diwali in remembrance of those we lost in Jammu and Kashmir. I also decided to be in Jammu and Kashmir on Diwali day.

In order to further strengthen Jammu and Kashmir's development journey, we decided that our Government ministers would frequently go there and interact

with people directly. These frequent visits also played a crucial role in building goodwill in Jammu and Kashmir. From May 2014 to March 2019, over 150 ministerial visits took place. This is a record in itself. The special package of 2015 was a significant step in addressing the developmental needs of Jammu and Kashmir. It contained initiatives for infrastructure development, job creation, tourism promotion and support to the handicraft industry.

We harnessed the power of sports in Jammu and Kashmir, recognising its potential to ignite the dreams of the youth. Through sporting initiatives, we witnessed the transformational impact of athletic pursuits on their aspirations and futures. Sporting venues were upgraded, training programmes were organised and coaches were made available. One of the most unique things was to encourage the setting of local football clubs. The results were outstanding. The name of the talented footballer Afshan Ashiq comes to my mind- in December 2014 she was a part of a stone pelting group in Srinagar but with the right encouragement she turned to football, she was sent for training and excelled in the game. I recall interacting with her in one of the Fit India Dialogues where I said it's time to move over 'Bend it like Beckham' because it is now 'Ace it like Afshan'. Other youngsters began to shine in kickboxing, Karate and more.

The Panchayat polls were also a watershed moment in the region's quest for all-round development. Once again, we were faced with a choice of either remaining in power or standing by our principles- the choice was never tough and we let go of a Government but preferred that the ideals that we stand for, the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir are given top priority. The success of Panchayat polls indicated the democratic nature of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. My mind went back to an interaction I had with Pradhans from the villages. Among other issues, I made a request to them- that at no point must schools be burnt and that must be ensured. I was delighted to see that this was adhered to. After all, if schools are burnt the biggest sufferers are the small children.

The historical day of 5th August is etched in the hearts and minds of every Indian. Our Parliament passed the historic decision to abrogate Article 370. Since then, much has changed in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The

judicial court verdict came in December 2023 but seeing the wave of development across Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, the people's court have given a resounding thumbs up to the Parliament's decision of abolishing Articles 370 and 35(A) for four years now.

At a political level, the last 4 years have been marked with a renewed faith in grassroots democracy. The women, tribals, SC, ST and marginalised sections of society were not getting their due. At the same time, the aspirations of Ladakh were totally ignored. 5th August 2019 changed all that. All Central laws now apply without fear or favour. Representation has also got more widespread- a three tier Panchayati Raj System is in place, BDC elections have been held, and refugee communities who were all but forgotten have begun to enjoy the fruits of development.

Key Central Government schemes have attained saturation levels, thus covering all sections of society. These include Saubhagya, Ujjwala and Ujjwala schemes. Strides have been made in housing, tap water connection and financial inclusion. Healthcare, otherwise a major challenge for the people, has witnessed an upgrade of infrastructure. All the villages achieved ODF Plus status. Government vacancies, which were otherwise a den of corruption and favouritism have been filled in a transparent and process driven manner. Other indicators like IMR have shown betterment. The boost to infrastructure and tourism has been for everyone to see. The credit for this naturally goes to the resilience of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, who have shown time and again that they want only development and are willing to be drivers of this positive change. Earlier, there was a question mark on the status of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. Now, there are only exclamation marks about record growth, record development, record tourist inflow.

In its verdict on 11th December, the Supreme Court has strengthened the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat' - it has reminded us that what defines us is the bonds of unity and a shared commitment to good governance. Today, every child born in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh is born with a clean canvas, where he or she can paint a future full of vibrant aspirations. Today, the dreams of the people are no longer prisoners of the past but are possibilities of the future. After all, Development, democracy and dignity have replaced disillusionment, disappointment and despondency.

Sustaining higher growth needs consumer spending push

By Ajit Ranade

The economic data for the second quarter i.e. the period from July till September was published by the government on November 30. These are called quick estimates of the national economic output. They are provided for two broad sets of output numbers, namely Gross Value Added (GVA) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The former is a measure of value added by each individual producer, or sector or industry to the economy. It is of course measured across all producers, be they farmers, small entrepreneurs or large companies. GVA thus measures the value added in converting inputs to outputs. The latter, i.e. GDP is the value of goods and services produced within a given period, which could be annual GDP or quarterly GDP. It is measured in three different ways. Either as value of all production, or of all expenditure or of all incomes. All three give the same result, since the total value of what is sold also represents income to those producing what is sold. The only difference between GVA and GDP is taxes paid or subsidies received. Usually, GDP always exceeds GVA since the government imposes net taxes whose collection is higher than the subsidies that it pays out.

The GDP for the July to September period measured in current prices was 72 lakh crores compared to 66 lakh crores for the same period last year. GVA for the corresponding two quarters of this and the previous year was 64 and 59 lakh crores respectively. At this quarterly rate, the annual GDP in current prices will likely reach 300 lakh crore during this fiscal year. This would be three times, or 200 percent higher than what it was ten years ago in 2012.

These same numbers for GDP and GVA need to be examined by removing the

19 percent compared to a year ago. These were 7 lakh crore this quarter as against 5.9 lakh crore in the same period last year. Similarly, investment spending rose at an impressive 13 percent over last year, growing to 21.5 lakh crore from 19.1 lakh crore last year. So clearly these two are driving the growth rate at a spectacular pace. On the other hand, consumer spending rose by just 8 percent this quarter compared to last year. All these are nominal numbers, not adjusted for impact of inflation and rising prices.

If you correct for inflation then consumer spending is rising only at around 3 percent, and this makes up 60 percent of GDP. If real GDP growth is to maintain a pace of 7 percent in the medium term, the consumer spending component has to grow at close to 6 or 7 percent itself. It means doubling the rate at which it grew (in real terms) during the latest quarter of July to September. Consumer spending momentum can be maintained if there is commensurate growth in employment, wages, and in retail loans. The latter includes housing loans which can be a significant contributor to growth. High inflation can adversely affect consumer sentiment, as people cut down spending on discretionary items. Investment spending is picking up which is a very good sign. It should have an increasing component of private capital spending and should not only depend on government spending on infrastructure. The government providing a fiscal fillip is constrained by the deficit situation. So that will need to be controlled. On a half yearly basis, the government component of GDP (at current prices) rose at 9 percent only slightly higher than the consumer spending component. Even then since we are approaching the national elections of 2024,

"If we take both the quarters of this year together, i.e. the period April to September, GDP has expanded by 7.7 percent in real terms. At this rate GDP growth for the full year would definitely cross 7 percent and put India among the fastest growing large economies of the world."

impact of rising prices. Since inflation for the past four years on average has been clocking close to 5 percent, the expansion in GDP or GVA measured in current prices is not the "real" picture as it has an "inflated" component. Removing the inflation effect the real growth of GDP is 7.6 percent during the second quarter, which is higher than last year's 6.2 percent. This is quite heartening.

If we take both the quarters of this year together, i.e. the period April to September, GDP has expanded by 7.7 percent in real terms. At this rate GDP growth for the full year would definitely cross 7 percent and put India among the fastest growing large economies of the world. To achieve this at a time of turmoil caused by wars, inflation, supply chain disruptions, geopolitical tensions and uncertainty is a very impressive achievement.

Hence, we need to examine three things. Firstly, what is driving this GDP growth. Secondly, whether it is sustainable in the medium to long term. And thirdly how are the benefits of GDP growth translating as gains for different sections of the people, their livelihoods, incomes and employment.

The answer to the first question is that government and investment spending has risen much faster than consumer spending. Keep in mind that government spending makes up 10 percent and investment spending (also called capital formation) makes up 30 percent. The rest is consumption spending, which has the lion's share. Net exports are barely 1 or 1.5 percent currently. Government spending during the latest quarter of July to September grew at a rate of

the government's capex push is likely to accelerate during this fiscal year which will provide additional strength to GDP growth.

Whether 7 or 7.5 percent can be sustained in the medium to long term depends on consistency of growth in consumer and investment spending. India is attracting large investment flows, and many sectors have a very positive growth outlook. Hence sustaining growth only needs price and policy stability and fiscal prudence. As for the third question of how the benefits of growth are translating to different sections of society, we will need more micro-economic data from surveys. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is indicating rising employment numbers and higher labour force participation rates, both by men and women. The growth in real wage rates needs to be confirmed.

Since the present rate of growth in consumer spending is low, it implies that incomes of workers are not rising fast enough, even if wages are rising. The RBI consumer sentiment survey is also a useful guide. Here too lowered inflation expectations will help boost consumer confidence. Typically, higher income households tend to have a much higher proportion of savings, and hence sustained growth in consumer spending requires the gains of growth to be spread across all income categories. This is something we need to watch. The news on the economy is getting better and it is imperative that economic policy ensures that the growth process is truly inclusive.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is a noted economist) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Farmers as an alibi

Editor,
I appreciate Patricia Mukhim's solid and grounded article on the problems faced by our local farmers. Having worked for various projects and still connected to rural development with farmers, self help groups and federations, I personally feel that such an August event would have been more worthy and practically positive if it was held in an open space right on the fields where our rural cultivators work and earn to feed countless households. That till date a state uniform policy is missing which is much needed to address landlessness amongst farmers, price regulation system, free and effective transportation system coupled with innovation to push agriculture and horticulture as an engine of growth and economic prosperity, speaks of the priority that Government has for the farming community. The

State Agriculture Policy lacks the vision to address the need to develop a strong value chain mechanism in many areas of economic interests that should benefit the grassroots community. It is sad that an event like that would have well-heeled individuals who may not even know the seasonality calendar of our farmers. Adding to this is their lack of understanding as to what our farmers require and their priorities.

The State Government should seriously look into the difficulties faced by local farmers vis a vis their relations with banks. It is often seen that most branch managers fear to give loans to farmer producers' groups or self-help groups. An example is the Kissan Credit Card or KCC. In the future such an event is planned it would be proper for all those officials to step into the shoes of a farmer with empathy then only will proactive change happen.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

Uniforms for students have little value

Editor,
The recent exchange of letters in the media about the introduction of uniforms for students of St Anthony's College is more than a storm in a teacup. While most of the letters decry this initiative, a letter in the Shillong Times, Dec 8, 2023 by A. Sarki, has waxed eloquent about the advantages of uniforms for students. These are nothing but empty platitudes. He or she has not provided any data to support these unjustified and speculative conclusions.

Making everyone look like clones does not promote equality. The letter uses the phrase "collective spirit and pride." Yes, these are good notions, but are applicable more to the army or sports teams, where a collective commitment is the basic reason for the uniforms. This does not apply to schools or colleges. Imagine if tomor-

row the government declared that all state employees must wear a uniform to promote "collective spirit and pride." It's absurd.

The department of education of Ohio State University, USA, conducted a comprehensive survey of more than six thousand students on this issue in 2022. This study was supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the US government and published in a prestigious education journal.

The results showed that, "Despite the belief of many parents and teachers, school uniforms don't seem to have any effect on young students' behavior or attendance overall." The study showed that schools with uniforms had the same levels of aggression and bullying. So, equality was not improved by uniforms. In the UK, 70% of adolescents do not want uniforms.

In the study students were rated on three dimensions: internalizing behavior problems such as anxiety and social withdrawal, external-

izing behavior problems such as aggression, and social skills. Overall, school uniforms had no effect on any of the three dimensions of behavior in any grade.

The study did find that low-income students in schools with uniforms did have slightly better attendance, but that difference amounted to less than one day per year. Measurements of social anxiety showed the same levels across schools, whether there were uniforms or not.

According to the author of the study, "While uniforms are supposed to build a sense of community, they may have the opposite effect. When students can't show their individuality, they may not feel like they belong as much. The results of this study should caution parents, teachers and administrators from assuming that school uniforms have positive effects that they may not have."

A meta-analysis of 92 studies from across the world concluded that, "uniforms have no impact on academic

performance, yet directly impact physical and psychological health. Girls, ethnic and religious minorities, gender-diverse students and poorer students suffer harm from uniform policies. Paradoxically, for some students, a uniform creates a barrier to education that it was originally instituted to remedy."

While there is much data on the effects of school uniforms, there seem to be hardly any data on uniforms for college students, indicating that researchers do not feel that this is a worthwhile subject for study. One article from Karnataka showed that management students felt that a uniform, coat and tie, makes them ready for the corporate world. Much of the remaining data was inconclusive.

Yours etc.,
Glenn Kharkongor,
Via email

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"Expelled from individual consciousness by the rush of change, history finds its revenge by stamping the collective unconsciousness with habits and values."

— Arthur M. Schlesinger

The Shillong Times

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Way forward in J&K

THE Supreme Court decision on the controversial abrogation of Article 370 vis-à-vis Jammu and Kashmir was along expected lines. Ever since the second Modi government did away with the Special Status for the troubled region on August 5, 2019, petitions against the landmark decisions were viewed with scepticism by the top court. The five-judge Constitution Bench that considered the arguments unanimously upheld the government orders and subsequent decisions, but directed the Centre to restore statehood for Jammu and Kashmir and hold elections there before September 30, 2024. The bench has also ratified the government decision to divide the state and turn Ladakh into a Union Territory.

Understandably, the opposition political parties as also rights activists in Jammu and Kashmir are miffed at the way the apex court looked at the contentious central issue. The separate recommendation from Justice Sanjay Kaul seeking impartial investigations into human rights abuses by both state and non-state actors since the start of militancy there in the 1980s is well-appreciated. Alongside, the setting up of a reconciliation panel on the lines of the South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation has been proposed. While this should partly address the concerns of rights activists, its effectiveness is in serious doubt. The central and state governments have a poor reputation for ignoring recommendations of judicial commissions in relation to humanitarian and other issues. The tendency of such commissions is also to drag their terms for unacceptably long periods, at the end of which the issue at stake is forgotten and overtaken by other more serious issues. Also, the apex court bench, curiously, set the deadline for Jammu and Kashmir elections to September 30, thereby cautiously avoiding polls there along with the general elections in the first half of 2024. It would thus be incumbent on the next government to address this issue.

The fact on the ground is that the overall scenario in Jammu and Kashmir has vastly improved in terms of law and order since the abrogation of Article 370, followed by a phase of tough measures like detention of senior political figures there. Even after the curbs on public activities were lifted, these leaders could not stir up public opinion against the central government's actions. The government, alongside, claims the process of development has hastened there, investments were pouring in and lakhs of jobs created for the youths. Overall, the positive vibes in Kashmir are testified by the larger numbers of tourists turning up and returning from there. This positivity also formed the underpinning for the SC nod for abrogation of Article 370. The process of healing the hearts and minds of the harried people of the Valley must be an imperative for the present government.

Moitra's Expulsion as MP Dubious

By Bindo M Lanong

The incongruous expulsion of an elected Member of Parliament from West Bengal, Mahua Moitra of the Trinamool Congress, during last week's session in Lok Sabha, on corruption charges, prima-facie seems to be dubious in nature, apart from having created a serious precedent for the future of democratic institutions in the country.

Without unnecessarily beating about the bush, one can easily refer to Art 102 and Art 191 of the Constitution of India, relating to this subject of disqualification

from Krishna Nagar Constituency, West Bengal in 2019, having won by a margin of over 63,000 votes. The allegations against her are that she was paid to table questions in Parliament, which she denied. On such allegations, an Ethics Committee of Parliament was reportedly constituted and the said committee, having enquired into the allegations, came up with the report which incriminated Moitra and finally when the matter came

an Election Commission; whereas, the question of disqualification of such member or members was done by Parliament, more seriously so, when the victim denied the allegations against her and what is more bugging is that reportedly, she was not provided fairly with an opportunity to hear her side of the story.

The gravity of expulsion of an elected member of the elected body, especially of the highest law making

the final order, which many will look forward to, the order to guide and clean the electoral and parliamentary system, where the role of politics and politicians should be measured on the basis of the retributive need of the people, among other considerations.

Political Vendetta

Some political observers have attributed the harsh expulsion of Moitra to political vendetta. It is known that the Trinamool Congress of Mamata Banerjee commands a huge following in West Bengal and that the BJP



of membership, either in Parliament or in the State Assemblies, where nowhere is there any mention about debaring any burglar, a murderer, or any criminal from contesting election or being an elected member to such Houses. To be specific, the above said criminals, after having been fortunately elected as such Members to Parliament or other Assemblies in any State in India, are also eligible to hold the office of a Minister or even as leader of the House.

The above two Articles, bar only a foreigner, any person holding any government office of profit, including a registered government contractor and also an insane person who is not necessarily declared by any distinguished legal practitioner but by a competent court and lastly the defectors from one party to another under the 10th Schedule provisions.

To be more precise, many may recall the infamous Bandit Queen of Chambal Valley UP, Phoolan Devi, who contested the election to Parliament, won and became MP Lok Sabha in 1996. She was never disqualified like Mahua Didi, but Devi was found, during filing of nomination papers, eligible to contest as a candidate to the House of the People, despite all her other criminal records, since the nature of crimes she committed fell outside the purview of Art 102 and Art 191 above.

Mahua Moitra is an elected Member of Parliament

up in Parliament, majority of members took exception to what Moitra did and finally voted to disqualify her as a Member of the House with immediate effect, despite the voice of the Opposition which was against the Ruling of the Speaker. Moitra claimed that she was never given an opportunity to tell her side of the story, denying

Legislature of a democratic country like India, in an outrageous manner, as claimed by the victim herself and others supporting her, will be one of the rarest battles, which will not only confine itself to the victim and those in the Parliamentary domain, but with all concerned, particularly the voters of Krishnanagar Constituency, who

"On such allegations, an Ethics Committee of Parliament was reportedly constituted and the said committee, having enquired into the allegations, came up with the report which incriminated Moitra and finally when the matter came up in Parliament, majority of members took exception to what Moitra did and finally voted to disqualify her as a Member of the House with immediate effect, despite the voice of the Opposition which was against the Ruling of the Speaker."

of ever having been paid by any party, in whose favour she submitted her questions in Parliament.

The claims and counter-claims on the question of the opportunity of having heard and not heard her, is an easy procedure as laid down in the Rules, to come to conclusion. However the moot issue of disqualifying an elected Member of Parliament, cannot be side-tracked in a casual manner.

Any elected member of the House is declared elected by due process of law, under the exclusive jurisdiction of

have lost their representative in this fashion. If Moitra does not submit hook, line and sinker to the expulsion order, she may in all likelihood, find fairness if she files an appeal before the competent court of justice. It is advisable for her to opt for this course, not only for her personal interest but for all others who will be facing similar tragedies in future, if this order is not challenged. Also if not challenged this will create a precedent for others to suffer like her.

What matters most, therefore, will be the credibility of

has had to suffer defeat at the hands of the Trinamool. Hence the BJP has found Mohua Moitra a fair game to avenge the Trinamool and now that time has presented itself in Moitra's expulsion. And yet many more aggressive programmes are lying in wait in the BJP's agenda, including the Uniform Civil Court (UCC), which they are gearing up in full swing to experiment in some states and for all this, they will require more strength, both in Parliament and in the States.

The expulsion of an elected Member of Parliament is a high-profile case, which has caught the attention of all concerned, including those beyond the Indian frontiers and many are eagerly awaiting for the final outcome.

The three pillars of a vibrant Democracy which include the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary will apparently be involved in this expulsion issue, since it is the Executive which conclusively deals with the subject of Election. The Legislature by a majority expelled the elected member of the House and finally when the matter is referred to the Judiciary, 'Merit' of the case has always been the outcome of a verdict.

Hopefully the meritorious verdict after her appeal, will set the case at rest.

(The author is a former minister and Speaker Meghalaya Legislative Assembly)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Busy Fingers...
"Who's this?" I asked my friend as I entered his house and saw a disheveled boy sitting in his living room.

"My son!" he replied.
"Hi," I said and watched as the young fellow stared at me then looked around, ran around the room searching for something like a dog looking for his favourite bone and then sat down waving his arms at his father.

"He's not well is he?" I asked my friend.
"Withdrawal symptoms," whispered my friend to me.
"Drugs?" I whispered back.

"No messaging," said my friend.
"Messaging?" I asked.
"On his phone all the time!" said my friend.
"Ah," I said looking at my friend's son, who was staring with haunted eyes at his hands.

"That's where his phone used to be," said my friend.
"We've taken it away from him, so he can get used to life without messaging!"

"Good," I said looking at my friend's son, who was suddenly staring at me with the same haunted eyes. Suddenly he lunged at me and started tapping my knees.

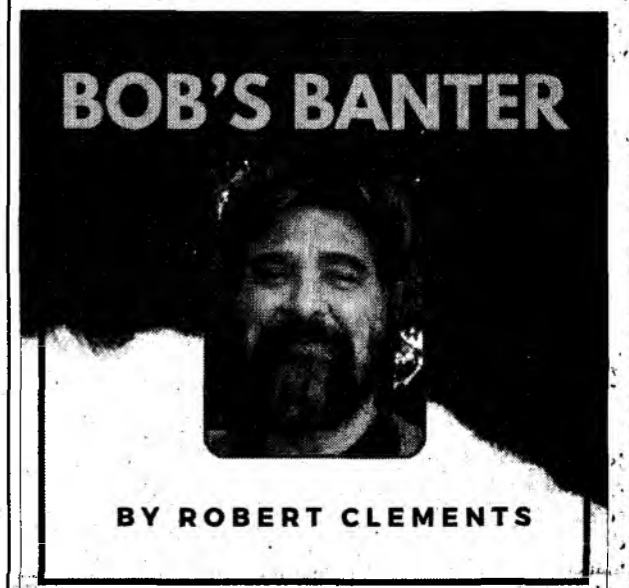
sounding exasperated.
"You don't have to text me, I'm talking to you!"

"But I've got used to texting now!" he texted back and as I heard a loud ping on my cell phone, realized was continuing to message me.

And that's the state of the world today. As I pass hoardings all over the city, I see a price war taking place between different mobile phone companies. "Chat free!" says one. "Just chat, just chat, just chat," say a thousand other boards and banners fixed all across every bus stop and store, all over town, country and the whole world.

"Talk is out, chat is in!" I know friends of mine working for multinationals and other corporate firms, who sit in little cubicles, with half a wall of plywood between them, typing messages to one another, instead of pushing back their chair and conversing.

You walk into these offices and find their fingers set over their cell phone. You think they are busy at work, till you see a smile, or hear a laugh... and you know a word, a letter, a sentence, not something you said, has brought out a laugh! I know that soon, the laugh from their throat, or smile on



"It's ticklish," I giggled.

"What's he doing?"
"He's messaging," said my friend. "He's asking whether you have a phone?"

"Yes," I giggled. "But I am not giving it to you!"
"Just message him!" said my friend.

"Without using the phone?" I asked.
"Type a message on his knee."

"No," I said, "I don't want to do anything of that sort, when I've got a voice to speak with!"

My friend's son withdrew his hand from my knee in a flash, looked at me with disdain and went back to his chair. He reached across and tapped something on his father's knee.

"What's he saying?" I asked, slightly curious.
"He's saying you're a barbarian."

"Tell him I know how to talk!" I said angrily.

The boy looked at me with the same disgust and walked out of the room.

"You have upset my son," said my friend.

"I'm sorry" I said. "Is there something I can do to make up for it?"

"You could learn to message him on his knees," said my friend.

"Nah," I said, "I'm not too happy using someone else's knees to type."

"Do it for me," said my friend.

"No!" I said firmly.
"What shall I do?" asked my despairing friend.

"Teach him to talk!" I said.

"Talk!" whispered my friend, switching on his TV to watch anchors, raising their voices and shouting guests on their show. "It is better he messages in silence than starts talking like this!"

We both looked at the TV and agreed to give him back his phone!

Maybe we were too quick in finding a solution, because a little later as I met him, my friend himself, seemed reluctant to speak back to me, and was doing what his son had previously been stopped from doing. "Why aren't you answering me, what are you doing?" I asked suspiciously.

"I'm messaging you, with my cell phone!" he said,

their face will be converted into an expression, a smile, an emoji on their WhatsApp screens.

"Laughter and tears, you have been replaced by symbols!" I shout, but no one hears me.

"It's the next stage in evolution," said a doctor to me. "Just as man evolved away from his tail, when he stopped swinging from trees, so will we evolve from using our voice!"

"What about singing? I asked my doctor friend, as he switched on his phone and I listened to some garish sounds coming from it. "That's the music of today!" he said, "maybe silence is better huh Bob?"

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Words!" he laughed. "Looks like you've forgotten how to use your ears huh?" and we both burst into laughter.

"Texting," said my doctor friend, "is becoming more addictive than talking, and there are less hassles involved".

"Less hassles?" I asked.

"Yes," said my friend, "imagine in talking you've got to meet physically at a place and be aware of the other person's body language. No such problems when you chat. You are free!"

"Free?" I asked.
"Yes, free to type something and to mean something else. Chat is a true actor acting a role on stage, your phone screen!"

Chat is an act. No gestures. No voice. Just a performance of words on your phone which is actually meant for speaking!

A silent world with busy fingers drumming away on keyboards is what is seen everywhere!

"Hey," I told my friend's son, "Looks like the world is following you!" I watched as the boy looked at my mouth bewildered, then saw my friend also looking at me surprised, and then heard my phone flash with a message from him, "Get real! Teach your fingers to get busy..."

(The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883).

Letters to the Editor

Corruption, biggest human rights violation

Editor,
On Friday December 8, the Meghalaya State Human Rights Commission held an event to commemorate International Human Rights Day in Shillong. One of the biggest violations of human rights in India is corruption. Ironically the ugly term which dehumanises the victims was not addressed. Corruption denies every citizen her/his legitimate rights and impoverishes the abused.

Corruption must be seen in totality as a failure of the Executive to deliver and where the Judiciary too doesn't cover itself in glory. There have been instances galore where citizens are languishing in jails in India and the powers that be have

turned a blind eye or a deaf ear to such, much against the Fundamental Rights bestowed to the citizens. The media too has fallen short in raising issues where there have been violations of human rights.

Everything that a citizen is robbed off is due to corruption and unless this is addressed and the guilty brought to book, human right violations will continue unabated.

Yours etc.,
Tyrone D'Brass
Tura

Mohua Moitra's expulsion undemocratic

Editor,
On Mahua Moitra's expulsion from Parliament,

the editorial, "Mahua Moitra expelled from Lok Sabha" (ST, December 9, 2023) rightly says, "This is clearly another instance of the BJP riding roughshod over parliamentary procedures to teach anyone who dares to question the Prime Minister or any of his crony capitalists, a lesson they will remember." Earlier, Rahul Gandhi asked questions in Parliament about the government's alleged patronage of the Adani Group. Then suddenly someone dragged him to the court of law for a comment that he made during an election rally in Karnataka a long time ago on April 13, 2019. Thereafter, he legally fought his way to get back to Parliament. There are other dots to join. NDTV's Ravish Kumar had the courage to ask the government at the Centre important questions and to criticise crony capitalism. Then Adani Group took over NDTV and Ravish

Kumar resigned. Also, many journalists have been facing defamation cases by the Adani Group. Given that the government has consistently failed to give clear answers to the 'A' questions that Rahul Gandhi and Mahua Moitra repeatedly asked in Parliament, the needle of suspicion does not therefore point to Mahua Moitra but to crony capitalism.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Who's creating the fuel crisis?

Editor,
The news report that a fuel crisis has been created mainly because some groups in Ri Bhoi district are extorting money is surely a case that needs urgent handling. It reflects on the failure of the government to contain the plethora of so-called

pressure groups that have mushroomed in Meghalaya and are extorting right, left and centre. Time is not far off when even government employees too will have to pay to these groups as is happening in Manipur and Nagaland. After all, we learn all the wrong things very quickly. The centrally owned road construction company is already unable to cope up with the extortion but it seems that the MDA-2 Government is least concerned. What is all this if not failure of governance? Meghalaya has seen corruption since early days but this state has never seen extortion at this scale where even small and petty shop owners are being fleeced. What are the police doing? Or have they also surrendered meekly? After all, the police too are seen extending their hands towards all truck drivers in all parts of the State. I see Meghalaya as a state that

has failed on all fronts and the state is only going down a steep precipice. That is why Conrad Sangma has to keep inventing all kinds of festivals to distract people from real issues affecting the State of Meghalaya. Without the noise people will start thinking and asking questions and this is dangerous for any ruling party.

The unfortunate part is that the Opposition parties that are only bragging about who is more popular than whom are saying and doing nothing to point out the mafia rule in Meghalaya. Stop bragging VPP and do your job to bring order to the State!

Yours etc.,
Khrawkupar Diengdoh,
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"There is no such thing as society:
there are individual men and women,
and there are families."

—Margaret Thatcher

The Shillong Times

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Khasi Mandarin Going Places

THIS is the second time that the Khasi Mandarin oranges with their unique taste are being exported outside the state. This is good news because it is a case of farmers directly benefiting from the marketing assistance of the Government. The 1.5 metric tonnes of oranges are reportedly selling at the LuLu hypermarket locations in Al Qusais and Al Barsha in Dubai's upmarket venues. Undoubtedly these oranges grown organically will fetch a high market value as compared to the genetically modified organism (GMO) variety that enter our own markets here from other states of India and other countries. Those GMO oranges don't have the zing of the Khasi Mandarin. Of course, organic products do need a discerning consumer base. Elsewhere in the world products that are certified organic fetch a much higher price than those grown with chemical fertilisers with heavy doses of pesticides.

Now that farmers are safely able to grow and export their oranges, attention must be paid to pineapples with their short shelf life and what can be done to bring the same kind of assistance to pineapple farmers who more often than not have to consign their products to the bin. There is a huge market for processed pineapple products such as juice, canned fruit and jams which if branded well and with more private entrepreneurs coming in would fetch decent returns for farmers. Meghalaya's Lakadong turmeric is already known because of marketing techniques. That Lakadong turmeric has got its GI tag recently is a step towards popularising this spice and its health benefits.

It is heartening to note that the consignment of Khasi Mandarin exported to Dubai has been harvested from the districts of Ri Bhoi, East Garo Hills, and South Garo Hills, the warmer climes of the State. Those grown in the upper reaches such as in East Khasi Hills are yet to ripen and are usually harvested in January. These varieties can also be expected to find their markets in Dubai in the next consignment. That the Secretary of the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), Dr Sudhangshu was present at the Dubai stores when the oranges arrived is historic as it means that this is going to be an annual, assured market. What must be noted is that orange growers are getting a fairer deal than the farmers cultivating tomatoes in Ri Bhoi district which is again due to marketing gaps. The Marketing Division of the Agriculture Department has to do a much better job at finding markets for other agricultural produce especially the perishable varieties. It is well known that much of Meghalaya's radish, cauliflower, cabbages and potatoes find their way into the markets of Assam through the middle man/woman channel. Hence while the intermediaries in the trade are getting richer, farmers get a poor deal. It is this discontent that needs to be addressed.

Are our youth blinded by festivities?

By Albert Thyriang

The MDA Government has spent nine crore rupees for the controversial Cherry Blossom festival. The Me'gong festival got more or less the same amount. The exchequer also extends financial assistance to the 10 drums Wangala festival, the Behdienkhlam, the Shad Nongkrem and numerous other festivals. The Government may not even have the complete list of the festivals with the corresponding amounts allotted for each. The budgetary allocation for the year 2022-23 is Rs 20 crore for 19 festivals including the Cherry Blossom festival, the Shillong literary festival, the Me'gong festival, the Meghalaya film festival, etc. For Sports and Youth Affairs Rs 208 crore is earmarked. The budget boasts of an aggregate investment for youth in 2022-23 to be Rs 1,363 crore.

Questions have been raised, and rightly so, as to why 'poor' Meghalaya has to be so lavish on festivals. The second poorest state in the country has no dearth of funds for celebrations. Huge amount of money is spent for bringing international bands and stars.

For the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival the American chart-topper, Ne-Yo alongside Ronan Keating and our local bands were brought in. The '90s pop band Vengaboys travelled to the Me'Gong festival in Jengal. Critics claim the phenomenal amount is a scandalous wastage. The Government defends this by stating that the festivals promote tourism and that what the 'lakhs' of tourists who brought money on food, hotels, tours, purchases and other services far surpasses the Government's expenditure. The convinced detractors assert that the Government does not even know the number of tourists who visit the state on the festive days. The claims and counter claims are healthy. It is criticisms that have forced the Government to promise to review both the Cherry Blossom and Me'gong festivals. Hope a clear picture of the boon and bane will emerge to determine future festivals.

The Government is staunch in its conviction that the festivals promote local talents. Local artistes also vouch for the Government's policy. The platforms mean a lot for not only budding as well as professional talents but we cannot also deny that festivals, celebrations and sports events are lullabies. They induce a false sense of good disposition. They distract the public from the mis-governance, failures and short-comings of the

Government. They may stop the public from criticising the government of the day.

Last July a football tournament was 'sponsored' by a local MLA in a playground adjacent to a main road. They road was (probably is still) full of potholes. Vehicles had to move on first gear. Huge crowds witnessed the matches. The biggest throng was of course on the final day. The MLA was the chief guest. On the grand finale the organisers were all praise for the honourable member. The crowd cheered for him loudly. They even shouted 'long live our MLA'. They all forgot about the bad road 50 meters from the podium. In fact the roads in the locality and the whole area were in the same condition. No one complained about the pathetic roads. On another tourney the venue was at a dilapidated LP government school also stands. The organisers, the players and the attendants, all ignored the half-fallen tin roof, the broken doors, windows, desks and benches and worn out floor of the school in the village. But they happily applauded the MLA for the donations for jerseys, balls and the funds for the tournament.

Does not the Government expect festivals to have the same effect? Proceed a bit ahead of Bhoirymbong you will ride on 'rock 'n' roll' roads. The border villages, where basic amenities are absent are not far from the venue of the Cherry Blossom festival. The Wangala and Me'gong festivals were held in 'Baljek Airport'. How come festivals in an Airport? This Government has approached the central government for funds for an international airport when we can't even make the one we have, functional. Festival enthusiasts won't point out these facts to the 'benevolent' government. Surely the organisers of the various Meghalaya festivals have seen ramshackle government school buildings; certainly packed crowds at the Cherry Blossom and Me'gong festival have traversed through horrible roads in the state but for the sake of good music they don't matter. An artiste who was part of the Cherry Blossom festival was asked to comment on the acts of omission and commission of the government, in a panel discussion. His reply was, 'I am not a politician. What I can say is that the festivals benefit local artistes.' The counter question to the artiste is - should artistes be concerned only about

themselves?

Most of the festival goers are young voters. Not that they should stay away from such celebrations but should they also not be concerned with the ills of the state? Are we seeing enough youths who voice their distress at the various issues facing the state? Even as we are still in a celebratory mode Rs 13 crore 'scam' has surfaced in the East Garo Hills' eco-tourism project. Illegal wood mills openly operate in Garo Hills while the authorities look the other way. Worse than the illegal mills are the illicit coal mining and transportation! The Meghalaya High Court has to summon the SP of East Jaintia Hills. An FIR has also been filed by former MLA, Rophul S Marak on the rampant coal mining in South Garo Hills. The ex-Rongara-Siju representative fears that the recent e-auction in the East Jaintia Hills District is but a disguise to facilitate illegal transportation. What is the response of the youth to these adverse realities in the state?

The festival lovers might also be aware of the alarming statistics of children smokers. The touching story of Daphi was narrated in this newspaper. Many have reacted to draw a larger picture of prevalent poverty in the state. No less serious is the menace of drugs. The Government says the centre is on a war against drugs. The MDA government has signed a pack with religious bodies and other groups to defeat the enemy. More bad news: the cases of HIV among adults in this state are higher than national average. What is the response of the young generation these grim happenings? Have we seen youth groups and associations volunteering to be part of the solution? Or do we largely have a carefree group who loves partying? Now that Christmas and the New Year are fast approaching, we will see vigorous religious and 'worldly' celebrations, while we remain indifferent to substantial matters?

The front page report on this paper on December 5 is not shocking for those who know how things work. One of the reasons responsible for delays in executing road projects in the state is due to the 'constant interference by myriad local youth who harass workers and exploit the contractors of central government projects.' Youth have become a road-block to development. Youth are holding Meghalaya back to lag behind other north eastern states. Less than 100 km away from Shillong the city

of Guwahati is progressing at a terrific pace. Flyovers after flyovers have been inaugurated. The first flyover in our state capital is not even a dream. If we want excellent roads and mega projects we need specialised labourers and firms from outside the state. We just can't do it by ourselves. There are no multi-million construction companies here. After procedure has been followed why harass labourers? In the 21st century why should documented labourers be beaten up? Why are offices of licenced companies shut down? Phobia won't take us far.

It is common knowledge that pressure groups, who are mainly youths demand money from companies. If compliance is wanting the officials and workers are harassed and threatened. A project may even be opposed. In the late 90s early 2000s the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) constructed a road from Wakhaji to Mawthabab and other mining locations. Allegedly a pressure group that received the contracts favoured the road while others who did not financially benefit opposed the project. Love for the 'Jaibynriew' was never the motivating factor.

In 2019 the first time voters were 76,000 or 4.6% of the total voters. If the data of voters below 30 and 40 (youth category) is available it would work out to about 40 percent of voters. A formidable force indeed! Do the youth merely vote but are largely disengaged with affairs of the state? It is true that youth groups have detected the alleged fund embezzlement of Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) in West Garo Hills and raised the alarm at the shoddy work on Dawki-Amalrem-Jowai road but such cases are rare and not sustained. Groups are obsessed with ILP and the railways and other sentimental issues but there is none to challenge corruption, illegality, poverty, social evils and a host of other crucial concerns. The music of Ne-Yo and the Vengaboys are captivating, fascinating and enchanting but youth power is also to be utilised for nation building.

We also often see that festivals turn political. The couches and sofas on the dais are filled with guests from the ruling parties. Undoubtedly, politicians take political mileage from all such festivals and treat them as lullabies for the public to sleep off their woes and even forget that they have a right to good roads, clean drinking water, healthcare, good education and more as citizens of an enlightened democracy.

Fossil Fuels & De-Carbonisation Nations divided at COP28

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

Controversy took centre stage at COP28 with many countries resisting the term for the first time for a global phase-out of fossil fuels, which account for three-quarters of greenhouse gas emission, leading to global warming. Hectic efforts were made to change the draft phrase 'phase out' to "reducing consumption and production of fossil fuels, in an equitable manner so as to achieve net zero by, before, or around 2050 in keeping with the science". The pressure came from coal and oil producing countries, including India.

However, the EU and the US were reported to be disappointed and wanted stronger language to be used. India, on its part, has been trying to reduce CO2 emissions, including methane emissions by 2030 with sufficient progress made in increasing production and use of renewable energy. In a Germanwatch report in the environmental realm, India's performance showed significant improvement from 31st rank in 2004 to 7th in 2023. The country maintained its top 10 position, figuring among the highest performers for the fifth year in a row.

The draft includes concerns that the goal of developed nations to mobilize \$100 billion per year by 2020 in the context of transparency on implementation was not met in 2021. Climate finance has been another contentious issue like in the past two-three conferences as the developed world has failed to keep its commitments. An important outcome of COP28 was a new loss and damage fund for the poorest and most vulnerable countries which would help them deal with the irreversible impact of climate disaster. Host country UAE and Germany both pledged \$100m (£79m) to this start-up fund, which will aim to keep up with the rising costs caused by extreme weather and slow-onset disasters such as sea level rise, ocean acidification and melting glaciers. The initial funding of close to \$300m - including £60m from the UK, \$24.5m from the US and \$10m from Japan - is a much-needed boost for the agreement.

Pledging money raises hopes but only when it's translated into reality will results be positive. According to OECD, the estimate of climate finance provided and mobilised by developed countries in 2020 was about \$83 billion, whereas Oxfam in its 'Climate finance shadow report' noted that the amount was merely \$21-24.5 billion. Thus there's need to scale up resources several times through enhanced provision and mobilisation by the developed world, as pointed out by Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav at the summit.

Regarding emissions, both the US and China lead the race with 40%, followed by India, the Russian Federation and Japan. But the situation has been changing as developing countries are rapidly moving towards industrialisation as well as urbanisation. There is also a trend, somewhat similar to the Western world, where over consumption of the wealthiest and increased industrialisation has been exacerbating emissions in the Third World.

Reports indicate that the top emitting countries of the future could come from the developing world - Brazil, India, South Africa and Indonesia. Their challenges are quite serious as they must encounter the twin problems of preserving the environment while lifting hundreds of people out of poverty, and these get acute in their quest for industrialisation and urbanisation. Whatever may be the targets be, the ability to control global emissions or move towards a net-zero goal in the next two decades appear to be an impossibility. There is a lack of political courage to bend the emission curve by enforcing laws and regulations. Therefore, there's a dire need to examine the high levels of pollution, especially air, being witnessed in India. Though

attempts are being made for a transition to a low-carbon economy, the task is arduous, given the country is an agro-based economy, and stubble burning is a challenge.

Reports reveal that India emits around 5.2 million tonnes of PM 2.5 annually not accounting dust from construction. Further, 53% comes from biomass burning and industrial activities. Burning of agricultural residues has hit headlines several times as the problem continues in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

India's greenhouse gas emissions from crop residue burning increased 75% over the past decade with MP accounting for the second largest area under fires after Punjab, as per satellite-based study by researchers at Indian Institute of Science Education & Research, Bhopal. While it's well known that stubble fires in Punjab and Haryana play a major role in early winter episodes of air pollution over the NCR, the study, covering 602 districts, revealed an exponential rise in the farm area burnt in MP and other states outside the Indo-Gangetic plains.

The other critical air pollution is from industrial effluents, which in most countries are strictly monitored and regulated. But not in India. The industrial segment is the second largest contributor of PM 2.5, and most States are casual in acting. Though in recent times its changing, there's need for stricter monitoring of environmental regulations.

Meanwhile, reports that the world is likely to witness a 4-7-fold increase in heat-related deaths by mid-century is a cause of concern. The Lancet's new global projections report last year warned that individuals were, on average, exposed to 86 days of health-threatening high temperature of which 60% were made at least twice as likely to occur because of human caused climate change. The governments are to blame. Projections of a 20C hotter world reveal a bleak future and are a reminder that the scale of mitigation efforts has been grossly inadequate.

Similarly, another more depressing picture emerged from the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) which warned that the world is on track to witness a 2.5-2.9-degree Celsius temperature rise above pre-industrial levels if all the current pledges under the Paris Agreement are implemented by 2030. This was not foreseen by experts few years back as such temperature rise would lead to devastating consequences of climate change in terms of frequent extreme weather events in this century. The report revealed there's no change, emissions in 2030 will be 22 gigatonnes higher than the 1.50 C limit allows. The UN Secretary General rightly attributed this to a "failure of leadership, a betrayal of the vulnerable and a massive missed opportunity".

It needs to be reiterated that decarbonisation must happen in every aspect of our lives from deploying greening solutions for heavy polluters to better monitoring so that environmental regulations are complied with. For decades, India has been dealing with the problem of development versus climate change. However, though carbon intensity may be reduced by 25-30% by 2030, the zero-emission target by 2050 may be difficult or rather impossible to keep.

With the current pressure on reducing dependence on fossil fuels, India, China and many other emerging countries will have to think afresh in evolving their development strategy. India faces a big challenge with huge developmental needs, having such a vast population whose living standards must be improved at a faster pace and thus energy needs would continue to increase. How India and other countries would reduce dependence on fossil fuels remains to be seen. ---INFA

Letters to the Editor

Petroleum Mazdoor Union Threat

The news report 'Meghalaya stares at yet another fuel crisis,' vis-à-vis the threat issued by the North East Petroleum Mazdoor Union to stop loading of petroleum products destined for the state of Meghalaya is quite upsetting. The warning issued by the Union was uncalled for as the arrest of suspected individuals, involved in fuel theft from oil tankers and fuel adulteration, was based on raids conducted by the state police after receiving complaints on the same. The Mazdoor Union in fact is arm-twisting the state authorities for release of those persons involved in the illegal act notwithstanding the fact that members of their Union were involved in the racketeering of petroleum products during transportation. As such the legal steps taken by the concerned authorities to put a stop to such illegalities should be appreciated and the law should be allowed to take its own course so as to discourage others from committing such unlawful acts in future.

New political assignments by Modi

In all the three states the Chief Ministers and two Deputy Chief Ministers had been carefully selected by the BJP with the aim of capturing maximum Lok Sabha seats so that gets a third term at the Centre. This will make Modi the second Prime Minister after Nehru to achieve this rare feat. With the new assignments in three states Modi has proved that "Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai," works. In Madhya Pradesh the BJP chose a Yadav for the post of CM. This will benefit the Party in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where the post of chief minister had remained within one family of Yadavs. Having a Yadav CM in Madhya Pradesh will definitely benefit to BJP. In all the three states the BJP has picked Gen Next to helm the state governments. Moreover, it has been noticed that only the BJP can operate like a disruptive, innovative technology start-up turned unicorn. In the era of Modi,

the only obsolete commodity is status quo. Whereas the Congress could not resolve the clash between CM and Deputy CM in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the same happened in Punjab also a year ago.

Empowering tribal groups is good for national politics and national security and clearly the BJP leadership wanted to send a bigger message to the people of India ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, when Prime Minister Modi seeks a third term for his government. The choice of Vishnu Deo Sai, a prominent tribal face of the party and with rich political experience as the next CM of Chhattisgarh after nearly a week's wait should be seen in this perspective. As PM Modi said in his victory speech, the tribal community played a key role in the ouster of the Congress.

Interestingly the Deputy CM of Chhattisgarh is a Brahmin. They earlier felt ignored by the ruling parties. Now with the inclusion of Brahmin faces in the cabinet it will definitely pay dividends for the BJP.

The biggest challenge before the new Government in Chhattisgarh is to cleanse the State of the stench of corruption that marked the previous regime, staunch

denials by the then dispensation notwithstanding. That was not possibly because of any individual engagement in dirty deals, but hugely because of the distorted political philosophy and policy the party in power had adopted towards national issues. The party leadership at the national and the state levels had differing and confused ideas of how the economy had to be managed and how to make things happen.

Not much has yet been thought through and written about the overall national impact of the recently concluded Assembly elections to five states - but the direction and mood of India is clear. Across the north, central and western India, there is an absolute and complete domination of the BJP's political narrative. After winning all the three states comfortably, the BJP has stunningly done the unthinkable, even unbelievable, by choosing three new younger leaders to lead the government.

In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP had its toughest challenge because "Mamaji" Shivraj Singh Chouhan is not only an extraordinarily popular leader but also the incumbent CM. Yet, the saffron party went ahead and

named Mohan Yadav as the next chief minister. The 58-year old Yadav is an OBC and a three-time legislator from Ujjain and had served as a minister in the Chouhan government. It was not an easy exercise to appoint him CM of Madhya Pradesh.

The BJP named Bhajanlal Sharma as the next chief minister of Rajasthan. He will be supported by two deputies - Vindhya Nagar MLA, Diya Kumari and Dudu MLA, Prem Chand Bairwa. The party chose Vasudev Devnani for the post of Speaker as he represents Ajmer North.

Though the Pradhan Mantri Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PM-PVTG) Mission was announced in the Union Budget in February, its launch on the birth anniversary of tribal icon Birsu Munda in Jharkhand on November 15, was a significant part of the Modi government's outreach to tribals.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

(ST, December 9, 2023), it is a criminal negligence to evade environmental impact assessment before the excavation for building a tunnel or a high-rise building. From the tunnel collapse in Uttarakhand to flooded streets in Chennai after a few hours of rain it is evident that there is something wrong in urban planning. We do not need smart brutes but smart human beings to make anything be it a country or a city look smart. Moreover, rising inequality in India mar the efforts of making anything smart. As a matter of fact, a smart city should not require a wall to hide the truth. The policy makers must ensure food, health care, education and employment for all and give priority to improve the Human Development Index score rather than only to lopsided GDP growth. Would a model look smart by wearing a brand new costly coat along with a cheap, shabby pair of trousers?

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Failure to plan smart

Editor,
Apropos of Ashwin Pundalik's article, "Constructing a Himalayan challenge"

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"The greatest gift of leadership is a boss who wants you to be successful."

— Jon Taffer

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 125 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2023

Dare-devil show inside parliament

THE canister-hit at Parliament House by a group of youths on Wednesday afternoon was both shocking and sinister. Viewing it from an impassioned angle, one might take it as a godsend. For, it caused no harm as such but exposed the security flaws in the glittering new edifice. More than the group of six youths, this is time to take the security wing of the Parliament to task for what has happened. The breach of security was glaring. Had it not been the case, there was no way these youths could pass even the first post, the entrance to Parliament House, as security personnel have been specifically assigned the task of doing a detailed physical check of each visitor other than the parliamentarians. Security personnel by and large know who is who. It is incumbent on them to ensure that visitors are subjected to a body check. When two of these youths entered parliament, reached the visitors' gallery and then jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber, it was principally some bold MPs themselves who confronted them. The watch and ward came into the picture later, as could only be expected as they are not omnipresent inside the two houses or the central hall. They would troop in when they are summoned in the event of a bedlam. Security is deployed mainly at the entrance and it is there where the two men managed to hide the canisters and walk past.

That this security breach happened on the precise day of the stunning Parliament attack by Kashmiri terrorists in 2001, and shortly after homage was paid by Parliament to the martyrs of that fateful day, underscores the seriousness of the present security lapse. Likely, with such weak security, terrorists themselves could walk in without much hassle yet again. The youths engaged in this reckless act were, prima facie, not part of any terror module or criminal gang though they planned the action well in advance, did a recce and enacted the drama in a coordinated manner. They say they grouped together on a social media platform some 18 months ago. No ideology seemed to guide them. They were obviously from the lower strata of the society, some of them were educated and some jobless. Other than shouting vaguely against "dictatorship," no specific issue seemed to have stirred their minds. Unless proven otherwise, they were disgruntled youths out to "make a mark," and hog publicity by crude yet simple means. They might be ready, too, to face the consequences thereof, as this was not an abrupt action. Yet, in a democracy, there's space for them. Invoking provisions of the anti-terror act against them is perhaps unwarranted.

In the prelude to the 1989 general elections, Congress-sponsored billboards started pedestrians with a query: How many prime ministers will a country have? The nation went berserk with the Bofors controversy. VP Singh's Janata Dal spearheaded the anti-Congress front and an ebullient Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) cobbled in tandem to defeat the Rajiv Gandhi regime. Three and a half decades later, the wheel has come full circle. Only the crusaders have changed. The I.N.D.I.A bloc, instead of being a shot in the arm for an anti-BJP front, has been a blessing in the offing. It has actually strengthened the BJP-led NDA regime with a

The Nation's echo chambers

By Chiranjib Haldar

turn the I.N.D.I.A poll machinery into a non-starter. The infighting in the anti-BJP coalition is prominent and starkly visible. Several allies, the Samajwadi Party, AAP and JD(U) are in the fray independent of the Congress. Nitish Kumar and Akhilesh Yadav are rabble rousing about how a domineering Congress is treating them shabbily. Allegations of Congress forsaking I.N.D.I.A's interests only met with derision from the Gandhi family and indirectly helped the BJP. For the ruling BJP regime, any meeting of I.N.D.I.A partners would

armament against opposition parties. Thus, the usual dividends from a subterranean polarising rhetoric may increase as the 2024 general election approaches. A bolstered BJP would obviously march into the Lok Sabha polls by relying on its potent combination of welfare and majoritarian triumphalism alias rewild. Reclaiming lost territory especially in the south, riding piggyback on a rise in the BJP's Telangana vote share, would be next on the party's agenda. The BJP wins because they do get their last mile de-

liance's stronghold. That would be the wherewithal of any regime eyeing its third consecutive stint.

There is no surprise in the current political landscape in India. We love our echo chambers. We love to fraternise as well as draw reasons and logic in tune with what we want the world to be. It isn't just in India or in Indian politics; the shadow of a right-wing victory in Netherlands casts its silhouette on Europe. A whole gamut of anti-Israeli sentiments continues to overflow in many places. There is a mutual blindness to the other side's presence at the cost of sanity. For the anti-BJP, it may be all about Electronic Vot-



seeming coalition of regional satraps led by the Congress, having bloated further. And if the assembly poll outcomes were to measure any index of opposition unity, there is no filip; it is a thumbs-down for its flagbearer, the Congress.

A southern silver lining for the grand old party notwithstanding, BJP's consolidation in the heartland states may be a chronicle of loss foretold for the grand dame of Indian polity. The prelude to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls has pumped adrenalin to the BJP and been a knock on the chin for Congress. These reverses have only prompted many I.N.D.I.A allies to question the Rahul Gandhi-Mallikarjun Kharge duo's prowess to lead the opposition slugfest. BJP's bantamweight punches to the Congress in Chattisgarh which Bhupesh Baghel was expected to retain and steamrolling of Kamal Nath in Madhya Pradesh has only impeded the idea of I.N.D.I.A. For the BJP, a ragtag coalition of regional chieftains, though headed by the Congress, was enough to

actually chip off the leverage enjoyed by the Congress so far. There are lessons for the BJP and the anti-Modi opposition. It is a shocker that trumpeting key issues incessantly fail to sway the

livery right; they are focused round the clock on winning elections. They deal sternly with intra party rivalry, they start planning for the next polls as soon as the current one is over. They probably

ing Machine (EVM) fraud, religiosity and governance failure, irrespective of voting trends.

Even before 2014, the saffron citadel expanded by stitching caste alliances. The BJP may not be in dire need of long-term alliance partners; the party can consolidate its position with time-bound pre-poll alliances to venture into territories that entail a booster. The more fractured the opposition becomes on the road to the 2024 hustings, with multiple aspirants for the coveted top slot often at loggerheads, the easier it will be for the BJP to beat anti-incumbency and stride back to power. Whether this is complete tosh will be tested in the ensuing parliamentary elections. With a rainbow opposition still in disarray, throwing up too many claimants for prime ministership, the BJP will only hardsell Narendra Modi for his third stint and woo the electorate with both continuity and change.

(Chiranjib Haldar is a commentator on Politics and Society.)

"If the I.N.D.I.A alliance or any supra-national nomenclature given to the opposition grouping don't cobble in unison or get its act together, the BJP will obviously wallop the alliance's stronghold. That would be the wherewithal of any regime eyeing its third consecutive stint."

electorate. Booster doses to a majoritarian ethic, protracted dereliction to the violent discord in Manipur, a blatant spur to crony and monopoly capitalism hardly cuts ice with the masses.

What is interesting is that the BJP had not projected chief ministerial candidates in the heartland states it won but aggressively campaigned on Modi's guarantee and impetus. This is something that the saffron stalwarts have perfected as an effective

have a booth level well-oiled electoral machinery plan in place for April-May 2024, while the Opposition is still squabbling amongst themselves. Politics is not a picnic of teddy bears though it may not be a last resort for scoundrels as the adage goes. If the I.N.D.I.A alliance or any supra-national nomenclature given to the opposition grouping don't cobble in unison or get its act together, the BJP will obviously wallop the al-

SC verdict upholding abrogation of Article 370 poses a threat to federal principles

CJI has belied the hopes he raised at the time of joining

By P. Sudhir

The Supreme Court judgment on the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution and the dismantling of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories is an egregious example of the constitutional court capitulating to the misuse of powers by the executive. Four years after the event, the three concurrent judgments of the five-member constitution bench, headed by the chief justice of India, have larger and long-lasting implications that strike at the roots of federalism and states' rights.

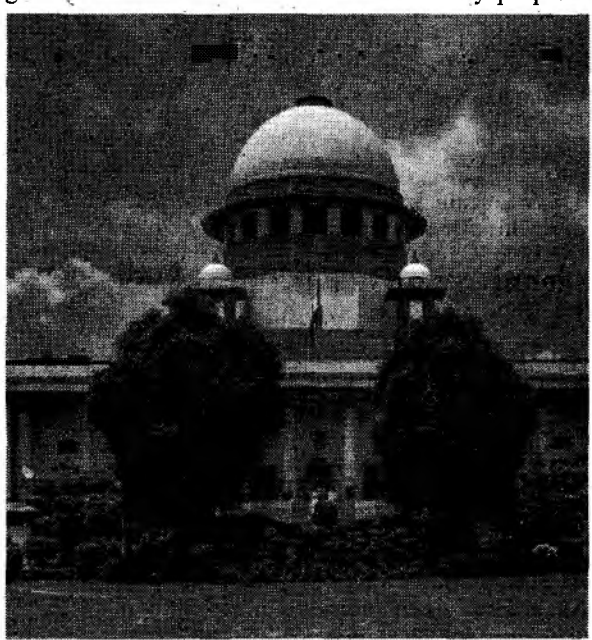
By upholding the validity of the presidential order abrogating Article 370 at a time when the state of J&K was under president's rule, the Supreme Court has given its imprimatur to this latest betrayal of the commitment made to the people of J&K at the time of accession to the Indian Union. By ruling that Article 370 was a temporary measure and there was no 'internal sovereignty' for the state of J&K, the court has bypassed the question of why a special status was accorded to J&K and how such a status was not something temporary, but part of a solemn commitment made to the people of Kashmir by the constitutional authorities then. Article 370 represented a constitutional guarantee that this status is

abrogating Article 370.

The other dangerous feature of the judgment is the endorsement of the Modi government's authoritarian and unitary drive, which seeks to undo whatever limited features of federalism and states' rights that exist in the constitution. The Supreme Court has refused to adjudicate on the validity of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act adopted by parliament in 2019, which led to the dismantling of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the creation of two union territories. The issue was whether Article 3 of the Constitution was validly used and whether this Article can be used to downgrade a state to the status of a union territory.

The court, in a blatant act of judicial abdication, stated that it was not going into the matter since the solicitor general had given an assurance that statehood to J&K would be restored. This was a mere assurance with no timeframe. At the same time, the court ruled that the formation of the union territory of Ladakh was valid. The court has said elections should be held by September, 2024 but not specified that statehood should be restored before that.

As per Article 3 of the Constitution, the president has to send any proposal



something which would be defined and evolved with the concurrence of the representatives of the people of J&K.

The judgment delivered by the chief justice, on behalf of three members of the bench, makes the astounding claim that Article 370 was intended to "enhance Constitutional integration between the Union and the State of Jammu and Kashmir" rather than as a provision for special status of J&K. It further claims that the continuous exercise of power under Article 370 (1) by the president indicates that the gradual process of constitutional integration was ongoing.

The history of Article 370 shows that it was constantly misused to deny autonomy and encroach on the states' powers over the years by the president exercising this power. How was that done? "Concurrence" was given under various spells of president's rule by the centre's own-appointed governor.

However, as per the peculiar logic of the verdict, "The declaration issued by the President under Article 370 (3) was a culmination of the process of integration and as such is a valid exercise of power".

By this reasoning of the learned justices, J&K does not deserve even the special features or rights given to some of the north-eastern and other states in Article 371. There can be no better legal justification for the decades of denial of democracy and autonomy to J&K.

Even when the court has found the amendment of Article 367 to redefine the constituent assembly of Jammu and Kashmir as a legislative assembly as ultra virus, the judgment circuitously goes on to state that this does not affect the validity of the consequent notification by the president

for change of boundary of a state or a merger of state or a creation of a new state to the state legislature concerned for its views. It is only after receiving the state legislature's response that parliament can legislate on the matter. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir using Article 356, the state assembly had been dissolved in November 2018. So there was no state legislature, which was consulted on the matter.

Under president's rule, it is parliament which is supposed to legislate on the matters of the state and hence, the legislation to break up the state into two union territories was discussed and adopted by parliament. This, in itself, violated the procedure of Article 3, wherein the state legislature had to be taken into confidence even though its opinion was not binding on parliament. Further, the basic question, whether under Article 3, a state can be legislated out of existence was not addressed by the court. The upholding of the validity of the formation of the union territory of Ladakh opens the way for similar exercises in future. A ruling party with a brute majority in parliament can use the situation arising out of the imposition of president's rule in a state to pass legislation in parliament to derogate its status by creating a part of it as a union territory.

The Supreme Court verdict gives a stamp of approval to the centre's unitary drive and poses a serious threat to the federal principle and to the balance of centre-state relations. When Justice Chandrachud took over as the chief justice of India, there was some expectation that the Supreme Court would cease to become an executive court. Alas, such hopes have been belied. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Mawkhar Church Committee: An unholy scam?

Editor,
As usual I went for my Sunday service at Mawkhar Church and part of the service order is the church announcement by the elder of the church for scrapping the Sohmylleng mission. So I went back home to check the church report and I was shocked to find some inconvenient questions. Firstly, as announced, the evangelising mission started in 2010 and in 2012 the school, as a means of evangelism, was started from Nursery to Class III. Then after a year or so the church committee found out that all the residents of Sohmylleng belong to the Roman Catholic church. Thus, it poses a question, as to why did the Church Committee waited for 9 years to inform the members of the Church that the residents are Christians? Had they informed the members back in 2014 or 2015 then the school could have been stopped at class III and crores of rupees of church members' money would not have been wasted. Now, the church members are emotionally blackmailed to support the school as it has reached Class X. This is also in direct contradiction to the statement made by the church in the reports 2011 to 2017 that the mission is to evangelise the people through the school. But they continued the school till now and the burden is on the poor members who would

have to support the school through their hard earned money and who didn't get any opportunity to question this matter.

In the Presbyterian church, the members have a say in important matters of the church but this wasn't done. What did the church elders and the pastors gain by hiding the truth from the church members that they failed the mission in 2013 and didn't dare to publicly declare?

Furthermore, massive plots of land were bought but not mentioned in the announcement. The Sohmylleng funds have also been converted to education funds highlighting the earthly way of operational style by changing the name of the fund but eventually the money would still go to the Sohmylleng school. From the style of functioning it appears that the church subsists only from the tithes of the church elders and pastors and not of the thousands of church members' financial support.

The financial liabilities are atrocious. The church elder finally announced that the financial status shall be reported once the auditing is done. Outrageously, it means the church has not been registered under any Society act under the law which can be inferred that the church hasn't obtained tax exemption and nor has its paid any tax. If this is the case, doesn't it mean that the church that receives tithes in lakhs of rupees per week is evading taxes? It may lead to serious legal repercussions if the Income Tax department decides to take legal action.

As in the past, serious matters in the church are conducted by the general meeting of church members. However, for 2 years now there has not been any initiative by the church committee to update and discuss the missing money case of more than Rs 4 crores and the much controversial Sohmylleng mission with the church members. We as church members are at a loss at what the leaders of the church are doing behind our backs. Our opinions and suggestions are not valuable except our hard earned money as tithes. We can only pray for God's judgement on the church committee.

Yours etc.,
Vesuvius Diengdoh,
Via email

Railways indispensable for petroleum transport

Editor,
The recent threat by the North East Petroleum Mazdoor Union to suspend transport of fuel to Meghalaya, since some of its members were arrested for alleged involvement in pilferage of fuel, once again brings to the fore the need for more efficient transport services for fuel and other commodities into the state. The dependency on road transport for delivery of petroleum to numerous dispensing fuel pumps in the state has brought along with it several challenges including fuel theft and adulteration. Be-

sides, this is not the first time that the Mazdoor Union has called for a strike in transport of fuel into our state. This reliance on transport of fuel by tankers from outside the state has exposed our weakness in the transport sector, leaving us at the mercy of such Unions, at times creating unwarranted traffic snarls in Shillong city whenever there is a call for fuel strike.

Besides the vulnerability of tankers and other cargo trucks to extortion by certain organisations or pressure groups has further compounded the problem which eventually affects the common man. That certain groups are tooth and nail against the introduction of goods train into the state is but a ploy to be able to continue their iniquitous act at the cost of the 'jaidbyrniew' who, anyway, have never given these pressure groups the required mandate to represent them. The Government should, therefore, focus on the bigger picture and give the go ahead for goods trains into the state for the benefit of its inhabitants and thereby put an end once and for all such strike threats and other illegal acts carried out by different groups or unions with vested interests.

Yours etc.,
Stanley LK Diengdoh
Dymmu, Upper Nongjri,
Umnsing

Abuse of Power

Editor,
It saddens me to recount a horrible episode in which one traffic cop abused his au-

thority, leaving me perplexed about the ethical code of conduct displayed by such traffic police. The incident involved a traffic cop allegedly engaging in excessive use of force, verbal abuse, and unfair targeting of a civilian. The said incident occurred in Madanring on December 13, 2023 at around 8:00 P.M., where I had parked my car near the roadside to carry my groceries from one shop. It may be mentioned that the shop owner provides a parking space for customers, and I parked my car there, ensuring that I did not block the free flow of traffic. However, the haughty traffic officer hit my car and threatened to clamp it, and he used violent and harsh words, compelling me to pay a fine of Rs 1,000. The unwanted action of such police personnel not only undermines the trust between law enforcement officials and the community but also raises questions about the professionalism and ethics of traffic police.

Traffic police are instrumental in managing the complex dynamics of traffic flow, particularly in densely populated urban areas. Traffic Police Department plays a vital role in promoting road safety, maintaining order, and ensuring the efficient functioning of road networks. Their efforts contribute to the well-being and security of the community, making them an indispensable part of law enforcement and public safety. I understand that traffic police personnel have a challenging job and I also appreciate the importance of traffic police in enforcing traffic laws for the safety of the community,

but it is also essential that they approach their duties with professionalism and respect for the individuals they interact with. It is crucial for our community to have faith in the integrity and fairness of our law enforcement, especially those tasked with ensuring road safety. Instances of abuse of power not only tarnish the reputation of the department but also erode the public's trust in the system.

Law enforcement personnel are entrusted with the responsibility of upholding justice, maintaining public order, and ensuring the safety of the communities they serve. While majority of traffic police personnel fulfil their duties with dedication and integrity, instances of such bad behaviour among law enforcement personnel are a grave cause for concern. The psychological toll on individuals who experience or witness such bad behaviour of traffic police personnel can lead to a loss of faith in the justice system and contribute to a negative perception of law enforcement as a whole. This use of force seemed disproportionate to the circumstances and raises concerns about the traffic police's arbitrary use of force and lack of professionalism.

Yours etc.,
William Kharkongor,
Shillong -21

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"Glory, built on selfish principles,
is shame and guilt."

— William Cowper

The Shillong Times

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Of delusional awards

THIS is an era of awards. There is an award for every aspect of human life and now the award syndrome has entered the lexicon of governments too. Its difficult to keep track of who has got which award for what? There are just too many of them – one overlapping into the other without any visible results on the ground. Some weeks ago the Sustainable Transport and Efficient Mobility Society (STEMS) was awarded in New Delhi even when the buses intended for transportation of school students to prevent too many vehicles from clogging the streets of Shillong had just a few takers. Even government employees are unwilling to sign up for this public transportation system because the idea of public transport is alien to those that can afford a vehicle. The fact that the leading institutions of the city that create the most traffic jams between Dhankheti and Laitumkrah and Dhankheti and Fire Brigade have refused to use school buses and that the Government has not been able to make them comply is enough indication that the STEM services is as yet only at the trial stage and should have proven itself before it could be awarded. A genuine award takes stock of an initiative over a period of time. But now awards are a dime a dozen.

The latest award won by the Government is in the power sector and that for 'energy saving initiatives.' The question to ask is whether load shedding particularly once the dry season sets in is an 'energy saving tactic' or an energy crisis. The Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) had come in for sharp criticism from the Comptroller & Auditor General for the year ending March 2022 for injudicious decision of MePDCL for awarding works under SAUB-HAGYA to contractors at their quoted rates resulting in avoidable expenditure of Rs 156.14 crore. The Cabinet Secretary, Government of India had in a video conference on December 14, 2018 with the Chief Secretary of the Government of Meghalaya and other officials suggested that the Notice Inviting Tender (NIT) of SAUB-HAGYA be cancelled since the rates quoted by Turnkey Contractors (TKC) were above the estimated cost and going for fresh tenders would delay the completion of the project. But despite assuring the Cabinet Secretary that the advisory would be followed, MePDCL went ahead with the tender and awarded the works to the TKC thereby extending undue financial benefit to them.

This was called out by the media and a dubious fact-finding committee was commissioned which gave the Government a clean chit. That public memory on all corruption cases in Meghalaya are short-lived is another matter. The question to the MeECL is what is the award for? And why is the Government of Meghalaya so underconfident that it needs these photo-ops of ministers and bureaucrats receiving sundry awards at the hands of dignitaries in Delhi, to pep itself up? It will not be surprising if soon there is some award for the Education or the Health Department too even when our indices on both are woefully below par.

Low business in the city: What's causing it and what does it reveal?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, there was a news item in the paper titled 'Spectre of scanty footfall of Christmas shoppers in town,' that reported on the fears of possibility of a downturn in business for the retail shops in the city. Business was already down in the preceding puja season, with the same story that some shops had to return as much as 30-50% of their stock. In the story published 'Shopkeepers cross about waning enthusiasm for puja shopping' (ST October 12, 2023), one reason given for the fall in business was to the gradual migration of the main customer base, i.e., the non-tribal or non-indigenous population from the state. Contrary to popular wisdom on the street (the original version of WhatsApp University), there has been a constant decline in the non-tribal population in the state, which has fallen from 19.52% in 1971 to 13.85% in 2011. The latest census, when conducted, will most likely reveal the same trend. The blame this time around, i.e., the Christmas season, has been laid on the shifting consumer preferences towards sustainable and cost-effective fashion alternatives, from thrift shops and street vendors particularly among the youth. This, it is believed, has taken away the business from the more established shops. It is also speculated that the rise of online shopping has had a negative impact on local businesses, as mentioned in both stories. Shillong is not only the capital but also the commercial hub of the state; it's very much possible that the same trend can be seen in the rest of the state as well. Tura has also reported similar accounts. The important question is which factor is the most important and how the different factors mentioned are influencing each other.

In one of the stories published, a shopkeeper interviewed rejected the idea that internet shopping is a substitute for the in-person experience of handling, seeing, and purchasing goods, expressing the view that his clientele is different from that of ordinary internet buyers. Another shopkeeper agreed that those who prefer in-store shopping tend to visit on weekends and holidays, suggesting that the customer base is different. Thrift shops and street vendors (non-online shopping modes) are reported to be doing well, which does suggest that the rise in online shopping may not be the most important reason for explaining the reduction in business for the established shops. There seems to be something more at play here. In this regard, the story published on October 16, 2023, titled 'Puja preparations begin in full force, markets rue lack of consumers' about the low business during the Puja season in Tura, can be very illuminating.

The story reported that "the lack of handy liquid cash has also impacted sales... (with) most sections of the state, including the state government, the GHADC going through a major cash crunch, money has become hard to come by... the fact that they have less spending power has meant that business owners have less

money to circulate through their business." In short, the downturn in business can be attributed to the low purchasing power or availability of limited disposable income among consumers. People, therefore, are buying cheap stuff (online or from thrift shops and street vendors) not because they want to but because they have to. There appears to be some evidence that points towards this line of reasoning.

An important factor that determines an individual or family's purchasing power (i.e., the availability of disposable income) is the prevailing inflation in the economy. Higher inflation lowers purchasing power, and vice versa. Over the last year, inflation has been a big issue for the country. There are two indices that are used to measure inflation in India: the consumer price index (CPI) and the wholesale price index (WPI). Measured on a monthly basis, CPI analyzes the retail inflation of goods and services in the economy, while WPI considers the change in prices at which consumers buy goods at a wholesale price or in bulk from factories, mandis, etc. The Reserve Bank of India has kept the target of keeping inflation at 4% within a tolerance range of +/-2% (i.e., within 2% to 6%). A look at the CPI rates since January 2023 shows that that ceiling has either been breached or was close to it on at least six occasions, i.e., more than half of the year. The highest was recorded in July, when retail inflation rose to 7.4%, which was the highest, compared to the preceding 15 months, i.e., stretching all the way to 2021. The rising cost of living has therefore severely impacted consumer spending.

One way to tackle the problem of inflation is to link wages with the rate of inflation—wages rise in proportion to an increase in inflation. In the organized sector, this is achieved through yearly increments, which ensure that real income (i.e., how much money an individual makes after accounting for inflation) does not decline over time. However, this is not the case in the unorganized sector, which does not have the facility of yearly increments. This is a very big problem since, according to the Union Ministry of Employment and Labour, workers in the unorganized sector constitute about 93% of the total work force in the country. It means that out of every 100 workers, 93 will be working without any protection against inflation. In the case of Meghalaya, this becomes very important for some specific reasons.

It is now well established that the culture of extortion, whether through illegal toll gates or from non-indigenous shopkeepers, is an epidemic that raises the price of commodities. This in turn pushes up the price of goods supplied to the rural markets as well. And now that the bridge over Umiam Dam will be under repair for the next four months, all vehicles coming to Shillong by-pass and VIP Road, Mawtawr. This will increase the cost

of transportation which will be transferred to consumers, most of whom are already suffering from high inflation and already have limited disposable income. And if there's extortion on the new routes or collection from non-indigenous shopkeepers, then the problem will be exacerbated. This will then have a very serious impact on the overall economy as well.

The purchasing power of consumers can be estimated by looking at private consumption, i.e., purchases made by consumers on items such as food, housing (rents), energy, clothing, health, leisure, education, communication, transport, as well as hotels and restaurant services. In India, private consumption accounted for 59.7% of its nominal GDP in June 2023, i.e., more than half of the GDP. This comprises consumers spending on goods and services produced in the country. This fact was brought home during 2020, when private consumption fell by -5.2% due to COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions. Consequently India's GDP also contracted by 6.6% in 2020-2021. What this means for Meghalaya is that, out of the Rs 46,600 crore GDP figures projected for 2023-24 (at current prices) by the Government of Meghalaya in its 2023-2024 Budget, almost 28,000 crore will have to come from private consumption. But if consumers do not improve their spending, the actual GDP figures could be much lower at the end of the financial year. The target of turning Meghalaya into a 10-billion dollar economy will mean increasing the purchasing power of the consumers in Meghalaya to the extent that they should have disposable income above and beyond 5 billion dollars to spend in the market. Is this possible? Or is it another jumble similar to one where every person in the country was supposed to get Rs 15 lakh in their account.

One way of ensuring that the purchasing power of consumers is increased is by creating decent jobs that can bring a fair income, provide security in the workplace, and provide social protection for the workers. These kinds of jobs are mostly found in the formal sector, with government employment being the most obvious candidate. However, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma has expressed concerns about the state government's ability to provide employment opportunities for the growing number of youths entering the workforce each year. He gave the example of the Police Department, which is projected to have approximately 1,000 vacancies over the next five years, translating to around 200 posts per year. He looked at the private sector to absorb the remaining 59,000 out of the 60,000 individuals looking to join the workforce annually. Is the private sector strong enough to absorb more than 59,000 workers every year?

Let's take the example of shopkeepers in the city. The only way they can absorb some of the job seekers (provided they want to

work in the shops) is if they can reinvest their profits to expand the business. That way, they can hire more people and pay them decent wages. However, as things stand, they are facing losses that will compel them to do the reverse: cut down on the number of employees, reduce wages, or worse, close down the business. None of those are helpful. There is, though, one sector that has recently done well. But because of politics, its future is not looking good.

Recently, Parambir Singh Sehdev, president of the Federation of Shillong Hotels, expressed his gratitude to the Meghalaya Government for organizing the three-day Cherry Blossom Festival, which resulted in almost 100 percent hotel occupancy. This was quite significant since the industry had been going through a long dry spell following the prolonged pandemic and the unfortunate incident at Mukroh last year, which led to the cancellation of the Cherry Blossom Festival. If this good business were to continue, it would mean more profit for the industry, which, if supported by proper policies, would mean more job creation in the industry. Those who get jobs then go to the market and make purchases, which in turn raises the profits of the shopkeepers, provided they do not get extortion demands. They will reinvest the profit in the business, thus hiring more people, and the cycle continues. This is also very critical for those who are looking at self-employment. There's a lot of talk about encouraging entrepreneurship for job creation. However, with very few consumers who're going to buy the goods or services produced by the entrepreneurs how will it work? Belief in oneself and strong determination are not going to be enough to keep the enterprise afloat.

Demanding accountability for spending the money on festivals is good since the money spent actually comes from the taxpayers, i.e., you and me. However, when the criticism descends to calling for a case to be filed against a young woman for dancing in the festival in an attempt to target the Government, it is a clear case of ugly politics; not jobs or the economy, that is driving the criticism from some quarters.

Meghalaya is among the poorest states in the country. What economic policies the government enunciates and how the public responds to them by demanding accountability or creating roadblocks will determine whether we can ever get to live a decent life without constantly being worried about our future and those of our loved ones. For the politicians who are either already crorepatris or on the way to becoming one (just the monthly salary of an individual MLA will make him/her a crorepati even if they do nothing), they have nothing to worry about. But for us, it's a matter of life and death. Hopefully, we take the economy as seriously as it takes us. If not, we are doomed.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organization or institution)

Curious case of 'Hindu terrorists' involved in breach of parliament's security

Central agencies have to go deep to find out the real reasons

By Sushil Kutty

Parliament attack 'mastermind' Lalit Mohan Jha is in police custody. Four of his underlings – if he is 'mastermind', indeed – have been charged with terrorism under various sections of the UAPA, supposedly one of the toughest anti-terror legislations anywhere in the world. Does that mean, Neelam Devi, Sagar Sharma, Manoranjan D., and Anmol Shinde, along with Lalit Mohan Jha, are deemed terrorists and 'saffron terror' is god's own truth, not the figment of some dervish imagination?

The Bharatiya Janata Party and its ideological parent, the 'Sangh Parivar', has always objected to the nomenclature 'saffron terror' and gone down hard on the Congress for allegedly coining the term. Naturally, the Congress was diffident. Congress stalwarts like Sushil Kumar Shinde, a Union Home Minister, were accused of forwarding the idea of 'Hindu terror', which the Sangh Parivar insisted did not exist.

rendered. In fact, he wanted to be caught; wanted to surrender, why? Will Union Home Minister Amit Shah admit in Parliament that this was "Hindu terror" based on the names of the six people identified as perpetrators of the attack on Parliament?

The Modi government cannot ignore the possibility; nothing should be discounted. If it is "Hindu terror", so be it and address any such likelihood head-on. Like somebody in the Congress tweeted, "What if the names were Muslim?" Sure, what if the names were Muslim? The answer is, nobody would have raised an eyebrow even if Muslim names are default for terrorism and for nobody's fault, too.

This is the first time UAPA has been slapped against Hindu names under the heading "terror". Of course, like always, "terror does not have a religion". But, what the hell, this is happening at a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party is spearheading a Hin-



Now, Jha is the "mastermind" and he leads a bunch of Hindu names. Agencies tracking perpetrators of the December 13, 2023, Parliament attack have had it easy so far. Lalit Mohan Jha could have done a Shaista Parveen – gangster Atiq Ahmed's widow – on the investigating agencies just like Shaista Parveen has been evading Uttar Pradesh Police and could be anywhere, from Prayagraj to Nepalraj.

Jha, however, is a different kind of oddball – he, like his accomplices, is courting name and fame with arrest. He and his four accomplices have been charged under the draconian UAPA. From the outside, UAPA sounds glamorous, even chic. But Neelam Devi, Sagar Sharma, Manoranjan D., Anmol Shinde and Lalit Mohan Jha haven't heard the half of it. Also, the Delhi Police Special Cell has the reputation of pulling the innards out of a long gutted corpse. Jha and Co., must be singing like talkative canaries.

But Jha destroyed the mobile phones, and destroyed crucial evidence. That did not stop the Delhi Police from charging them under the stringent UAPA. Attacking Parliament with intent is terrorism. Running rampage inside the Lok Sabha is blatant and brazen terrorism. Triggering canister smoke bombs in closed and cloistered quarters is terrorism. Scaring the living daylight out of elected MPs is terrorism.

Jumping into the well of the Lok Sabha points to "terror training". What if the canisters carried poison gas? What if Sagar and Manoranjan D were trained to kill with bare hands? The possibilities are endless and imagination can kill. Neelam Devi and Anmol Shinde – protested outside. Lalit Mohan Jha sur-

du-first election campaign for ensuring a third-time in a row BJP government at the Centre. Does the Modi government even know the ramifications of charging Hindus under a terror law and then not be labelled "Hindu terror"?

Islamic terror comes easily off the lips but even the mere mention of "Hindu terror" was frowned on and the Congress almost always got bashed for doing the unthinkable. For instance, way back in 2015, then Home Minister in the first Modi government, Rajnath Singh, went ballistic on the Congress, accusing the UPA government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of coining "Hindu terrorism" and alleged that this "weakened" India's fight against terror.

Stating that the Modi government will "never allow such a shameful situation", Rajnath Singh had in 2015 said that "terrorism is terrorism, it does not have any caste, creed or religion." If so, what has happened now, nine years on, why have people, with clear Hindu names been charged with an act of terrorism, and why have sections of the stringent terror law UAPA been slapped against them?

How can India accept this? The opposition INDI-Alliance should forthwith reject the Modi government premise that educated but unemployed youth, for no fault of theirs but because of the Modi government's failures, have been charged under the UAPA law and branded terrorists. The Modi government must come clean on "Hindu terror", admit whether there's "Hindu terror" or not there's? Also, make clear why Sagar Sharma, Manoranjan D., Anmol Shinde, Neelam Devi have been accused of committing a terrorist act? Are they terrorists or not? If they're terrorists, is it proof that "Hindu terror" exists? (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Church and Corruption

Editor,
I had written my response to Albert Thymiang's essay, 'Bishops and the Church' (ST Oct 5, 2023) but never posted it. Reading Vesuvius Diengdoh's letter, 'Mawkhar Church Committee: An unholy scam, (Dec. 15, 2023) has made me rewrite that letter. I'm really not a rigid denominational person. But let me focus on what jarred me about Vesuvius' letter, "that all residents of Sohmylleng belong to the Roman Catholic church," and the dilemma it faces.

All Anglican schools, established before and after Independence across the country had an open door policy on school admission. Christian students were admitted irrespective of denominations. In the school I studied in, 70% were Roman Catholics! A minuscule number were Anglicans! All expenses were borne by the overseas Committees. Not a paisa was collected from the parents! And with pride in our schools, I carry this truth sharing with people who are so caught up with denominational Christianity!

Now back to the core issue of the church, God's Ministry today, (across all

denominations I surmise) has become an institutionalised body of corruption and irreligious activities. Harsh assumptions/allegations some would conclude, but it is a hard fact backed by concrete evidence-based truth.

Our Church of North and South India is currently caught up with nefarious and ungodly functioning with court cases galore against the top hierarchy! Mind you this is nothing new! Since the amalgamation of churches under CNI/CSI corruption, nepotism and political intrigue has been played out openly by the powers that be! The previous

Moderator along with a few Bishops, priests and family members are imprisoned without bail.

Bishops, as the head of dioceses, have ruined many Christian institutions, missions and charitable organisations. By virtue of their designation as bishops, they are the Chairpersons, Presidents of all governing and managerial bodies and they rule the roost! Quite a few Bishops have minted enough money to open their own schools in metropolitan cities, construct a few floors to run guest houses, built other assets in cities before retirement! Something just impossible on a Bishop's

salary!

The dark and ugly side of churches will always find supporters among the congregation, clergy, elected members of various managing committees and the hierarchy. Earlier, I would burn with a red hot anger over these Robbed Robbers! But not today. I rest in the comforting assurance that they will be held accountable and will face the wrath of God, for there is nothing permanent and durable in this world. We as laymen must continue living our lives as true believers! My heart aches when I reflect on the selflessness of missionaries who surrendered

themselves in the service of God. Their journeys to far flung places along with their families, that include babies and toddlers, just moves me to marvel at their resilience, commitment and dedication in the service of God! They truly denied themselves, took up their cross to spread the Good News and serve the people in His name leaving a legacy, only to be destroyed by the New Age hierarchical church order. Corruption is so embedded in the priesthood today that the honest and sincere young clergy get drawn into the system and become drunk on the glitter and glamour of a lifestyle lost in the ways of the flesh

and of the world! They become stubborn supporters of Bishops because they see how tasty the jam is spread on both sides of their morning toast!

History has revealed to us what shocking and unimaginable horrors the churches have committed and the secrecy is well guarded. We are so ready to dismiss the churches' wrongdoings as rumours or someone having a hidden agenda or dismissing it as church politics that need to be brushed aside or taken with a pinch of salt.

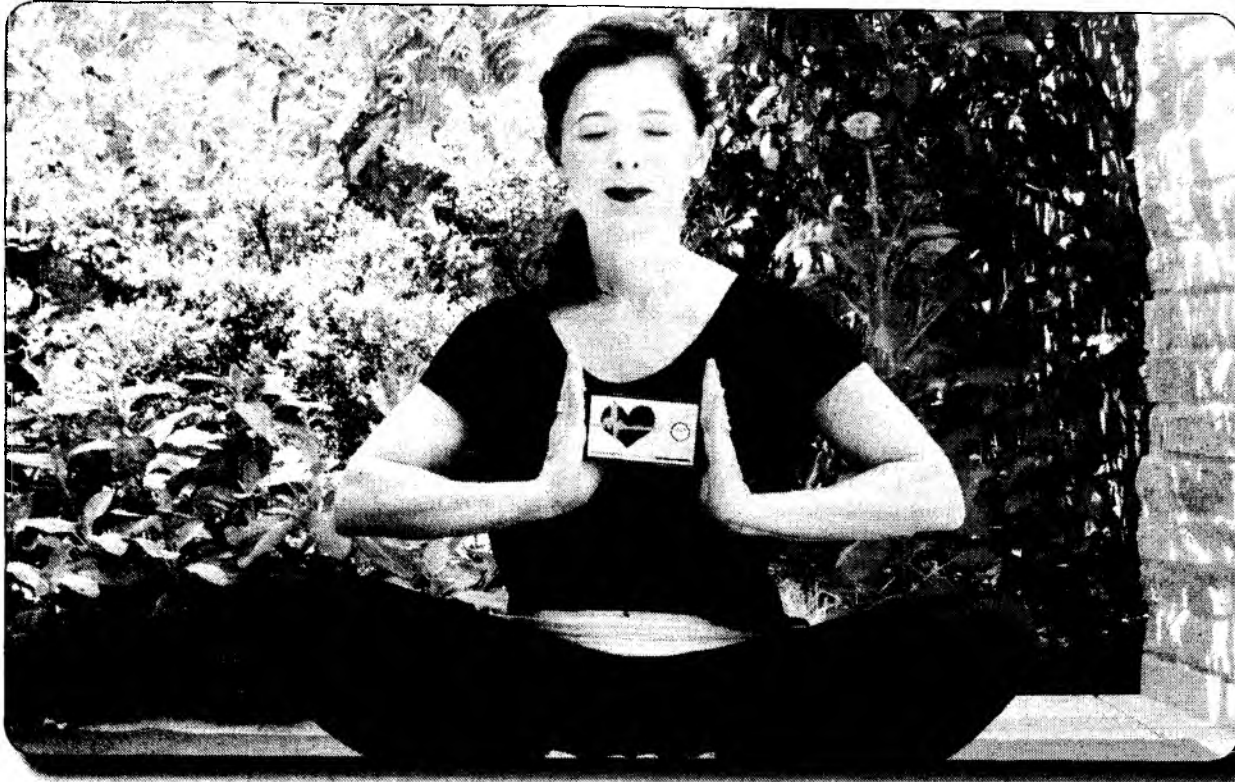
The impeccably ornate regalia worn by Bishops is designed to project a halo of holiness and infallibility to believers. We are mesmerized by the aura of the

'costume'! And Not by the 'Lowliness' that Christ demonstrates by His life on this earth! I know I'll be widely criticised but I draw my strength and support from 1TheSonianIvs 3: We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yours etc.,
Kevin Phillips
Shillong - 19

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Can meditation improve impact of social media on mental health?



Social media has evolved into an inseparable part of our lives, with its substantial role in connecting people, sharing information and expressing creativity. However, the excessive usage of social media, especially by Gen Z, has adversely impacted people's mental health.

In this article, we will delve deeper into how the mental health of young individuals is impacted by social media, underlining the adverse consequences, such as depression and low self-esteem, while highlighting the potential benefits of meditation as a form of therapy.

The unparalleled influence of social media on Gen Z

Gen Z is the first generation to have been raised entirely in the digital era, with social media as an

essential part of their lives from the beginning. They are consumers and creators who utilise platforms such as Instagram, X, and Facebook to communicate their experiences, thoughts, and imaginations with the world.

Owing to this, they often find themselves using these platforms more frequently and for prolonged durations, getting lost in the intricate maze of the digital world. Here are some of the ways through which social media hampers the mental health of young individuals, leading to conditions like low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and much more.

Social media has emerged as a platform where individuals reveal their best moments, often edited and

carefully curated to deliver an idealised version of their lives. This can fuel unrealistic expectations among the younger generation, leading to low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority. Comparing one's reality with the highlight reels of others can be detrimental, driving dissatisfaction and negative emotions.

While individuals often compare themselves with the flawless lives of others on social media, it is a flawed practice as it involves assessing one's existence based on limited and usually manufactured glimpses of others' lives. This can result in feelings of jealousy and envy, negatively affecting one's mental health.

Similar to conventional forms of bullying, cyberbullying can cause

considerable damage to an individual's self-esteem. In this regard, GenZ, who is often extensively involved in social media, may find it challenging to escape cyberbullying, resulting in feelings of remorse, anxiety and seclusion.

Sleep disruption

Moreover, excessive screen time, coupled with the addictive characteristics of social media, can disrupt sleep patterns and affect sleep quality. This can lead to irritability, depression and anxiety and worsen mental health problems.

How meditation can play a transformative role in addressing these challenges with its healing benefits?

Meditation can be a powerful remedy to mitigate social media's impact on individuals' mental health. By relaxing and focusing the mind on the present moment,

this age-old practice offers a host of benefits, including:

Stress reduction

Numerous studies have shown that practising meditation can effectively reduce stress levels. By embracing it, GenZ can calm their minds and stay motivated. The practice also furnishes a host of approaches to managing stress, enhancing mental resilience and facilitating in navigating the challenges of social media more effectively.

Alleviates anxiety

As mentioned earlier, excessive social media usage can induce anxiety due to the continuous flow of information and social comparisons. In this regard, meditation can be an ideal solution to ease anxiety by allowing individuals to stay mindful and focused on the present moment, thus relieving stress and

soothing the mind.

The practice is also renowned for reducing the symptoms of depression by enhancing emotional control and self-awareness.

Enhances self-esteem

Regular meditation also boosts self-acceptance, self-compassion, and a deeper relationship with oneself, alleviating the negative impact of social media's unrealistic standards and comparisons. As a result, individuals experience significant growth in their self-esteem.

As young individuals continue to navigate the digital world, they must prioritise their mental well-being. An effective way to do so is by embracing mindfulness practices like meditation into their daily routine. This could allow them to balance their online presence and their real personalities while nurturing compassion for themselves. (LANSLife)

5 must read books before the year ends

As the year draws to a close, the literary world beckons with five captivating recommendations that promise to enrich your reading experience. Each book on this curated list offers a unique journey into realms of imagination, contemplation, and emotion.

These diverse and captivating books offer a range of perspectives, from the future of artificial intelligence to historical struggles and personal reflections. Choose one or explore them all to enrich your reading list before the year ends.

And the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro: Immerse yourself in this thought-provoking and emotionally resonant novel by Nobel Prize-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro. "Klara and the Sun" explores the implications of artificial intelligence and the essence of humanity through the eyes of an AI companion. As the year wraps up, delve into this beautifully crafted narrative that raises questions about love, consciousness, and the future.

Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir: If you're a fan of science fiction and thrilling space adventures, "Project Hail Mary" is a must-read. Andy Weir, the author of "The Martian," takes you on another gripping journey through space, science, and survival. Join Ryland Grace on a mission to save humanity, filled with humor, ingenuity, and unexpected twists. It's a page-turner that will keep you hooked until the very end.

Mindful Marketing by Zebra Learn: ZebraLearn, a new-age publishing company, has joined forces with Rajesh Srinivasan, a contemporary marketing strategy consultant and author, to launch a first-of-its-kind cartoon book "Mindful Marketing" designed to master modern marketing. This innovative book features a series of pocket cartoons and frameworks accompanied by insightful commentary from the author, Rajesh. The book applies a lens of humour and thoughtfulness to spotlight prevailing practices that impede organizations in the realms of marketing, branding, culture, and more.

The Four Winds by Kristin Hannah: Kristin Hannah, known for her powerful storytelling, delivers another compelling historical fiction novel set during the Great Depression. "The Four Winds" follows the journey of a woman named Elsa as she faces the challenges of poverty, dust storms, and societal expectations. This poignant tale explores resilience, love, and the strength of the human spirit, making it a timely and impactful read.

The Midnight Library by Matt Haig: As the year comes to a close, take a moment to reflect on life's choices with "The Midnight Library" by Matt Haig. This enchanting novel follows Nora Seed as she navigates a library that allows her to explore different versions of her life. Filled with philosophical insights and a touch of magic, this book encourages readers to ponder the infinite possibilities that shape our existence. (LANSLife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 17, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

On your solar return chart Moon sextile Mars indicating developments and good progress. Professionally you will aim high and will need to put in extra effort. Business persons may make big plans and professionals could look at added responsibilities. All this will involve hard work. Travel brings in opportunities, expands your viewpoint. Some new associations will be formed and these could also be long lasting. Financially you will do very well. You could also acquire a vehicle or property. An intimate relationship can also commence which will have a soothing effect on you. There could be some fluctuations in energy levels so take care of health matters.

'This week for you'

Aries : (March 21 - April 20) Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced by the planetary combination. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Reliability and creativity will take you places now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would brilliantly and effectively handle difficult projects at work. Business associates bring good news and lucrative terms and opportunities.

Taurus : (April 21 - May 21) Friendship, love, romance and children are highlighted. You would have new attitudes towards family, finance, and social relationships. Home and family matters capture your attention and are a strong source of pride. It is a time when worldly matters are not as important to you. Use this energy to find ways to improve your interpersonal relations and your home and work environment. You might be a bit of a showman at this time. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and for joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Gemini : (May 22 - June 21) With communication, creativity and judgment you gain money and influence in business ventures. Success brings status and respect as you dominate the professional scene. This is the right time to participate in community events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. This phase brings rewards and recognition in your professional life. You would also work hard with an inclination towards more detailed work, and it can get to you at times. Personal projects are on an upswing. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Income from foreign sources could also figure this time. You feel on top of things and replete with good health and energy.

Cancer : (June 22 - July 22) A period of hard work and effort is in your forecast. You would be taking on new responsibilities and will enjoy the challenges. A new set-up in an existing home or a new home altogether may be part of the picture in the coming weeks. There will also be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your domestic routines, comfort, and feeling of security. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your need for a solid foundation—a place to return to when the rest of the world gets to you. Do not isolate yourself when you are feeling down. Friends and loved ones will support you and listen to you when you air your feelings.

Leo : (July 23 - August 23) Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routine tend to speed up now. You are required to do a balancing act, and something big is in the pipeline. There may be some confusion about your dreams and ideas regarding your career. Give yourself time to digest everything before you make a move. You would also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Increased energy for health routines and work is with you.

Virgo : (August 24 - September 22) There may be debates and discussions in family and you may face some opposition. You are likely to exert your energy and initiative into actively pursuing a rewarding love life, social amusement, and pleasure in general. You have a

likeable and competitive temperament. There is a stronger desire for creative endeavors, athletics and risk-taking pursuits. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner and a few conflicts are possible. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others on a mental level. You have a stronger need than usual for intellectual stimulation.

Libra : (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings good-luck for love and romance. Ego confrontations with family members are possible now, but the best way to handle this is to do your best to strengthen your relationship with your family and your home base. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself, so that regardless of what you meet in the outside world over the next weeks, you have a secure place to return to. Besides spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and nourishing your inner foundation that support you and your growth.

Scorpio : (October 24 - November 22) Associates at work might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you status. You can improve your love life by bringing more understanding and sharing views with each other. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people and of your immediate environment. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is your best bet now. If health is affected, fevers or infections are more likely.

Sagittarius : (November 23 - December 21) This period brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. You explore and search, make new connections, and pay attention to your immediate environment. Give other people a little extra time and attention, notice their efforts on your behalf, and strengthen your connections. You are more curious and alert than usual, and you could be quite busy with work. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment. Siblings, neighbours, close relatives, friends, and co-workers may play a more important role than usual in your life. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical.

Capricorn : (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration promotes your luck in work related areas. You would be especially fond of home and family life. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental now. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. There would be a bright opportunity to travel, learning or the publishing of a project. Getting your finances on track will be necessary at this time. Do your best to avoid letting emotions rule over good judgment when it comes to expenses and other financial matters. Share your thoughts and feelings with others and you may be surprised at the support you receive from close friends and loved ones.

Aquarius : (January 21 - February 18) Pay close attention to performance, it will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You will have the ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and can expect good returns from overseas business. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more spiritual or idealistic pursuits. A sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself is something that is entering your life now. There may be a development of romance at your work place. You turn your attention on fitness and diet programs.

Pisces : (February 19 - March 20) There would be happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening of your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background. Your dreams and ideas about intimacy come into focus, but could also bring the flaws in this area of your life to light. An income boost is likely in this period. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the physical world of the senses, and this is a time to start fresh in terms of how you arrange your life in order to feel a sense of value and worthiness. It is also a wonderful time for taking moments to please yourself through earthy, tactile, and comforting endeavours.

Mastering skincare in your 40s



Entering your 40s is a significant milestone, and with it comes a shift in your skincare needs. While wisdom and experience are earned over the years, so are fine lines, changes in skin texture, and other signs of ageing. It's a pivotal moment to reassess your skincare routine and adopt a more thoughtful approach to skincare. By steering clear of prevalent pitfalls and addressing skin concerns appropriately, you can effortlessly maintain a healthy complexion.

Neglecting sun protection

One of the most crucial skincare mistakes in your 40s is neglecting sun protection. Sun exposure can lead to premature ageing, fine lines, hyperpigmentation, and even skin cancer. To counteract this, make sure to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least SPF 30 every day, regardless of the weather. Consider using products with added antioxidants for added protection against UV damage.

Overlooking retinol and vitamin C

Retinol and Vitamin C are powerhouse ingredients for maintaining youthful skin. They help stimulate collagen production, reduce fine lines, and combat pigmentation issues. Incorporate a retinol serum at night and a Vitamin C serum in the morning for a powerful, anti-ageing regimen. Start with lower concentrations and gradually increase as your skin builds tolerance.

Ignoring hydration

In the 40s, your skin's natural moisture barrier weakens, leading to dryness and loss of elasticity. Opt for a hydrating moisturizer with ingredients like hyaluronic acid, ceramides, and glycerin to lock in moisture and maintain plump, supple skin. For individuals in search of a substantial and long-lasting enhancement, the bio-remodeling treatment, commonly known as the Profilo

procedure, is a commendable option. Distinguished by its exceptionally high concentration of ultrapure hyaluronic acid, this procedure deeply nourishes the skin's layers, promoting heightened hydration, elasticity, and suppleness across various areas of the body, including the face, neck, décolletage, and hands. As a result, it not only stimulates the production of collagen and elastin but also rejuvenates it effectively.

Over-exfoliating

Over-exfoliation can exacerbate skin sensitivity and lead to irritation. While exfoliation is important, limit it to 2-3 times a week and choose gentle exfoliants like glycolic acid. Avoid harsh physical scrubs that can be too abrasive for mature skin.

Not tailoring your skincare routine

Sticking to the same products and routines from your 20s or 30s can be a typical oversight. Your skin's requirements have changed, and a generic approach may no longer suffice. Reevaluate your skincare products and consider incorporating anti-ageing ingredients like peptides, antioxidants, and growth factors to support collagen production and skin repair. Consult with a dermatologist or skincare specialist. They can provide personalized advice, identify skin concerns, and recommend appropriate treatments or procedures to address them.

Failing to prioritize sleep and nutrition

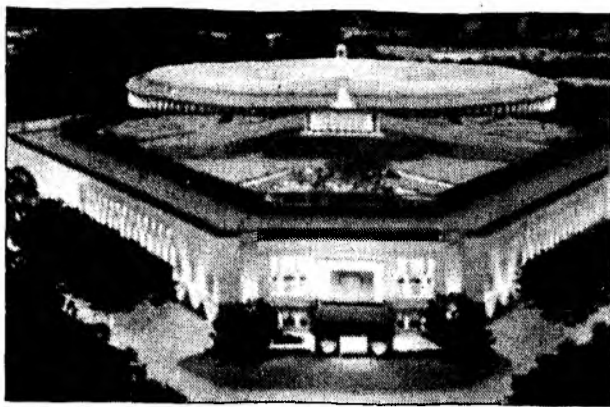
A healthy lifestyle is integral to maintaining youthful skin. Ensure you get adequate sleep and follow a balanced diet rich in antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamins. These nutrients play a crucial role in supporting skin health from the inside out.

It's never too late to start taking care of your skin, and the benefits will be well worth the effort. (LANSLife)

Parl security breach case: Accused sent to seven-day police custody

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: A Delhi court on Saturday sent Mahesh Kumawat, arrested in the Parliament security breach case, to police remand for seven days for custodial interrogation after the prosecution alleged that he was involved in the conspiracy for the "last two years". Special Judge Hardeep Kaur remanded Kumawat in Delhi police's custody after the public prosecutor told the court that the accused "wanted to create anarchy in the country so that they can compel the government to meet their unjust and illegal demands".

"He was in contact with other accused persons in hatching the conspiracy for the last two years. He helped the mastermind accused, Lalit Jha, in the destruction of the mobile phone to destroy evidence and to hide the larger conspiracy," the prosecutor told the court, adding he was required to



be questioned to unearth the entire conspiracy.

The court passed the order on an application filed by the city police which sought his custody for 15 days.

The defence counsel opposed the police application, claiming that the Kumawat was arrested without any reason in a violation of his fundamental rights.

During the arguments, the prosecutor told the court that the custody of the accused

was required "to find the actual motive behind the attack and his association with enemy country and terrorist organisations".

According to Delhi police, Kumawat has been arrested on charges of destruction of evidence and criminal conspiracy.

It was the sixth arrest in the case. Kumawat had come on his own to a police station along with Lalit Jha on Thursday night and both

were handed over to the Special Cell. He was being questioned since then, the police said. He was a member of the now-deleted Bhagat Singh Fan Club page created by the accused, they said.

Bengal LoP alleges Lalit Jha's association with TMC youth wing

Leader of Opposition in West Bengal Assembly Suvendu Adhikari on Saturday alleged that Lalit Jha, the alleged mastermind in the Parliament security breach case, was associated with the youth wing of the Trinamool Congress. The TMC, however, dismissed the allegation.

In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror attack on Wednesday, two men jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour, released yellow-coloured smoke from canisters and raised slogans, before being overpowered by the MPs.

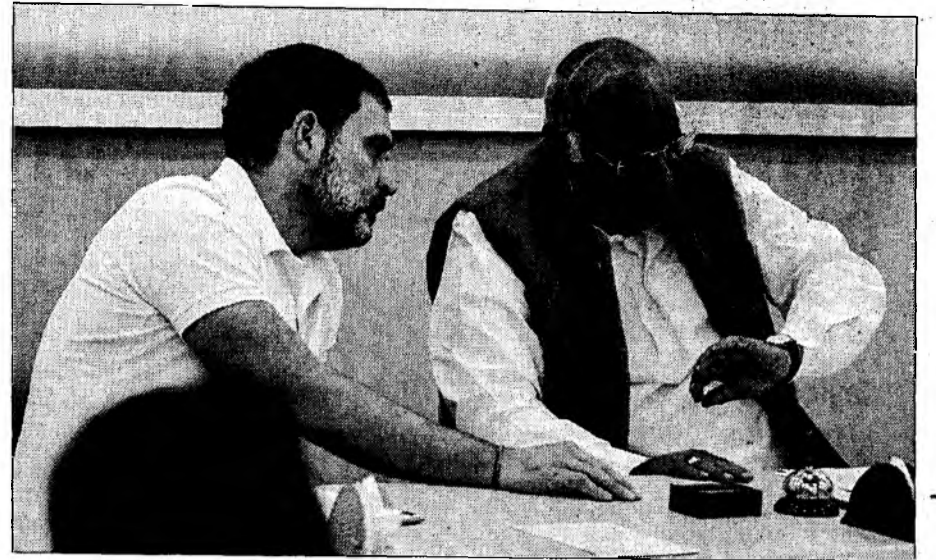
"Lalit Jha is rank and file of Trinamool Yuva," Adhikari, the BJP MLA from Nandigram, told reporters at Bagdogra airport.

Adhikari claimed that Jha's photos with various TMC leaders, including MLA and councillors and TMC Yuva leaders in the state, have come to the fore.

"He is a known face of Trinamool Congress youth wing," he alleged. Jha and his family members, who hail from Bihar's Darbhanga, have been living in Kolkata for some decades now.

Dismissing Adhikari's allegation, TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh told PTI that Jha was never associated with the ruling party in West Bengal. "The biggest question is why were passes to the two persons who breached the Parliament security given by a BJP MP," Ghosh said.

BJP MP Pratap Simha had issued visitor passes to the two persons. (PTI)



Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge with party leader Rahul Gandhi during a meeting at AICC headquarters, in New Delhi, on Saturday. (PTI)

Unemployment, rising prices behind Parliament security breach: Rahul

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Saturday said unemployment and rising prices were behind the December 13 Parliament security breach.

Speaking to reporters after an election strategy meeting with leaders of the party's Gujarat unit here, Gandhi said it's the youngsters who are not getting jobs due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's policies who breached Parliament security.

He said the breach was the eruption of an anger long simmering among the youth.

"The biggest issue in the country is that of unemployment, which is boiling all over the country. The country's youth are not getting employment due to the policies of Modi ji," he said.

BJP derided Gandhi saying he "always talks trash" and claimed that unemployment was at its lowest in the last six years.

"Rahul Gandhi never disappoints; always talks trash. For the record, unemploy-

ment in India is at 3.2%, the lowest in six years.

"Instead, Rahul Gandhi and I.N.D.I Alliance leaders must explain the close linkages of those involved in the Parliament breach with Congress, TMC, and CPI(M). Rahul Gandhi, in particular, must clarify his association with Asim Sarode, who was part of Bharat Jodo Yatra and has offered to provide legal aid to the intruders," BJP IT in-charge Amit Malviya said in a post on X.

In another post, he highlighted Congress MP Dhiraaj Sahu's corruption with caption "Don't 'Donate for Dynasty.'" Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge said the breach was a serious issue yet the Union Home Minister is not ready to give a statement on it in Parliament.

"The security breach is a serious issue and the government should pay attention to it. We are asking for the Home Minister's statement in Parliament, but the Home Minister is not saying anything, neither is he giving a statement. He is speaking in TV shows, but not inside

Parliament.

"This is not good for democracy. But there is no meaning of this to those people who do not believe in democracy," Kharge told reporters.

In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror attack on Wednesday, two men jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour, released yellow smoke from canisters and shouted slogans, before they were overpowered by the MPs.

"Where are the jobs? The youths are desperate. We have to focus on this issue and give jobs to the youth," Gandhi also said in a Hindi post on X.

"There has definitely been a security lapse, but the reason behind it is the country's biggest issue - unemployment," Gandhi said.

Kharge when asked about Amit Shah accusing the Congress of politicising the issue, said, "Home Minister Shah talks about us to seek votes and abuses Nehru ji to seek votes. (PTI)

National nuggets

Rahul summoned to appear in UP court

SULTANPUR (UP), Dec 16: The MP-MLA Court here on Saturday summoned Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on January 6 in a case in which he has been accused of making certain remarks against Union Home Minister Amit Shah, a counsel said. The court had earlier directed Gandhi to appear on Saturday but he did not appear. The case stems from a lawsuit filed on August 4, 2018 by Bharatiya Janata Party leader Vijay Mishra in which he accused Rahul Gandhi of making objectionable remarks against Amit Shah. Mishra's advocate Santosh Pandey said that the MP-MLA court of Sultanpur had summoned Gandhi on December 16 in the case, but he did not appear. Pandey said that on November 18, Judge Yogesh Yadav after arguments reserved the verdict and posted the next hearing for November 27 and summoned Gandhi to appear on December 16. Mishra is a former chairman of a cooperative bank and a resident of Hanumanganj (PTI) (PTI)

250 militants present at launchpads across border

SRINAGAR, Dec 16: About 250 to 300 militants are present at launchpads across the border "waiting to infiltrate" Jammu and Kashmir, a top BSF officer said on Saturday. The officer, however, added that security forces were alert and would foil any cross-border infiltration attempts. "There are intelligence inputs that 250-300 militants are waiting at launchpads, but we and the Army have dominated all the vulnerable patches and are alert," Inspector General BSF, Ashok Yadav told reporters in Pulwama district of south Kashmir. He said the brave jawans of the BSF and Army were alert in the border areas and would foil any infiltration attempts. "We are confident of foiling any infiltration bid," Yadav added. He said the connect between the security forces and the people of Kashmir has increased over the last few years. "If people cooperate with us we can take developmental activities forward in a better way," he said. Meanwhile a fire broke out inside an ITBP camp on the outskirts of Srinagar city on Saturday evening, officials said. They said the fire broke out in a shed inside the camp in the Pantha Chowk area here. There was no loss of life or injury to anyone, the officials said. (PTI)

PM Modi says development of small cities key to developed India resolve

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday that his guarantee begins from where hope from everyone else ends and asserted that development of smaller cities is at the centre of his resolve to make India a developed country.

Addressing the beneficiaries of the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra through video conferencing, the prime minister said, "With resolve of a developed India, 'Modi's guarantee vehicle' is reaching every corner of country." In one month, the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra has reached thousands of villages and cities and most of them are small towns, he

added.

Modi said his government is trying to ease troubles of everyone like a family member.

"This is our government that has helped the poor, farmers, small businessmen and various other sections of society. Modi's guarantee begins after hope from everyone else ends," he said.

The prime minister said that for a long time after independence, benefits of development were limited to a few big cities, but his government is focussing on development of smaller cities and that would strengthen the foundation for a developed India.

He also urged everyone to

avail the benefits of various government schemes.

"Even though Modi has flagged off the Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra, the truth is that today the countrymen have taken command of that yatra. At a place where the journey halts, people from other villages or cities start leading the journey," he said.

Modi also flagged off the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Mizoram, the five states where assembly elections were held recently. The yatra was launched for other states earlier, but the launch for the five states got delayed due to the model

code of conduct in place due to the elections.

He also interacted with beneficiaries from various states who have availed various government schemes.

Interacting with one such beneficiary, he said 'atmanirbhar' women of the country are not just sustaining themselves, but also becoming a boon for others.

Modi said his government is working relentlessly for such committed and hard-working people.

Earlier during the event, Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said that everyone's work now gets done expeditiously as the people of the country have become 'Modiji's VIP. (PTI)

'Our foundational aspects of cultural, spiritual unity facing challenges'

CHENNAI, Dec 16: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Saturday said a concerted campaign to challenge the foundational aspects of India was on, but this misguided interrogation was historically inaccurate and betrayed a lack of understanding.

Despite the immense diversity in terms of languages, religions and customs, the people of India were united by a common thread of a shared culture and heritage, he emphasised while speaking at the 'Thirumurai Thiruvizha' celebrations here.

The one-day divine festival was held on the occasion of the celestial wedding of Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai with Lord Sundareswarar. The event held at Neelankarai, East Coast Road, saw the participation of 10 Saiva Atheenams (Mutt

Pontiffs), former MLC and BJP national co-in-charge of Tamil Nadu Ponguleti Sudhakar Reddy, among others.

Speaking at the function, Singh said, "There has been a concerted campaign in recent times to challenge the foundational aspects of Bharat's cultural and spiritual unity. Certain mischievous elements persistently propagate the notion that India is not a nation, but a mere union of distinct states." This misguided interrogation of India's national and cultural identity was historically inaccurate and betrayed either a lack of understanding of cultural nationalism in the Indian context or a profound hatred for all things Indian, he added. "Questioning the oneness of Bharat is a wrong idea, a bad idea. The disruptive and secessionist tenden-

cies that have emerged are being effectively addressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is actively reinforcing the national fabric of our cultural unity," he said.

Under the far-sighted leadership of the Prime Minister, the entire nation is being brought together physically and emotionally, Singh said, and pointed to the connectivity through rail, roads, ports and airports, cheap data and 5G network, and development of North-Eastern states. The Defence Minister further said the Prime Minister consistently emphasised the contribution of Tamil people and their rich culture to the Indian identity. His deep personal affinity and emotional attachment to the great Tamil traditions is known to everyone, he added. (PTI)

Cong to launch crowdfunding campaign

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: The Congress on Saturday announced the launch of its nationwide Donate for Desh crowdfunding campaign for generating resources for the party ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The campaign will be launched on December 18 by Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge in Delhi. During a press conference at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters, Congress General Secretary (Organisation) KC Venugopal and Treasurer Ajay Makhen said Indians above the age of 18 can donate a minimum of Rs 138 or in multiples such as Rs 1,380, Rs 13,800 and so on to the campaign. Venugopal said the initiative was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's historic 1920-21 *Tilak Swaraj Fund*. (PTI)

Malviya asks INDIA bloc to clarify close link with those involved in breach

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: Hours after Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said that unemployment and inflation are the reasons behind the Parliament security breach, the BJP hit back saying that he and INDIA bloc leaders must explain the close linkages of those involved in the Parliament breach with Congress, TMC, and CPI(M).

BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya in a post on X said, "Rahul Gandhi never disappoints, always talks trash. For the record, unemployment in India is at 3.2 per cent, the lowest in six years."

Slamming the Congress and the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc parties, Malviya said, "Instead, Rahul Gandhi and I.N.D.I Alliance leaders must explain the close linkages of those involved in the Parliament breach with Congress, TMC, and CPI(M). Rahul Gandhi, in particular, must clarify his association with Asim Sarode, who was part of Bharat Jodo Yatra and has offered to provide legal aid to the intruders."

Earlier in the day, while speaking to the

media at the party headquarters, Rahul Gandhi said, "Security breach has happened. But why it has happened. Unemployment is a big reason in the country. And due to policies of the Modi government youths are not getting employment opportunities. (Security) Breach has happened and main reason behind this is unemployment and inflation."

Meanwhile, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla Saturday informed members of the House he has formed a "high-powered committee" to review various aspects of security in the Parliament complex and formulate an action plan to ensure that the December 13 incident is not repeated.

In a letter to Lok Sabha members, Birla also said the report of the high-level inquiry committee set up by the Union home ministry will "soon" be shared with the House.

"In addition, I have also constituted a High Powered Committee which will review various aspects of security in the Parliament Complex and formulate a concrete action plan to ensure that such incidents do not recur," he said in the letter. (Agencies)

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"In addition, I have also constituted a High Powered Committee which will review various aspects of security in the Parliament Complex and formulate a concrete action plan to ensure that such incidents do not recur," he said in the letter. (Agencies)

President Murmu, PM Modi pay homage to fallen heroes of 1971 war

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday led the nation in paying tribute to the fallen heroes of the 1971 war that led to redrawing of the political map of South Asia and ended the horrific violence unleashed by the Pakistani army on millions of Bangladeshi people. The remarkable victory in the war following the surrender of more than 90,000 Pakistani soldiers on December 16, 1971, resulted in the birth of Bangladesh as an independent country.

India commemorates December 16 as Vijay Diwas.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, paying his heartfelt tribute to the brave soldiers, said their sacrifice and unwavering spirit will forever be etched in the nation's history. "Today, on Vijay Diwas, we pay heartfelt tributes to

all the brave heroes who dutifully served India in 1971, ensuring a decisive victory. Their valour and dedication remain a source of immense pride for the nation," he said in a post on X.

"Their sacrifices and unwavering spirit will forever be etched in the people's hearts and our nation's history. India salutes their courage and remembers their indomitable spirit," Modi said.

President Murmu said, "The nation remembers with gratitude the selfless sacrifice made by our armed forces during the 1971 war. On Vijay Diwas, I pay homage to the bravehearts who displayed unparalleled courage and achieved historic victory." Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also recalled the "indomitable courage and valour" of armed forces

Remarkable victory in war following surrender of more than 90,000 Pakistani soldiers on December 16, 1971, resulted in birth of Bangladesh as a free country

personnel in the war.

"We are proud of our armed forces who have fearlessly protected our country in every circumstance. Their sacrifice and service will forever be etched in our hearts," he said.

Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt, Chief

of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan, Chief of the Army Staff General Manoj Pande, Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral R Hari Kumar, Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane and Vice Chief of the Air Staff Air Marshal AP Singh also paid homage. (PTI)

India, Oman adopt vision document; resolve to conclude trade deal soon

NEW DELHI, Dec 16: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq on Saturday adopted a vision document to shore up bilateral cooperation in around 10 key areas and pushed for concluding a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) as early as possible during their "productive" talks to inject new momentum in India-Oman strategic ties.

PM Modi and the Omani ruler also discussed the situation arising out of the Hamas-Israel conflict, the challenge of terrorism as well as the larger need to try and achieve a two-state solution to the Palestine issue as a way forward, according to Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra. The two sides also announced the third tranche of Oman-India joint investment fund worth USD 300 million (around Rs 2,500 crore) that would be used for channelising investment into the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy.

The investment fund was



President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Sultan of Oman Haitham Bin Tariq, at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, on Saturday. (PTI)

started as a 50:50 joint venture between the SBI and Oman investment authority with the first tranche of USD 100 million and the second one of USD 200 million.

At a media briefing, the foreign secretary said India and Oman also signed agreements providing for cooperation in the field of information technology, combating financial crimes, culture and one for the establishment of a Hindi chair of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations in Oman.

The Sultan of Oman arrived in Delhi on a state visit

on Friday - his first trip to India as the top leader of the influential Gulf nation.

"Today is a historic day in India-Oman relations as the Sultan of Oman is on a state visit to India after 26 years," Modi said in his remarks at the delegation-level dialogue.

Describing the talks between Modi and the visiting leader as "comprehensive and constructive", Kwatra said the India-Oman vision document focuses on building a partnership in 8-to-10 areas including maritime cooperation. (PTI)

"Time changes everything except something within us which is always surprised by change."

—Thomas Hardy

The Shillong Times

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Laws & the people

LAWs are meant for the people; not the other way round. Laws are meant for the well-being of the nation even as they seek to protect and promote the collective interests of the people. Both these propositions complement each other and are not contradictory in nature. This thought arises in the context of a row, raised from some quarters, about the long-term impact of the recent Supreme Court order in favour of abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution. The Modi-led central government, fresh from getting a consecutive second term in power following its electoral victory in the 2019 general elections, abrogated Article 370 without getting approval from both Houses of Parliament. Such an approval was not possible due to the ruling side's lack of sufficient numbers in the upper house. The argument now is that, by giving its nod to this action, the apex court has opened the way for any future government to amend the Constitution without necessarily getting approval from both houses of Parliament by a two-thirds majority.

The provision for a consensus by a two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha has been a major handicap for the central government to take several key decisions of the cabinet forward. A case in point was the GST bills that struggled to get a nod from the Rajya Sabha for its enactment as law. Finally, after years of hold-up, the Modi government turned these into finance bills in order to skirt the RS nod and get the President to sign it into a law. The nation needs to move forward in several areas but laws are standing in the way. The Constitution cannot be wished away. One cannot have a circus without a ring. At the same time, national interests are supreme and that directly translates into people's interests. Kashmir, per se, is not the only issue.

An unending wait serves no purpose. The Constitution is the last word, but its provisions must stand the test of time. Changes are in order. And so many changes are the need of the hour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has acted with firmness on Kashmir only in his second term though the issue was central to the BJP's and the RSS's scheme of things. He has however been amiss in taking similar strong steps on other matters of urgency such as judicial reforms, administrative reforms et al. The wear and tear of 75 years needs to be addressed, attended to and a healing process initiated to strengthen the national fabric. Prima facie the Supreme Court appears to have kept national interests above the rule book by citing its own justifications. History will judge if this move of the apex court stands scrutiny or whether it is one more step towards weakening the Constitutional values.

Last Article of the Year 2023

By H H Mohrmen

en, and the weaker sections of the population, gainfully employed, improve their living standards and enhance their income. As the population in the state grows, the need of the hour for the government of the day is to give its all-out effort to create employment for the youth of the state.

Artificial Intelligence,



Chat GPT, and Other Technological Developments In the middle of this year, I met a young friend who asked me if I had tried ChatGPT and I responded in the negative but told him, I am aware of it from reports in the media. Now Open AI is launching ChatGPT Plus which is a conversational AI that can chat, answer follow-up questions, and other activities. 2023 is going to be remembered

can bring. It is however safe to say that 2023 marks the arrival of AI in the internet space. The other side of the debate is also on the need to have some kind of a mechanism to monitor and control the use of AI, which is also very relevant. Hopefully, the country and the world over will be able to come to some

kind of agreement and come up with a policy to monitor and control AI and ensure that it does not have control over humans. As the race for AI begins with the Open AI launch, its version 4, the race for quantum computing and making quantum computers is also on now. The battle for AI and quantum computing supremacy is on. One thing certain is the fact that there is

"The media called the second term of the Government under the leadership of NPP, the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance 2.0 or MDA 2.0. The only thing that can be said about the first year of the MDA regime is that the first year has not seen the government launching new projects. The first year saw the implementation of old missions and projects from the last MDA government and most of the projects were loans the government took from the different international funding agencies."

as the year when AI got the limelight and the battle for AI supremacy has also started. What does AI have in store for the future? Your guess is as good as mine, but it is certain that it is going to largely influence the way people live and work in the future. There is fear the development of AI machines will lead to machines taking over many activities that people are engaged in and that it would also displace many jobs, but it is too early to say how much disruption AI

no turning back on the technology be it on AI technology or quantum Computing or quantum computers.

Climate Change and COP 28 at Dubai Initially, there were criticisms as to why all places COP 28 was held in Dubai the Mecca of oil production and export. It is the wrong place for any COP at all. But COP 28 was hailed as the beginning of moving away from fossil fuels. The 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference or

Conference, more commonly known as COP28, was the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference and was held at Expo City, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The conference was held from 30 November to 12 December and unlike the previous COP, the outcome of COP 28 is welcomed by many. The United Nations press statement said that the Climate Change Conference (COP28) closed with an agreement that signals the "beginning of the end" of the fossil fuel era. It also stated that the conference lays the ground for a swift, just, and equitable transition, underpinned by deep emission cuts and scaled-up finance to achieve the goal. It also stated that in a demonstration of global solidarity, negotiators from nearly 200 Parties came together in Dubai on a decision on the world's first 'global stocktake' to ratchet up climate action before the end of the decade. The goal is the overarching aim to keep the global temperature limit of 1.5°C within reach. It is therefore heartening that at least on the climate change issue, 2023 ends on a positive note and we are expecting that the increase in temperature will be under control.

At the Global level the Two Wars

However, the disheartening news comes from Ukraine and Palestine where the war is going on. Israel's attack on Palestine has compelled the churches in the area to cut down on the feast and fanfare in celebrating Christmas in the region this year. Christmas in the area where Jesus was born will not be the same as any Christmas before this year. Whether the world will see the end of wars or conflict in different parts of the globe is a question that no one can answer, but one hopes that in the year 2024, we will see the end of Wars and battles in the conflict zones all over the world and peace will reign all over.

Come clean go green

In the state where we have festivals organized left right and center and almost every day, the Winter Tales festival was like a breath of fresh air. Unlike other festivals, it is a festival of arts, food, and music, but it is more than that. The festival is also different from the other fests in the state because it was promoted as a green festival, where even the sheds and all the arrangements in the festival were made of sustainable materials like jute, bamboo, etc. The festival was organized by DaKti and was led by prominent artists of the state, Rida Gatphoh, Carreen Langstiech, and others. Perhaps it is the first time in the history of the state where a Festival also organized a panel discussion on waste management. The theme of the discussion was also very aptly titled, "Come clean, Go Green. Waste is also going to be a very prominent issue in the years to come.

Modi govt plays with data before election to show unemployment declining

Joblessness on ground too high to cope with, centre's claim under question

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

In a written reply on December 11, 2023 in the Lok Sabha during the current winter session, the Minister of State for Labour and Employment Rameshwar Teli claimed that unemployment rate in the country is on a declining trend over the years, obviously to give a political message to the electorate in general, and the unemployed youth in particular that the government under PM Narendra Modi's leadership is performing well on the unemployment front. However, only two days later it was discovered that 4 out of the 6 that breached the parliament security on December 13, were actually distressed on account of unemployment. One of the arrested woman claimed that she wanted to draw the attention of the Modi government to this.

We don't yet know, if she was able to draw the attention of the Centre on this worsening problem on the ground at a time when the Lok Sabha election 2024 is approaching and the RSS-BJP clan and the ministers and officials under PM Modi have been busy in image makeover of the government on the employment front. For quite some time PM Modi has been distributing appointment letters to unemployed youth and now it is being claimed that unemployment rates has been brought down over the years, which is not substantiated with adequate evidence even while the government data shows much more reduced rate than the much elevated levels of unemployment in the private data such as that of the Centre of Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE).

"The Modi government then only said that the report was under scrutiny. Finally government had accepted the data once the election results were out in May 2019, and made structural changes and merged the department to avoid any further humiliation. The data now being provided under the new system is therefore seen as suspect."

The government's Periodic Labour Force Survey produces several sets of data, and one of them always show unemployment rates to be very low. This data is based on 'usual status' which the government loves to quote since it is useful as a face saving device for the government. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and many national and international organizations have even raised their fingers on the quality of the government's data, which is an additional concern for the people of the country.

Let us look at the data that Minister of State for Labour and Employment, Teli quoted in parliament. It said that the unemployment rate in 2018-19 was 5.8 per cent, 4.8 per cent in 2019-20, 4.2 per cent in 2020-21, 4.1 per cent in 2021-22, and 3.2 per cent in 2022-23. Politically speaking, it improves the image of the Modi government. However, one should recall how the government had suppressed the data for 2017-18 just before Lok Sabha election 2019, exactly 5 years ago, when the unemployment rate reached 6.1 per cent which was at a 45 year high. There were resignations of top officials in protest and the data was leaked. The Modi government then only said that the report was under scrutiny. Finally government had accepted the data once the election results were out in May 2019, and made structural changes and merged the department to avoid any further humiliation. The data now being provided under the new system is therefore seen as suspect.

Nevertheless, if one wants to see another set of government data on the 'current weekly status basis' the situation may seem horribly worse for the Modi government. The annual report on the PLFS 2022-23 released in October 2023 reveals unemployment rate in 2017-18 and 2018-19 at 8.7 per cent, 8.8 per cent in 2019-20, 7.5 per cent in 2020-21, 6.6 per cent in 2021-22, and 5.1 per cent in 2022-23.

Such annual reports also put the unemployment rate lower than the quarterly data of PLFS. The quarterly data are collected from urban areas, while data on rural unemployment are available only in the annual data. This gives government a chance to show a more comfortable picture on total unemployment rate. The allegation of discrepancies apart, such as in ESI and PF quarterly and annual data.

Let us examine the Quarterly bulletins of 2022-23. The latest data released on November 29, 2023 shows that unemployment rate (CWS) in July-September 2022 was 7.4 per cent, October-December 2022 was 7.2 per cent, January-March 2023 was 6.8 per cent, April-June 2023 was 6.6 per cent and July-September 2023 was 6.6 per cent. Obviously, unemployment rate is too elevated to cope with, while the minister's claim in parliament does not tally with the real data.

The private data we have gives different pictures of unemployment in the country which is far worse than the government data. No wonder the Union Minister

of Labour and Employment has warned several times in the past that people should not believe the private data. For example, all India unemployment rate in November 2023 as per the CMIE data was as high as 9.16 per cent. It was only little less than 10.05 per cent in October which was at a 29-month high. The rural unemployment rate eased to 9.05 per cent in November from 10.82 per cent the previous month, while the urban unemployment rate rose to 9.39 per cent from 8.44 per cent.

Further, CMIE data showed that the labour participation rate (LPR) in November decreased to 41.11 per cent from 41.65 per cent in October. In urban areas, the LPR declined to 38.85 per cent in November from 39.36 per cent in October, and in rural India, it fell to 42.27 per cent from 42.83 per cent.

The ground reality is much worse than even CMIE data, since the counting system of the employed and unemployed is questionable. It should also be noted that a person getting one hour of paid work in a week is counted as employed, in a country where minimum wage is too low to enable workers to have healthy food. Additionally, a person, who has even left in search of jobs out of frustration because there is no job in the market, is not counted as unemployed. There are also many other lacunae in the data, including disguised unemployment in the agriculture sector and among self-employed youth. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Church politics at its worst

Editor, Apropos of the letter by one Vesuvius Diengdoh (ST December 15, 2023), as a Christian I am appalled and pained at the same time that the matter relating to the missing money in the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church has been raked up once again in the media, even as it is learnt that the matter is sub-judice. Whatever the concerns or exasperation one may have, I believe the only rational and sensible thing to do for members of the Church is to patiently wait for the completion of the judicial process and its impending outcome, apart from, maybe, any internal probing by the Church to find out the truth.

With regards to the Sohmlyng Mission, whatever decision taken by the Church Committee to wind up the mission must have been based on absolutely clear and convincing grounds as per the powers conferred upon it

as the governing authority of the Church. Moreover, I have also learnt that the Constitution of the Church lays down that it is up to the Church Committee, in its wisdom, to decide if and when it is necessary or not to place any matter before the general meeting of the members of the Church. I am sure any issue or grievance can be addressed to the Church leaders if it is done in the right spirit and honourably. I believe that the Church Committee is also fully aware of its responsibility and accountability.

Whether it is by coincidence or design, the aforementioned letter echoes the article published in this paper on May 29, 2023, as far as the seemingly vivid and detailed accounts of the developments in the Church in recent years on the issues raised, is concerned. Does it not raise some pertinent questions in the minds of the readers? Could it be possible that both were authored by the same person who is privy to all decisions of the Church but who has some axe to grind

against it? I hope not. But if so, then it would be church politics in its most detestable form.

The worst thing that could have happened to the Church is for its members to harbour a vicious mindset and motivated intent to smear and harm the Church instead of building it. Yes, no one can escape the judgement of God in this life or the life to come. Therefore, let us live not according to our own will but the will of God, knowing fully well that one day we shall have to be accountable to Him.

Yours etc.,
Victor Khongsdam,
Via email

Will the real Indian please stand up?

Editor, On January 26, we celebrate the Indian Republic Day, where a country that is blessed with multiple religions, castes and creed and with different customs and

traditions which are loved by many. Unfortunately today India is surrounded by many demons that are destroying the freedom of the country and are robbing Indians of their livelihoods and freedom like corruption, terrorism, unemployment and under-employment, child labor, illiteracy, corrupt political interferences and fanaticism. These demons are devouring the country and are robbing its peace and happiness.

We are also indulging in dividing ourselves into religions and castes instead of calling ourselves Indians. We prefer to identify ourselves as natives of the state of the country we hail from. Thus we ourselves create this Divide & Rule factor and this is clearly seen at the time of elections, when we vote not for the right party, but the party that has the candidate of our religion and caste.

There is a need today for every Indian to rise up and stand against the factors that divide the people. There is a need for every Indian to understand the need of being

united as Indians and pledge not just our loyalty to the country but also voice out the factors that break and divide our unity and fraternity. Today there is a need for every Indian to show that united we can build a happy country and we will close the gap created by disharmony and hatred in the country.

Will the Real Indian please arise and stand for the unity of the country and forget the scars left by unholy events and persons? Will the real Indian please stand up? Jai Hind!

Yours etc.,
Cajetan Peter D'Souza
Mumbai - 77

Govt must address unemployment problem

Editor, While the central government must admit its failure to provide security of Parliament and rectify the loopholes, it cannot run away from the

fact of rising unemployment and inflation on which the agitators ventilated their anguish inside the Parliament. Rahul Gandhi is absolutely right when he said, "Breach has doubtless happened. But the reason behind this is unemployment and price rise." Not only should the government take corrective actions to improve security of Parliament but also must provide social security for all the citizens of our country. Measures like unemployment allowance, ensuring job security for gig workers and other contractual employees, free higher education and health care for the needy are to be taken immediately so that young people of our country do not suffer from hopelessness.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

**"Knowing is not enough; we must apply.
Willing is not enough; we must do."**

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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Domestic Violence: A Pressing Concern

A high profile case of domestic violence against a leading businessman of the city has brought to the fore one of the most well-kept secret of polite society – domestic violence. There is a very thin line between domestic violence and sexual harassment. In the first case violence is usually inflicted by a husband (the physically stronger partner) on the wife usually inside the four walls of a home. Sexual harassment can happen at the workplace in colleges and universities where senior male professors acting as guides to research scholars demand sexual favours from their students. That such cases are not reported does not mean they are not happening. It's just that the victims are worried about their reputation and that of their families. Many wives put up with domestic violence especially if the husband is well-heeled and holds a good job and position. In the case of research students it would be difficult to find a new guide if they report the behaviour of the present one. Hence silence becomes an escape route.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4 recorded that Meghalaya has the highest rate of domestic violence among the North Eastern States of India. There is a misconception in the rest of the country and the world that Meghalaya being a matrilineal society, women enjoy greater privilege and would therefore not experience domestic violence. Nothing can be further from the truth. About 32% of married women admitted to having been beaten or physically maltreated. Domestic violence takes an ugly turn especially when the woman is beaten or hurled abuses by the husband in front of the children. In such cases the children experience mental trauma but cannot speak about what they witness since these are supposed to be closely guarded family secrets.

In the high profile case that came to light recently, the daughter is the complainant and the witness to the violence being unleashed on her mother. It can well be imagined what trauma she must be going through. Domestic violence is not just about the physical attacks but the verbal and emotional abuses hurled day after day that destroy the peace of the family and reduce the woman to a wretch. In several instances, women's movements are controlled and they are even under surveillance. This occurs due to trust deficit between the couple. At other times, when the woman confronts the husband because of his affairs with other women, she is silenced through violent words, emotional pressure and assaults.

The Meghalaya State Commission for Women gets several complaints on a monthly basis against domestic violence but there are many more women especially in the rural areas who simply take it and lump it. Often, women fear that if they call out the violence they will be abandoned/divorced and will then have to fend for themselves and their children since maintenance is something that only the educated class can claim if their husbands are government employees or working in the formal sector. For most women, therefore, life is lived daily between the devil and the deep sea. It is important for the judiciary to also be concerned with the growing number of cases of domestic violence against women that come before it and to take these cases with utmost seriousness.

Christmas and the Massacre of Children

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

"Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under...Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning... Refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Gospel according to Mathew 2:16ff)

What is currently happening in Gaza, under the Occupied territory of Israel, is nothing less than an ethnic cleansing and this mass killing of the children of Gaza is palpable to us here in this tiny Indian State, which is thousands of miles away. Ethnic cleansing is an established political/racial tool used for the homogenization of state and society. It is the mass killing against people who belong to the marginalized and unwanted ethnic group in order to establish an ethnically homogenous geographical space. Such campaigns have existed throughout both Biblical and non-Biblical worlds and had taken place for either ethnic or religious or political reason. However, the rise of extreme nationalist movements in the twentieth century led to an unprecedented level of ethnically motivated mass killings, like the Nazi massacre of six million Jews in the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, Rohingya persecution and the merciless killings of the Palestinians in Gaza today.

Christmas is here again, and I share with my fellow Palestinian Christians, Arabs, Jews and others around the globe who are numb-founded at the gravity of the conflict, the senseless bombardments, destruction of homes, hospitals and spiraling humanitarian crisis. The images of the burnt and dead bodies of children wrapped in plain clothes will never be eroded from our memories. Yes! We will never forget and whoever has ordered and is participating in the killings of innocent children is committing a heinous crime and the State of Israel is culpable for the genocide. At the same time, we must also not condone the atrocities perpetrated by non-state actors and terrorists' groups of all hues. They are equally guilty for crimes against humanity.

The call to cancel Christmas celebrations and festivi-

ties is valid and it should not be a mere token of protest, religious or political, rather to fully empathize with the people of Gaza irrespective of their creed and religion, and wherever we must fiercely convey the message that this genocide with 1.7 million people displaced, and 7,000 children killed must end immediately. It is our spiritual and moral obligation to call out - "Enough of Death, Enough of Destruction; End the Occupation." This must be our prayer and become part of our liturgy this Christmas.

Does this current mass killing resonate with the

force and oppression against the people.

The Bible narratives explicitly elucidate the events which led up to the birth of Jesus. In the first Christmas both Joseph and Mary, (Jesus's parents), were migrant labourers who wandered from one place to another in search of livelihood. When Mary conceived the child (Jesus) they returned to Bethlehem to register for the census, and it was no coincidence that the time had arrived for her to give birth. Despite both Joseph and Mary being sons and daughters of Bethlehem, they did not own land and Mary couldn't find a place

he was committed to speaking truth to power and to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and occupied people of Palestine.

Herod's tyranny was well known as he ordered the execution of his wife and three sons on suspicion that they were planning to murder him. He would execute anyone whom he believed posed a threat to his rule. However, some bible scholars argue that there are no parallels to the narratives of Mathew as to the massacre of innocent children below two years of age and it was written to address the Jewish readers of the time who were familiar with the story of Jewish captivity in Egypt and the killings of the newborns by Pharaoh. It was written specifically for the Jewish readers and to bring a comparison between Moses and Jesus as the liberators of the occupied and oppressed people, in Egypt and under the Romans respectively. Be that as it may, Mary and Joseph did not forget the sufferings they have undergone under the occupation and would never forget the bruises that Jesus, their son, had to bear for the Jews, Arabs, Greeks, the slaves, the fishing community, the outcast, the women and marginalized people of Palestine under the Roman yoke. As Rev Munther Isaac, Pastor of Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, said, "This is what Christmas means to us, that we see Jesus being born among those who have lost everything, who are under the rubble." And Jesus is being born amidst the massacred children of Gaza.

We shall pray for peace in Palestine; we shall pray for peace of Israel; we shall pray for peace in the World, but we will never forget those images of the bruised, battered and massacred children of Gaza, until Justice is done.

To my fellow Christians here in Shillong, let us be wary of the influence of the theology of Christian Zionism which calls for Israel to reduce Gaza to a parking lot. This negates the Good News which the angels announced to the shepherds on the first Christmas night.

(The writer is theological-ly trained in Bishop's College Kolkata and was formerly working with the Presbyterian Church, Mawkhar, Shillong)

"Christmas is here again, and I share with my fellow Palestinian Christians, Arabs, Jews and others around the globe who are numb-founded at the gravity of the conflict, the senseless bombardments, destruction of homes, hospitals and spiraling humanitarian crisis. The images of the burnt and dead bodies of children wrapped in plain clothes will never be eroded from our memories. Yes! We will never forget and whoever has ordered and is participating in the killings of innocent children is committing a heinous crime and the State of Israel is culpable for the genocide."

nativity story during the birth of Jesus? Two thousand years ago when Jesus was born, Palestine was under the occupation of a foreign regime, i.e. the Romans, who were as brutal as any other occupied force in modern history. According to Roman annals, Caesar Augustus was at the helm when Jesus was born and as the first Roman emperor, he led the transformation of Rome from a Republic to an Empire and he shrewdly combined military might, institution-building and lawmaking to become Rome's sole ruler, laying the foundations of the 200-year Pax Romana (Roman Peace). The Pax Romana implied the period of Roman imperialism which lasted for roughly two hundred years and was obtained by brute

to lay her newborn as they were displaced by the Roman occupation.

The first Christmas occurred during a dreadful time in the history of what was already a troubled and turbulent land. The Gospel of Mathew recorded the slaughter of the innocents and Mary, Joseph and Jesus's flight to Egypt to escape death and destruction. At that point in time, Herod was the vassal king of Judea, which included the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, under the Roman Empire who ruled from about 37 BCE to 4 BCE. The messianic proclamation of the birth of Jesus and the title of "King of the Jews" was an open challenge to his authority. However, Jesus's mission was not to engineer a political coup d'état, rather

Fly-tipping an ethical issue

By Maitphang Syiem

As someone said, to understand a problem one must begin with questions. For a mathematician the questions and moves are always to find the X factor. So, lo and behold the question is on Fly-tipping - to get the meaning, one should break the word into two "Fly" and "Tipping". We've heard of words such as "on the fly" which relate to motion or movement and "Tipping" in this context is not about the gratuity thing we show when we leave a restaurant. Here it means "Throwing." Summarising this layman's deduction, it points to throwing something on the move. In a civic sense "Fly-tipping" is an act of illegal dumping of waste in places and you know better which places. We have a unique culture of practising cleanliness perhaps which should have earned accolades from all but there is also an underlying concern which must be addressed, that is, "Not in my backyard," attitude and the issue of "Fly-Tipping" coincides with the context. We treat our own backyard in the best possible ways but we leave our streets and roads in a mess. One should perhaps take it this way - that the streets, the roads, the footpaths are kind of an ecosystem. They too have an important role which affects our day-to-day activities, therefore to maintain that ecosystem we must treat them equally just like our own backyard. Isn't this the rational thing to do?

Our localities, communities no doubt are trying their best to maintain such civic norms and of course the prominent places would look clean but yet we still have pockets, unseen and unknown places such as drains, arterial roads etc., where wastes are continuously illegally dumped. The obvious places would be the drains, corners etc. And this is true if one would just take a walk around such places within the city. One will find the mess and when the drains get clogged, we all know what the resulting consequences are. Now going further with the issue of "Fly-tipping" it does appear that it occurs among both educated and uneducated folks. What could be the causes? There could be many reasons and it should be the responsibility of every individual to introspect as to why in spite of being educated we allow our conscience to Fly-tip.

In this globalised world none is uneducated but when it comes to waste management somewhere the thought arises as to why we are lagging in civic sense. Perhaps there are problems related to waste collection services. Somewhere the assessment on the service area or the coverage of each collection utility should be made because that ratio should be balanced. We can't have a single truck for a thousand households. Further, in this connection our city has areas where roads are narrow and inaccessible for trucks to enter which in turn leads to ineffective collection on the part of the concerned authorities and on the part of the user availing the collection services. Hence waste keeps on piling up and when the waste reaches saturation level, we tend to resort to ways to dispose of the piled up wastes. However, another reason would be laziness or missed timings so missed timings is directly proportional to waste piling up. To dispose of the waste we resort to Fly tipping.

We've seen many noble initiatives in the city taken up by many concerned organisations, individuals and societies to tackle the problem of waste, particularly solid waste, and the cleaning of the once pristine rivers of the city. The reality is that they can't keep on cleaning every time, because the next day the waste will resurge. So, the question here is why

is the waste resurging from time to time? Everyone talks about the once crystal waters, the aesthetic values of the rivers in the city but few will have the concern to rejuvenate and to act upon a reiterated simple solution which is "waste segregation" and responsible waste disposal. Now here comes the question as to how environmentally educated we are. Perhaps the ugly truth is that our environmental awareness is confined to only our backyards but not on a larger scale. It's important that we understand every entity in the environment as a unit which is part of the whole and that each unit has a designated role. So it is not just our own backyards; it is bigger than what we think. If we can keep our own backyards' clean why can't we go further beyond our own backyards? Introspect!

There is another concern on philosophical terms and that is our ethics which in this context points to environmental ethics. In fact this is a specialised subject in itself, therefore a point to emphasise here is that the kind of awareness we need the most must also engulf matters of ethics towards the larger picture beyond our backyards. It is fine to know how to keep our surroundings clean, planting trees etc., but it is also equally important to understand the ethics as to why we are doing it. Along with the aforementioned factors of Fly-tipping, the ethics involved is also another major reason to consider. Perhaps if one realises one's ethics or understands the environmental ethics, that person's conscience would not allow him/her to commit the act of Fly-tipping. Along such awareness it is imperative to inculcate environmental ethics in letter and spirit. It must seep into our grey matter, into our neurons and then only we can at least reach the aspired level of keeping our surroundings clean.

Furthermore, this matter also connects with the level of social development of our society. All development is important, but the ugly fact is that the word development for us is confined only to infrastructure. The point here is that environmental ethics and the kind of awareness all revolve around the realm of social development. The higher the level of social development the higher the responsibility for social action. We can see a living example in Mizoram and the civic sense vis a vis traffic. This speaks much about their ethics and level of social development. Their drivers don't honk or overtake on the roadways because this is not part of their ethics. Their conscience does not allow them to disrupt public order; they feel embarrassed to commit such an act. Taking a cue from such examples, why don't we try to cultivate the ethics of going beyond our backyards?

As a matter of fact, perhaps the issue of poor waste management that we are facing is not just a technological problem but on the larger scale it is a socio-environmental problem. Therefore, the qualitative data on such issues must also be taken into consideration to understand and to formulate effective measures. We can understand that all concerned are going all out to solve one of the burgeoning issues that the city is facing. But for now, keeping that in mind let us start by educating ourselves, and share our understanding from time to time. Let us go all out as individuals to keep our surroundings clean beyond our backyards and not resort to Fly-tipping.

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert and all views expressed are personal)

Letters to the Editor

NEIGRIHMS hospital and its sickening services

Editor,
Is NEIGRIHMS not lauded as the AIIMS of the Northeast? Is it not a ray of hope for the nearly 4 million people in Meghalaya? The relatives of the sick, even from Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, are seen standing in long queues in this hospital. They all expect the healing touch of proficient doctors and the warmth of the administrative staff and management.

However, beneath the impressive facade of the hospital lies a sickening reality. While there are many departments that have virtually left innumerable citizens in the lurch, today I will focus on the nephrology department. The inadequate dialysis unit in NEIGRIHMS has virtually plunged many into despair. Patients with critical kidney issues coming from far-flung areas of the Northeast have reportedly been greeted with the cold shoulder of the unavailability of the dialysis service. "No slots for a week," the patient is told on his face. Is it not a heartless retort?

Just imagine how you would feel if you were a patient with an advanced stage

of kidney failure waiting for a long time for dialysis. One distressed patient burst out in anger: "A nurse in the department told us to go to SUPER CARE for the job. It deeply offended us because private hospitals in the town, including Guwahati, have literally already robbed us of whatever money we had."

In another instance, a family with a patient who had undergone extensive treatment at CMC Vellore, reached Shillong. As the dialysis was due, without going home, the relatives had taken the patient directly to NEIGRIHMS. They were told no slots were available. Having no option, they humbly requested the slot for the next day. To their disappointment, the staff said that slot is not available until the 4th day. When the relatives requested to book for the fifth day, they were again told to come and check whether the slot would be available on that day. Out of desperation, when the relative sought an appointment on the fifth day, they were informed that all slots were full. This is just one example I am citing here.

One cannot help but wonder how on earth the hospital is being touted as the AIIMS of the Northeast. Is management not aware that delaying dialysis may lead to severe health complications affecting vital organs like the heart, lungs, and nervous system

and accumulation of toxins? Is it not a matter of life and death? The increasing number of kidney patients, contrasted with the limited dialysis capacity, paints a grim picture of neglect and utter failure at NEIGRIHMS.

Why hasn't it dawned on the management of NEIGRIHMS yet that "expanding" the dialysis facility is long overdue, given the number of patients relying on the hospital of national repute? This stagnation in service gives rise to an unnerving question: Are the authorities waiting for a "crisis to turn into a catastrophe?" Yes, countless families have long been experiencing catastrophes and nightmares! But who will bother to find out how? Who will express genuine words of compassion to the aggrieved families who are already afflicted by poverty? Who will come forward to put pressure on the government to "overhaul the hospital" and its management? I am very worried about the state of the health system in Meghalaya and the North East and if there is complicity between the government run and private hospitals. Concerned citizens should take a deep breath and raise questions because this continued silence might take away your life and mine!

Yours etc.,
Sali Gewali
Shillong

Don't trash NCERT textbooks; adapt them

Editor,
The headlines, 'NCERT textbooks by MBOSE must not omit culture, history of Meghalaya' (ST Dec.15, 2023) is a welcome stand taken by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). I've been reluctant to comment on the introduction of NCERT textbooks (having done so once long ago in one of my letters), especially when lobbyists (not critics) of the likes of Mukul Sangma and others who give such shallow and immature reasons against the idea. Possibly, they do not have the knowledge and make such remarks that the public or loyalists fall for! When KSU states, "it's a good beginning," I'm certain they've done their homework on the matter.

Now let me be so bold as to shake the hardened mindsets of the readers! NCERT textbooks covering all subjects up to class X, barring Social Science, can easily be introduced with effect from the new term 2024 - 25 without any procrastination. Social Science syllabus can be adopted and adapted to meet the 'Culture & History' of Meghalaya and other North Eastern states. The state has the freedom to in-

clude local history and leave out the irrelevant! The school education then is at par with all other subjects with the rest of the country. Period!

Now for the sensitive and sticky issue that might not go down with the general public. It is my intention to provoke readers to deeper reflection and introspection on the issue of Hindi in schools. May I submit Hindi be taught from class 1 onwards, maybe as a 3rd language. I recommend this because it's time we do not disadvantage our students when it comes to job opportunities in the central government offices of the state and in the country. May I ask readers to do their research on the number of locals employed and give their findings through this column of The Shillong Times.

I regret that I cannot read nor understand the language, let alone speak it fluently. Two of my son's went to Delhi for their graduation and Hindi was compulsory to obtain a degree. One son didn't get his graduation certificate till he passed the Hindi course. He had to take tuition and in the fourth year he passed and only then did he receive his B.A certificate. Job opportunities today in central government establishments have Hindi as a compulsory paper. It's only going to get tougher and the proficiency of Hindi is going to get higher. Hence, we need

to think ahead, beginning from now.

Yours etc.,
Kevin Phillips
Shillong - 19

CJI disappoints on Article 370

Editor,
This is with reference to P. Sudhir's article, "CJI has belied the hopes he raised at the time of joining" (ST, December 15, 2023). Some months ago, the Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud pointed out that India needed institutions of empathy more than institutions of eminence. According to the Cambridge dictionary the word 'empathy' means the ability to share or experience by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. Now, if I imagine what it would be like if I were a Kashmiri and try to share his feelings as my own then how would I feel after the Supreme Court upheld the abrogation of Article 370. Honestly, had my state been divided into two union territories, it would have made me sad.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding."

—Albert Einstein

The Shillong Times

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Paralysed Parliament

TO state that Parliament is in a state of paralysis is to state the obvious, though a one-sided show will continue for the remainder of this Winter Session. Almost the entire opposition has been charged out, and most of them -- 141 MPs in all -- have been suspended. The suspensions came following their protests inside both the Houses since last week seeking an explanation from the government over the serious breach of security reflected in the canister attack inside Parliament by a set of youths on Wednesday last.

A proper explanation from the government would have sufficed to end this protest at the very start itself. The Opposition was well within its limits to seek a statement from Home Minister Amit Shah on how the security breach occurred. It has a right to seek this explanation. The Modi-led government remained adamant and Speaker Om Birla took the stand that the Lok Sabha Secretariat is tasked with all the security matters relating to Parliament and not the government. Legislature, an arm of democracy, cannot be dictated to or controlled by the Executive, meaning the government. This is technically correct, but the issue of a security breach in Parliament goes beyond technicalities. This incident has stirred the national conscience and become a matter of grave concern to the informed sections of the populace. The issue cannot be confined within the walls of politics either. As of now, the Opposition is weak, and the principal opposition, the Congress Party, itself is having no more than 52 members in a house of 543. This does not mean that the Opposition can be taken for granted. The BJP-led government seems to be doing precisely that. In effecting the suspensions, speaker Om Birla has argued that the Opposition members violated rules like carrying placards within the august house, though an all-party meeting had agreed recently that this would not be done in the new Parliament. Yet, these do not in any way warrant a wholesome suspension for the entire session.

Effectively, the Parliament would function with skeletal representation on the Opposition benches, where the members of some neutral parties that are neither with the NDA nor the UPA would be sitting. This would mean bills, even "draconian" bills, of the government would be passed without any hassle. Chances are also that the government precisely wanted this to happen. Even otherwise, in the normal course too, there are hardly any serious discussions before bills are passed. Fewer members take interest in legislation, per se, other than doing their main job of voting for or against. A bill. Such is the progressively worsening scenario. This will not bode well for democracy, which is whittling away with every passing day.

Statistical Literacy
Why is it important?

By Rajiv Gupta

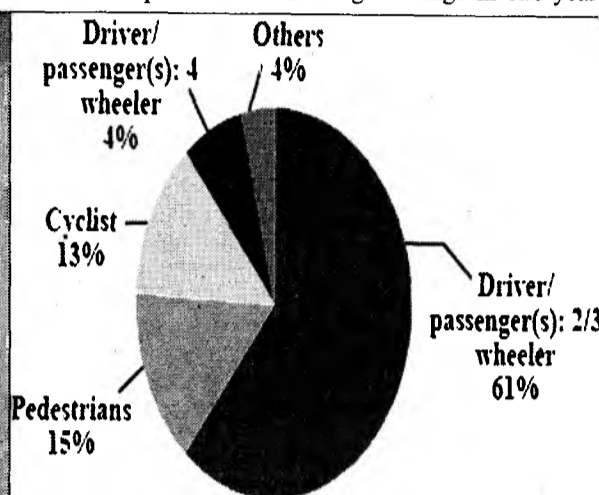
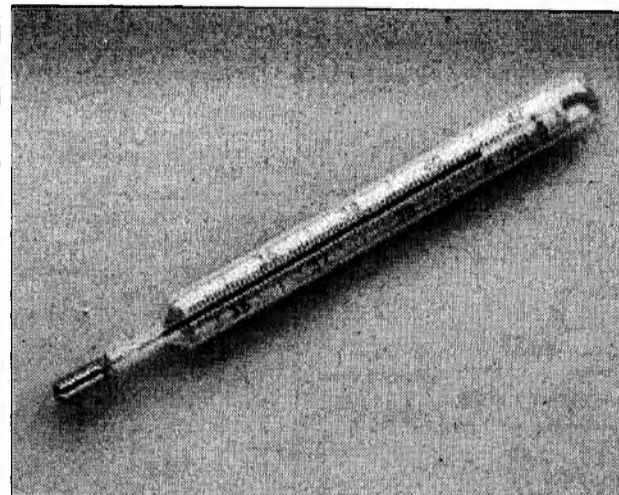
Suppose you take your temperature on two successive days. On the first day it is 98.2 degrees, on the second day it is 98.8 degrees. What would you infer from these readings? More importantly, what course of action would be warranted as a result? A lot of people take notice and act on information not very different from the example cited above. We often read items in newspapers with

and other media. The reason we should not start medicating ourselves when the body temperature reaches 98.8 is because body temperature has a natural range of variation. This variation is due to various factors such as the ambient temperature, our clothing, what we may have eaten, whether we

defining any limits which would indicate any unusual pattern of behaviour, it is easy to see that the number of accidents over the five-year period reported in the article is relatively stable. Not many people would interpret the reduction from the fourth to the fifth year as remarkable. A natural question which a

reader can ask is "So what?"

What is the harm in misreading natural variation and taking action to compensate for any effect that we feel necessary? Is it necessary for the problem to get big before we act on it? Should we not ward off problems by taking preventive measures? Deming wrote that if the data only shows natural or



statistics to make a point. The numbers could be about the economy, the number of accidents, or the crime rate, etc. We read the numbers but not everyone reflects on what the numbers mean. Numbers convey meaning and it is up to the reader to discern the meaning. Let us take an example.

A leading English national daily had a news item titled: "Fatal Accidents Down, Traffic Cops Cite Proactive Measures" on November 14, 2023, which gave statistics of road accidents in Delhi from 2019 to 2023 (up to October 31). There were 1433 fatal accidents in Delhi in 2019, 1163 in 2020, 1206 in 2021, 1428 in 2022, and 1141 up to October 31 in 2023. The Delhi Traffic Police cited these numbers to convey that there was a 4.7 per cent reduction in fatal accidents between 2022 and 2023 and that was due to proactive measures taken by the police. Is this a correct claim? Does it mean that in 2024 we should expect a further reduction in fatal road accidents?

Statistics can either convey relevant information which can lead to sound decisions, or they could be misinterpreted leading to action when none is warranted. In the temperature example at the beginning of the article, it should be clear that no action needs to be taken. Why? Because typical human temperatures fluctuate in a range, the range depending on the individual circumstances. If any medication is taken because the body temperature reaches 98.8, it can lead to undesirable side-effects. Similarly, we need to examine the data in the newspaper article. The observations will be valid not just for the article but for a host of numbers seen in newspapers, television,

have just exercised, etc. Dr. W.E. Deming, noted statistician and management guru who helped the Japanese industry become world leaders, called this natural variation caused by "common causes." If the statistic (in this case the body temperature) is within some defined limits, no action is required. But if it goes outside these limits, then

accident data. According to Deming, any unnecessary intervention based on short term changes in data would make the system unstable, with higher highs and lower lows. However, when the change is significant, i.e., the data crosses the limits beyond the natural variation, investigation into the cause of that occurrence is warranted and action needs to be taken. In the body temperature analogy, if the temperature were to cross 100 degrees, it often signals an infection for which some treatment becomes necessary.

Examples of misguided overreaction to data are seen in several walks of life. Perhaps one of the more glaring examples is when a company announces a drop in the sales or profit number compared to the previous quarter or year. The immediate reaction of the stock market is to selling of the stock which often leads to a drop in its price. Sales and profits of organizations do not always go up in a straight line. Any panic selling of a company's stock in response to a poor quarter or year is unwarranted as long as the company remains healthy.

This article was written to emphasise the need to develop statistical literacy in reading statistical data. Data is important for managing organisations, communities, and nations. However, collecting data involves time and cost. Therefore, we need to make sure that the data is put to proper use. In addition to the cost of collecting data, incorrect reaction to random fluctuations in the data can lead to worsening the system. The message should be clear. We need a better understanding of how to interpret statistical data.---INFA

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Deming said that we need to investigate and possibly take action. So once the body temperature crosses, say 100 degrees, it may be a sign that one needs to see a doctor.

Returning to the accident data, if we plot the data points, something interesting emerges.

What does the graph tell us? Should we conclude that some specific action resulted in a decrease in accidents? Or does it look like random variations in data which do not reveal any specific pattern or trend? Even without

random variation, any action in response to a change from one period to the next would make the system unstable with the potential to increase the variation in the data. In the case of the body temperature example given in the beginning of this article, most healthcare professionals agree that unnecessary medication to counter random changes in the body temperature can lead to problems. We should take steps to improve one's health such as eating well and exercise. But action should not be taken to coun-

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

The Greatest Story Ever Told..!

Two thousand years ago a wise old angel looked at a little angel, and offered his divine wings to wipe the tears in her: yes, "Why are you crying little angel?" he asked kindly. It was unusual to see weeping in the heavenly realm and he was a little uncertain how to deal with such.

"It's a week before Jesus will be born on earth," she sniffed, "And I just heard He is going to be born in a manger!"

"Yes indeed," said the wise old angel, "That is the greatest story that will ever be told!"

"Our God in a cattleshed!" exclaimed the little angel stamping her feet, "When His birth should have been in a palace, in a five-star hotel maybe?"

"Ah, my little angel, our God is escaping the five-star hotel they have tried to lock him in," said the wise old angel, "and is going to be available for all mankind! Look and see where they have kept God till now!"

The little angel, tears still falling from her eyes, looked down at earth, and saw pharisees walking around, "Look at them," said the wise angel, "Everything they do is done

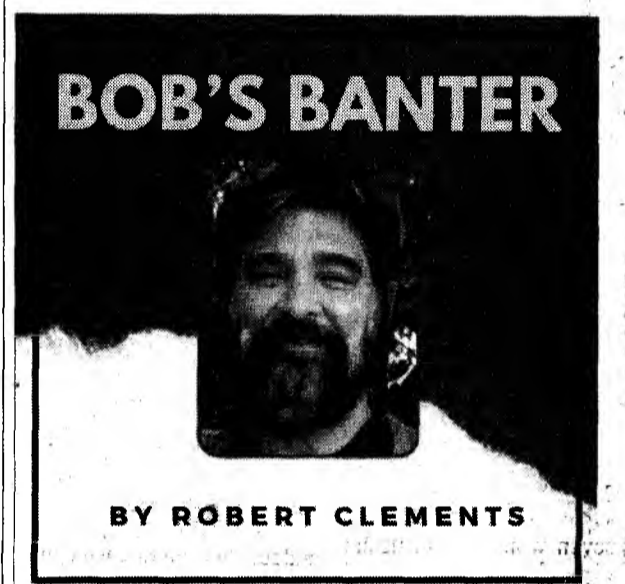
and women so that I would have company. I created them in my own image, so we could be like one family, but look at them, just look at them now! And all the angels, and saints and others looked down with God, and saw the wickedness below. I parted the Red Sea for them. Rescued them from Egypt. Gave them manna to eat, water to drink. Made them victorious in wars

Did miracles. What more do they want?"

An old angel, maybe Gabriel or Michael, must have slowly gone to God and whispered, "Whip them Lord, thrash them, beat them, kill them. Send a flood and finish them off!" But God paced up and down and finally whispered, "There's only one solution to know what is wrong, I will have to go down and find out!"

And God came down on Christmas! He came as a baby, born in the poorest place where animals were kept, lived with ordinary people like you and me, and found out what was wrong.

I think the first sounds he recognised was the sound of his father Joseph the carpenter's tools. Day in a day out he heard Joseph hammering and sawing, and must have realised how hard he



for show: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long!"

"With no God in their hearts!" whispered the little angel.

"They have become keepers of the fold," said the old angel, "Their duty is to keep others out! And, if Jesus were to be born in one of their temples or palaces, they would do the same with Him. Keep Him as another showpiece for themselves while looking down on others who don't wear their tassels, phylacteries and their hair in ringlets! Like..."

"Fishermen!"

"Tax collectors!"

"A Samaritan woman with five husbands!"

"Adulterous women!"

"Even a dying, repentant thief!" sighed the wise old angel.

The wise old angel and the little angel, looked down from heaven in the year 2023, "Now why are you crying little angel?" asked the wise angel.

"Because the keepers of the fold have moved from Bethlehem and Jerusalem to all over the world," she said, "Their tassels have been replaced by churches and religious trusts with signboards saying, 'Jesus belongs only here!' Their phylacteries with the scorn and derision they use when calling others demons and devils! Nothing has changed!"

"A lot has," said the wise old angel, "You remember our Lord telling them the story of the prodigal son?"

"Oh yes," said the little angel.

"Those who keep others out, who think they are holier than others, are the elder brother," said the wise old angel, "But unlike the younger brother who went in and feasted with his overjoyed father, these keepers of the fold will never join that feast!"

"And the feast," whispered the little angel, smiling, "Is the heaven we both are enjoying!"

And where did the greatest story ever told start taking place dear reader? In the realms of heaven where a worried and frustrated God looked down at a sinful earth and wondered what more He could do. 'I created those men

worked, and then listened, to the sounds of customers who did not pay Joseph in time. He must have seen days of no business too. What did Jesus understand from that? 'Jesus,' I told the businessmen, 'God understands the struggles as you build a business. He understands your cries to him as a customer doesn't pay or when there's no business for you. Take that problem to Him!'

What else did Jesus see? He saw a mother struggling make both ends meet. And you mothers and wives as sometimes you struggle to bring up a family. Jesus understands. He knows and listens to your prayers.

Then he went to Lazarus's grave and what did he do? He wept! He understood grief. The grief of losing a friend. Today that same Lord can wipe your tears away and comfort you, because he knows what grief is.

He understood the Samaritan woman at the well, and the woman caught in adultery. The world of men laughed at them, but Jesus understood they were survivors, and forgave them. In fact, he made the Samaritan woman an evangelist who brought many people from her village to Him.

He also understood how we are pulled down by people who discourage us. When Jesus started preaching, people laughed at him saying, "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" they chuckled. Do people laugh at you and say, "Can any good come from you?"

And he knew what betrayal was. For three years his twelve disciples walked with him, preached with him, healed with him, and finally one betrayed him. So, those of you who have been betrayed, Jesus came down and knows what you are feeling. As we celebrate Christmas, please remember dear readers that 'The Greatest Story Ever Told,' is about God being born as a baby in a cattle shed, not in a palace, so that he could know more about you and me.

We are part of the story..! *The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883.*

Letters to the Editor

What an eyesore!

Editor,
Lately in my visit to NEIGRIHMS hospital, I am overwhelmed by its excellent ambience and the hygienically maintained environs. The out-patients and their attendants can fully relish the sprawling complex and freely use the toilets with uninterrupted running water, which are conveniently located at every floor; unlike the Shillong civil hospital, where I had to shell out money for utilizing the toilets as an out-patient! In sum, kudos to NEIGRIHMS!

But on the flip side, on departing from NEIGRIHMS, on the left side of the main gate, I saw rows of endless retail stalls spreading their riots of merchandise beside a drain and on this sewer piles of thrash like used plastic bottles, and the like were heaped. I don't know if some good souls will ever care to offload those unsightly spectacles? And, for good measure, where shall the subsequent monsoon rains carry the garbage and deposit it? Given the fact that NEIGRI-

HMS is fast becoming a hub of qualitative health care centre in the North-East where I see even people from distant Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and others are preferring to come here to seek medical assistance due to its salubrious climate and peaceful environs. And which is why many interested visitors are visiting this health Institute.

Hence, to address this problematic issue which is becoming the only eyesore of this august establishment is perhaps for the management of NEIGRIHMS and the local durbar of the area to work in tandem on how to effectively and stringently deal with the nuisance in question. I hope that when I revisit this Institution such a grotesque sight will vanish lock stock and barrel!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

India's hunger index a concern

Editor,
Hunger has been described

by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen as 'quiet violence'. Every day 3 out of 4 Indians have to bear this quiet violence in their daily lives. The 2023 report on food security and nutrition which was released by the United Nations on December 12, this year said that 74.1 percent of Indians (over a billion people) could not afford a healthy diet in 2021.

The report from the Food and Agriculture Organisation, a specialised agency of the UN and other UN agencies has estimated that India's proportion of undernourished population stands at 16.6 per cent during 2020-22. This report has echoed the 2023 Global Hunger Index which was released a couple of months ago. India's position in the GHI has slid into a horrific 111th rank among 125 countries.

Though the Centre did not accept either of the reports, some experts pointed out a contradiction between the government's denial and the government's own estimate that around 813 million people require food assistance. Moreover, last month, the Union cabinet extended the

scheme for 5 more years.

On the UN estimation of over a billion underfed Indians versus government's estimation of 813 million, Raj Shekhar, national coordinator with the Right to Food Campaign, a non-government network campaigning for food security said, "The 813 million estimate is based on the 2011 census - the next census is overdue by two years. Without the new census, many needy, vulnerable people won't have the ration cards that will entitle them to PMGKAY benefits."

Economists and food rights activists pointed out that more than 10 crore deserving Indians would not get the benefit of the 5-year extension of the free rations programme for the poor because of the government's failure to conduct the long-due population census.

Interestingly, amid rising hunger and poverty, India has produced more billionaires than many developed countries. As per the data from the World of Statistics, India is home to 169 billionaires - the third highest in the world after the USA (735) and China (495). India,

where over a billion people could not afford a healthy diet, has more billionaires than developed countries like Germany (126), Russia (105), Italy (64), Canada (63), UK (52), Australia (47) and Japan (40).

Manmohan Singh once said, "India happens to be a rich country inhabited by very poor people." It highlighted the contrast between our resources and poverty. The time has come to say that India happens to be a country of very poor people inhabited by many billionaires. It will highlight a glaring inequality in India.

As per the 2022 World Inequality Report, the economic reforms adopted by India have mostly benefited the top 1%. It has been observed that the deregulation and liberalisation policies implemented in India since the mid-1980s have led to "one of the most extreme increases in income and wealth inequality in the world". It suggested that a modest progressive wealth tax should be levied on multimillionaires as it could generate significant revenues for the government because of the high concen-

tration of wealth.

Contrary to the prescription to levy more tax on the super rich, write-off of huge amounts of bank loans has been done for some rich businessmen without much ado while subsidies to the poor are questioned as rewards.

The report also points out that 31.7% of children of our country under 5 years of age are victims of stunted growth. Our policy makers must pay heed to what the former World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim had said on hunger and child stunting in India a few years ago, "This is the bottom line: if you walk into the future economy with 40 percent of your workforce having been stunted as children, you are not going to be able to compete." Our first priority should be to improve the health of our children.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"Eloquence is a painting of the thoughts."

— Blaise Pascal

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 131 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2023

Delayed farewell to MCCL

THE Mawmluh Cherra Cements Ltd started in the MCCL is headquartered in Shillong (Assam). It started commercial cement production in 1966 with capacity of 75,000 million tonnes per year which was later increased to 1,65,000 million tonnes annually. Limestone is available in plenty in the state hence the number of cement companies in East Jaintia Hills alone should be explanation enough that raw material availability and from sources not too far from the cement plant makes cement production a viable proposition in Meghalaya. So why did MCCL fail? The reasons are many and they are the same reasons plaguing the public sector in this country.

Firstly, all these companies are not run my experts but by the bureaucracy without management or corporate affairs training. But more than that all PSUs in Meghalaya are used as employment agencies where politicians who are appointed chairpersons of these PSUs from time to time all push in their camp followers to be employed, without any accountability as to how that would affect the health of the PSU. Such excess manpower is difficult to offload once they are on the payroll of the PSU. MCCL certainly had not made any manpower planning and the bureaucrats and technocrats really have no power to say 'No' to meddling politicians. The local people surrounding the MCCL plant inform that even workers who can hardly work and are well past their age of superannuation continue to limp and report for work and no one can tell them to retire. How can any company that must yield profits from production continue to pay non-productive workers? Among the employees that are still on the rolls there is indiscipline in how they report for work and leave the workplace. Employees of MCCL have treated the company like a government service where people's productivity and outcomes at the lower and mid-level are never measured.

Pricing policy could also be a factor because what's produced by PSUs are not guided by the principle of profit maximisation. Often pricing is controlled and regulated by the Government. Profitability is affected by another factor. Most public sector enterprises do not follow rational pricing policies. They are not guided by any clear-cut pricing policy. In most cases prices are fixed by departmental directives and ad-hoc piecemeal orders. A PSU requires to be run like a company and that requires efficient managers that are recruited on the basis of special criteria. Such managers then define the roles and responsibilities of subordinate staff and there is constant monitoring and performance evaluation. Such is not the case with PSUs which operate in a 'go as you please' environment. However, the closure of MCCL only directly affects a few families whereas the residents around the factory have been breathing easy for many years now since the company ceased production. Pollution in the form of fine dust settles in people's homes, trees and plants and their rooftops and would also have affected their breathing. The water from the MCCL has also seeped into the Mawmluh cave and caused it's deterioration. Now the infrastructure created at the MCCL can be utilised for other purposes. Disruption is not always bad!

Christmas challenges the celebrants

By Albert Thyriang

Christmas fever is reaching its peak. In three days the 2.38 billion Christians will be celebrating their most popular festival. Non-Christians too join in the festivity. Fancy lights of all colours are lit in churches, homes, streets, localities. They may not match the Moolamyliang Christmas Lights Extravaganza but their attractive glitters will capture the moment. The sound of carols, choirs and music are not to be left behind. The elaborate dishes will also follow. The modern Christmas is an exaggeration. What we need is a true Christmas. Christmas also throws a challenge to the 'believers' if not humanity.

A sober Christmas

The birth of Jesus more than 2000 years was a complete contrast to the current celebrations. His pregnant mother with the foster father, Joseph rode to Bethlehem like other Jews of the time - to submit themselves to the census ordered by the Roman emperor, Quirinius. The overwhelming crowds from all over Judaea left no room for Jesus in any of the inns in the town. Joseph found a random stable for Mary to deliver her son. It was an embarrassing place for any woman. But let us focus on Jesus! There were no lights, no decoration, no celebration, no 'happy birth day' wishes. The only visitors were the shepherds. Angels sang in the heavens, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to all people of good will!". But probably no one heard the melody. The Bible says that the birth of the 'Messiah' was foretold by many prophets but no one recognised him at his birth. It was the quietest event.

Today one wishes that Christmas is more sober for the very reason that the first Christmas was so. We have strayed from the original Christmas. The message is humility and an inner disposition. Today the feast is a show. It is commercialised beyond recognition. Christianity itself could be seen as a show. Spirituality is minimal. God could have arranged for a public reception for his son, had he wanted to. Jesus himself refused to be a 'magician' or a 'clown' when tempted by the devil to change stone into bread and jump down from a high building. His miracles were for a purpose, not for stunts. Jesus did not heal all the sick in Palestine. Even his resurrection was not a public display. He appeared to a few chosen ones. Jesus was interested in interior spirituality and not in dars.

A child-centred celebration in question

The other day the massacre of children in Gaza was narrated in an article. When the three wise men from the East did not return to inform King Herod of the birth of 'the future King of the Jews,' he ordered the slaughter of all two year old males and younger ones, in Bethlehem and the surroundings. The cruel but ironically called 'the Great', a Roman Jewish client king of the Herodian Kingdom of Judea was illegally king for he was not a Jew; forgot about him being from the lineage of king David. For the Jews their king must be anointed by 'Yahweh'. When the tyrannical ruler learned of the birth of a potential king he was threatened and sent soldiers to execute the massacre.

Children are being killed today. The death of 7000 children or more in Gaza is horrible. One is not an IDF spokesperson but Hamas uses children as shields. They have military infrastructure in hospitals, educational institutions, mosques and in residential areas so that when Israel bombs, Hamas and their sympathisers will condemn the 'Zionist state' for collateral deaths, including children. Plus we are speaking of terrors that kill children and the elderly, take them hostage, rape women and butcher Jews as a mission. They have pledged to repeat the October 7, massacre. Their chatter unequivocally declares the annihilation of the Jewish race.

We need not travel to Gaza to mourn the death of children. In Manipur children too were not spared. In our state, in June this year a four year old boy and two year old child were killed by their own father in Nongrah. In September a new-born baby was dumped in a garbage truck in Mawpat. As recently as December 13, an infant child was fished out from Wuhmkhrah a repeat of the May 7 incident when the body of a male baby was recovered from same river.

The reason for this crime is suspected to be teenage or unwanted pregnancies. It was reported in 2022 that teenage pregnancies in 2019-21 was 21.9%, a rise from 18.8% in 2015-16. The National Family Health Survey 5 (NFHS-5, 2019-2020) for Meghalaya

revealed that of all pregnant women 7.2% of them were between the ages of 15-19 years. A teenager may not abandon her new-born but child bearing adversely affects the health and education of both the mother and the child. The problem is more pronounced in villages standing at 8.4% as compared to 3.2% in urban areas.

In festivities like Christmas adolescents engage in sexual activities leading to teenage and unwanted pregnancies. Shame forces them to hide their state and they may even be compelled to abandon their new-born in isolated spots. Ideally Christmas, a child centred celebration should be a time for a serious discussion and deliberation on far reaching issues. But perhaps we have little time and interest for it. We are more inclined to celebrations sans reflections.

Peace still illusive

At his birth peace was announced. Jesus taught, 'blessed are the peacemakers,' 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' On the cross he prayed, 'forgive them for they know not what they do'. After he rose again he says, 'peace I give you, my peace I leave you.' The land of Jesus' birth was in war for at least two millennia before his arrival. When he came to the scene the mighty Romans were the rulers. Jesus did not advocate

the overthrowing of the hated foreign regime. He sanctified the land he lived in as the 'Holy Land.' But after him conquests and occupations continued. The present situation is bleak. Two Abrahamic religions lay claim over the tiny piece of land. The Jews have established the state of Israel. Arab Muslims desire nothing short of instating the Roman province of 'Palestina' into a 21st century Islamic Arab nation erasing Israel totally.

How would it feel to celebrate Christmas in Bethlehem or in the Holy Land? In such an environment does Christmas hold any significance? What can Christians do to achieve lasting peace? The question is rebuffed by reality in Christianised Europe. Demands for Sharia laws have been heard in the UK, Belgium, France, Canada, Australia and other liberal countries. Massive pro-Hamas rallies calling for

genocide of Jews took place in many European capital cities. This prompted the prime minister of Italy, Giorgia Meloni to state, 'Europe and Islam are incompatible.' The sentiment is echoed all over Europe.

Conflicts are happening in other places as well but we mention Manipur which is closer to our homes. For the Christian Kuki-Zo community the pre-Christmas 'gift' is sadly the batches of mass burials of the victims of the state-wide violence that has entered the eighth month. To even wish 'Happy Christmas' to them is improper! For them this Christmas is the darkest. Jesus' message of peace seems shattered.

Waning Christianity

A drop of Europe's Christian population from 553 million in 2010 to 454 million in 2020 has been projected - a fall by about 100 million in five years. While Christianity declines, the Muslim population is set to grow by 63%, an increase to 71 million in 2050 from 43 million in 2010. Hindus, Buddhists and others too will witness large gains running to 2050 and beyond. The attributed causes to the drop of the Christian population are low birth rates, the higher percentage of aging among the group, abandoning of the faith, large migration of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other religions to Europe. The rapid rise of radicalism in Europe has created alarm in the continent but it may not be enough to revive Christianity in the most advanced continent.

Is the European scenario a concern? A theologian this writer recently met was unfazed stating, 'If we wane in Europe we will gain somewhere else.' He has good reasons. Reports are rife that Iran is no more an Islamic nation. Christian population has overtaken the Shia sect of Islam in that country. Observers say this is not an exaggeration. Those who leave Islam for Christianity may not openly declare but secret conversions are overwhelming. The oppression in the land of Zoroastrianism will not last forever. As and when freedom comes Christianity is expected to gain massively.

Christianity could occupy the second spot sooner or later. It should not be a worry. What is more important is the authentic living of Christ's values that he ushered in more than 2000 years ago. A credible life of being true 'salt to the earth and light to the world' is all that counts for the December 25, birthday boy.

Restoration and rejuvenation of rivers and water bodies

By Pyntngen D Nongrum

At the invitation of the Deputy Commissioner East Khasi Hills, as the Rangbah Shnong of Jaiaw Shyiap Lumpyllon, I attended the meeting held on December 19, 2023 to discuss the 'Restoration and Rejuvenation of the Wah-Umkhrah, Umkhen, Umshyri. The session was interesting and lasted for almost 2 hours. At the end of the meet high tea was served and everyone had an opportunity to talk shop and also to present their locality's problems to the officers from the different Government departments. I had my chance to talk to one of the Additional DCs. I told him that perhaps the problems which were highlighted that day could be the same problems which the present Chief Secretary, who was chairing the meeting, must have discussed with the Rangbah Shnongs a couple of decades back. On a lighter note I told the Addl. DC that unless we take bold decisions these problems will persist till the time he takes over as Chief Secretary. We had a good laugh.

The Municipality limits they are akin to those living in the rest of Israel. They live by different standards laid down by the KHADC. At times there is overlapping of responsibility, as is the case with waste management and protection of rivers and water bodies. Both the authorities try to assert their rights to manage these affairs. The SMB collection and disposal of Bio Medical waste is a case in point. So I made a suggestion to the Chair that it is time for the State Government and the KHADC to meet, deliberate and sort out, if not on all issues, then just on the protection of rivers, water bodies and management of waste disposal and to constitute a strong Civic Administrative Body with clearly defined powers to operate not only within the municipal areas but in the scheduled areas too.

Some Rangbah Shnong raised issues about non-functional Sewage Treatment Plants (STP) constructed decades ago under the JN-NURM scheme. Some (STPs) which were constructed a



Let me run the readers through what was discussed and deliberated at this meeting. It started with the Power Point presentation by officers from the DC's office highlighting recent inspection of localities and supported by visual images of the filth all along the rivers, the direct discharge of human and animal excreta into the drains of the localities and other nauseating images. Powerpoint presentations by the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board were of the same nature and so were those of the Shillong Municipal Board. I must confess that, after having attended so many meetings to discuss cleaning Shillong City, Saving Wah-Umkhrah, this kind of presentation bored me. I am skeptical that once the power is switched off the points are lost in the labyrinth of the Departments.

We all live the reality of a filthy dirty city and stinking rivers every day. From the presentation by the S.M.B I learnt something new. It was for the first time I learnt that the S.M.B collects Bio Medical waste only from Medical institutions located within the Shillong Municipality limits. For those falling outside, there is another agency doing this job. At the end of the presentation and after seeing the present state of the city, the suburbs, the rivers, the violation of prevailing environmental laws by the citizens we are no better off than what we were a couple of decades ago. The Chief Secretary who was chairing the meet summed up the whole presentation with just one question, "WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?"

Once the presentations were over there was an interactive discussion. The Rangbah Shnongs presented their viewpoints: some highlighted the problems in their localities and some came up with brilliant suggestions. I was given an opportunity to speak and I spoke on what has been bothering me for quite some times. I have often compared East Khasi Hills District to the State of Israel. For those living within the limits of the Municipal Wards we are akin to those living in the West Bank. We follow some form of civic rules and bye laws laid down by the District Administration and for those who are out of

My request to the Government is to send out officers to all the localities, within the administered and scheduled areas and conduct a survey to find out if the citizens are ready to support the Government in constituting a strong and an efficient Civic Body. Perhaps in the next meeting these survey reports can be placed before the house and the Rangbah Shnongs may be asked to vote if they are willing to support the formation of a Civic Administrative Body. On such a day we will know if the 'AYES' have it.

(The writer is Rangbah Shnong, Jaiaw Shyiap Lumpyllon Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

Don't imprison thoughts

Editor, Writing on issues that shape our lives is a key building block of any rights-respecting society. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again.

From the unconventional "Funeral Nights" by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Patricia Mukhim's thought provoking "Waiting for an Equal World: Gender in India's Northeast," to the titular "Boats on Land" by Janice Pariat; Meghalaya has produced a fair number of gifted authors whose works has amazed publishing houses the country over and delighted readers of all ages. But over the years, the state has also missed out a number of good books by freelance writers that sadly couldn't make their way to the printers for one reason or the other. One such book is "In My Defence" written by one Roy Marbaniang.

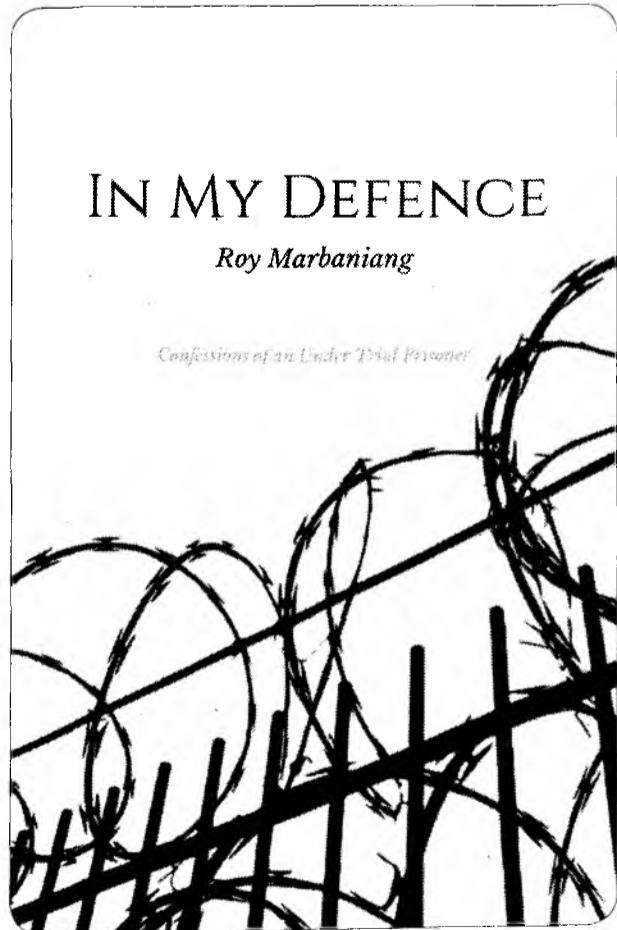
Amid the current crisis in Meghalaya's education and employment sector, the ques-

tion about the MDA's political correctness and the agitation about its corporate-style state management formula, a few publishing houses in the country have rejected the publication of the book as they allege the novel "mostly runs on paranoia and government betrayal" and is "a merciless attack on the present and past governments, self-righteous hypocrites and dim-witted bureaucrats." But the novel's rejection was mainly because it was partly written while the author was still lodged at the Shillong District Jail.

A plethora of other great books by several equally talented writers in the country have also faced similar rejection in the past; some even banned under Section 95 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, which confers powers on the State Government to ban a book if it contains content that may "promote, or attempt to promote, enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, or disharmony, or feeling of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious groups and the publication of such matters which is punishable under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code." It is really sad to see that in a democratic country like India, there's nothing new under the sun.

Exercising the right to write -- without fear or interference -- is central to

even though the right to freedom of expression has been enshrined in Article 19



living in an open and fair society; one in which people can enjoy their human rights. But in India, citizens (mostly prisoners) face repression

of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and protected legally by a raft of international and regional treaties. Even the Supreme

Court of India, has made it clear in several rulings that prisoners have as much right to express themselves as any other free citizen, however prison administrations hardly entertain such rulings.

We respect the government's duty to prohibit hateful speech; but many abuse their authority to silence peaceful dissent by passing laws criminalizing freedom of expression. It is also evident that this very freedom also comes under regular attack by our government whose primary aim is to stifle criticism. It is about time prison authorities and the government take the Supreme Court's rulings seriously.

Since every citizen of India, including prisoners, have fundamental rights, which include the freedom of speech and expression, it is also high time for the prison department to launch something like a "Prisoner Correspondence Network" to connect incarcerated people from District Jails across Meghalaya with their families on the outside. We know that prison can be extremely isolating; and understanding the pain of being locked up is heartbreaking. We also know that written correspondence is a good way for prisoners to get this contact. Such

a project can be rewarding to everyone involved; even studies show that good connections with the world beyond prison is one of the biggest factors in preventing re-offending.

We understand that the low literacy rates in Meghalaya jails can pose problems with correspondence, but launching letter-writing contests like what other countries have done -- such as PEN America's Annual Prisoner Writing Contest -- can offer inmates the opportunity to practice writing. Many prisoners at the Shillong District Jail, and many more held at different District Jails across the state of Meghalaya have lost contact with their loved ones. By connecting incarcerated people with the outside world, the Prisoner Correspondence Network can offer them both a lifeline and a future. Because after all what matters is on the inside.

Yours etc,
Michael J. Kharkongor,
Teacher & Social Worker
Shillong - 8

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"The human voice can never reach the distance that is covered by the still small voice of conscience."

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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Divided opposition

THE Opposition, still licking the wounds of the Hindi-belt drubbing in the assembly polls, is failing to present a sense of unity or coherence in their utterances even as the Lok Sabha polls are just a call away. Lack of unity in principal matters was all too evident as they met in Delhi and held the fourth round of confabulations. Even as leaders of 28 parties sat together, unanimity was the first casualty. This was only to be expected from a hotch-potch of conflicting interests. Where they agree is only on the need for ousting Narendra Modi and the BJP from power. Even on the issue of use of EVMs, the difference between the leaders was glaring.

The main architect of the INDIA alliance, Nitish Kumar, got a hit below the belt at the Delhi meeting as his West Bengal counterpart Mamata Banerjee and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal proposed the name of Mallikarjun Kharge as the PM choice to take on Modi and the BJP at the 2024 polls. Kharge was sensible enough to excuse himself by saying such matters could be decided later — which is reflective of the Congress stand all along. Kharge also knows well that, in the end, he could be made a scapegoat; more so in a scenario where the chances of the opposition alliance winning the polls are unsure. Banerjee obviously killed two birds with one stone. She kept Rahul Gandhi and Nitish Kumar out of this picture. Her proposal to field Priyanka Gandhi for Varanasi to 'neutralize' the Modi aura over the constituency too was met with skepticism. There was more disagreement and less agreement.

The first and foremost requirement for the Opposition at this juncture is to present a picture of unity and a sense of purpose. Instead, they are 'confusion worse confounded'. Obviously, their spirits are not high because of the let-down the Opposition faced in the assembly polls even as the Congress party saved its face to a small extent by registering an unexpected win in Telangana. The Opposition is also not able to catch Modi on the wrong foot in the decisive run-up to the parliament polls. Periodic conclaves here and there would not serve much of a purpose. Worse, there is no agreement among these parties about putting up common candidates in several states though they had identified such a possibility in over 400 constituencies some time ago. Rather, they would fight each other in several states including West Bengal, where the CPI-M would fight TMC and the BJP. Though the reds are a fading force there, they would not break bread with Banerjee. As the adage goes, "Divided we stand, united we fall."

Civic management: Where did we go wrong?

By Patricia Mukhim

At a meeting held at the State Convention Centre on December 13 last, Meghalaya Chief Secretary, DP Wahlang the convener of the meeting captioned, "Rejuvenation and Restoration of the Wah Umkhrah, Umshyri and Umkhen," asked a pertinent question that should make us all sit up — He asked, "Where Did We Go Wrong?" The meeting which saw the attendance of the Rangbah Shnongs of Shillong city and beyond (the so-called non-municipal areas) other stakeholders who are concerned about the state of the above rivers, are also trying to figure out where we have all gone wrong as a collective. How did a community that loves its "Ri" — (country which does not extend beyond the Meghalaya borders); a community that has a rigid sections which goes ballistic each time railways are mentioned and comes up with a counter — Give us the Inner Line Permit (ILP) and only then bring in railways, could remain blind to other daily assaults on this same "Ri Baieid" (beloved country).

I know this will mean a lot of trolls getting after me but what must be said has to be said. To answer the Chief Secretary's question — "Where Have We Gone Wrong?" the short answer is that the institution of the Dorbar Shnong is not able to deal with civic management because it does not have the wherewithal. In every other state of the country barring Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya there are elected civic bodies for every ward and the Municipality is accountable to that elected body. The District Councils are mandated to create town and village committees, perhaps for civic management but they have not done so. I am not aware of any KHADC mandated village committee in my Shnong. I know this too will be a sore point for the ADCs but we cannot run away from the truth and expect problems to disappear only by what's written on paper.

Each time someone points to these flaws on civic management and also a range of other issues that are the result of "bad political decisions" one faces the wrath of a section of the community. The autonomous district councils "had" a specific mandate and that was to ensure that customary laws and practices of the tribes of Meghalaya are not whittled away because of a majoritarian non-tribal government. Since 1972 we have had an all tribal government but we left the district councils untouched. Reason? Because no politician has the "spine" to bring political reforms that are for the larger good of the state and its people. The District Councils needed to be reimaged.

In the book "Sixth Schedule To The Constitution" By Justice BL Hansaria, in

chapter 4 - Constitutional Provisions Relevant to North Eastern States mentions Article 243M: part not to apply to certain areas. Part IX of the Constitution was introduced by the Constitution (73rd Amendment Act) 1992 making special provisions with regards to Panchayats. However, provisions of this part do not apply to tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule and also to states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and the hill areas in the state of Manipur for which district councils exist. However, the legislatures of the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have been given the powers to apply provisions of Part IX of the Constitution to their respective states by making a law with two-thirds majority. So, also Parliament has been given the power to apply the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution to the tribal areas under Sixth Schedule.

So what is Part IX of the Constitution? It deals with the "Panchayats" or local self-government institutions in rural areas. It lays the foundation for the establishment of Panchayats and devolves powers and responsibilities to these grassroots-level bodies. Part IX consists of Articles 243 to 243-O. The key features of Part IX are listed below so that we have a clear reading of what we in Meghalaya have lost by resisting modernisation and sticking to tradition in a world challenged by problems of modernity including, in the main, waste management.

1. **Three-Tier System:** Part IX envisions a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate (block or taluka), and district levels. This tiered structure allows for local self-governance at multiple levels.

2. **Reservation of Seats:** Article 243D empowers the states to reserve seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women in Panchayats to ensure adequate representation of these marginalized groups.

3. **Duration of Panchayats:** Article 243E specifies the duration of Panchayats, which is five years. Elections to constitute new Panchayats must be held before the expiration of the current term.

4. **State Legislation:** Article 243G empowers the state legislatures to enact laws to regulate the composition, powers, and functions of Panchayats. These laws vary from state to state.

5. **Powers and Functions:** Part IX details the powers and functions of Panchayats, including matters related to agriculture, health, education, local economic development, and social justice. Panchayats have the authority to levy taxes,

collect revenue, and make plans for economic development and social justice.

6. **Finance Commission:** Article 243-I mandates the appointment of a State Finance Commission to recommend financial arrangements between the state government and the Panchayats.

7. **Election Commission:** Article 243K establishes a State Election Commission for the conduct of Panchayat elections in a fair and impartial manner.

8. **Reservation of Chairpersons:** Article 243S allows for the reservation of the offices of Chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels for SCs, STs, and women in proportion to their population.

9. **Duration of Panchayats:** Article 243U specifies the duration of Panchayats at all levels, which is also five years. Elections for new Panchayats must be held before the expiration of the current term.

10. **Powers to Impose Taxes:** Panchayats have the authority to levy and collect taxes, duties, tolls, and fees as specified in Article 243X.

Our problem in Meghalaya is that we did not want to chip at the powers of the District Councils although the Councils have shown no inclination to fully deliver on the powers vested in them which states unequivocally that the "District Councils have been mandated to establish village or town committees and define their powers and also any other matter relating to village or town administration including village or town police and public health and sanitation." It was only in 2020 that the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Solid Waste Management) Act was passed and ratified by the District Council Affairs of the State Government in March 2022. The Act empowers the Dorbar Shnong to penalise violators. The legitimate question therefore is, "How can waste be managed at the level of the Shnongs without them being given the resources, especially financial and human resources to do so? The Councils have to come up with very clear rules and with no politics involved on how to penalise residents who openly violate the laws that state that each residential building should have latrines and septic tanks within their boundaries. Releasing septic tanks directly into the rivers is a criminal offence and violators should be given a show-cause notice and then deal with the courts thereafter. Other than that, it is difficult to get compliance from people who wilfully violate the laws of the land.

The Shnongs beyond the municipalities are doing what they do at present — using only the petty amounts collected from each house-

hold to manage to run the garbage collection trucks, pay the drivers and other helpers. Since most members of the executive committee are also full time employees of the government or outside it, their supervisory roles are limited. They are not full-time employees of the Shnong. Unless this critical aspect is addressed and unless we have a proper election to these bodies, things will not change.

To answer the Chief Secretary — Where have we gone wrong — the answer is we have gone wrong because we have relied on traditional bodies without proper delegation of powers, and expect them to solve modern problems and especially to manage waste generated by modern societies. They are overwhelmed by the problem and short of putting their hands up and saying, "This is beyond us," they simply exist because of our dogged belief or infatuation with tradition.

The pertinent question here is how do we expect the Rangbah Shnong and their council to continue to "treimon shngewbha" (work for free or do pro-bono work) and for how long? Not all Rangbah Shnong have political aspirations. Those who do have political aspirations work with that purpose but a great many are just selected by their constituents to attend to their daily needs and to manage the waste above all.

So is this arrangement tenable for the long run? It is not. It is failing. For instance, "Who gives permission to people to construct homes right on the river so they can release their septic tanks directly into the river? Can action be taken against such residents? Are we living in a free for all state where laws are applicable to some and not to others? Can such gross violation of building laws be transgressed without punishment? Does anyone in this state have the authority to bulldoze illegal constructions? That's a big NO for that extracts a political cost. So at the end of the day it is pointless to have laws, rules and regulation if they are not applied and have not been applied over decades, "simply because we cling to tradition and then 'leh kabamom" (do as we please) because many still believe we live in an independent "Ri Khasi."

Elections are also won on the slogan of "Ka Ri bad Ka Jaitbynriew," without understanding how that slogan will not become a death knell of the very people that the politicians claim to love. When the rivers die there will be no jaitbynriew, and the Ri will become a barren desert.

That's the rather lengthy answer to your question — Where did we go wrong?, Mr Chief Secretary.

IT dept action against NewsClick bank accounts is illegal seize SC delaying hearing of NC petition has allowed central agencies to be revengeful

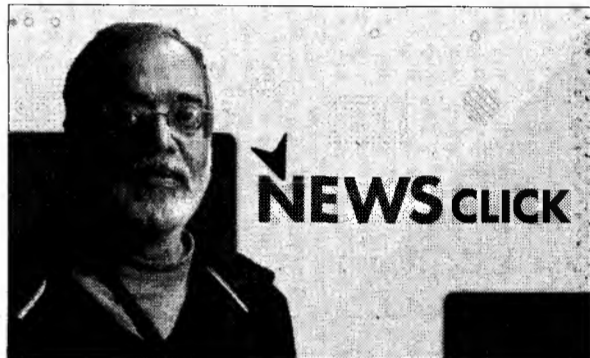
By Satyaki Chakraborty

The Narendra Modi Government's decision to freeze the accounts of the news portal NewsClick through the actions of the Income Tax Department is nothing but the continuation of the organized attack by the central agencies on this leading news portal to make it dysfunctional before the Lok Sabha elections in 2024. The latest IT action has led to the blocking of the payments made by the NC leading to acute embarrassment to this organization which is known for its prompt payments to its consultants and contributors.

NewsClick has always complied with the laws of the land, including all tax regulations. The claims levelled by the Income Tax Department have been challenged. There are normal rules which have

are in jail, all bail applications till now have been rejected. The Supreme Court which agreed to hear the petition against the arrest postponed the hearing till the early New Year. The learned judges refused to take cognizance of the seriousness of the issue since time was very crucial in this case. The IT department got involved after the ED and the CBI did their jobs in collusion. The objective of the ruling regime at the centre is to cripple the operations of this news portal from all directions.

The Constitution makers have talked of four pillars of our democracy — legislature, executive, judiciary and media. Media is the fourth pillar and all those who believe in democracy feel that each pillar will complement the



been totally violated by this drastic action in suddenly freezing the accounts just before the year-end festival season is starting.

Earlier, the raids by the Delhi police on the staff of the NewsClick news portal and subsequent arrest of the founder editor Prabir Purkayastha and HR head Amit Chakraborty on October 3 signalled the arrival of an era when all norms of democracy and press freedom were violated to achieve the objective of the ruling establishment to curb dissent.

The NewsClick case shows how the central government agencies can convert a pending case in Delhi High Court on money laundering under PMLA rule into a case of conspiracy and terrorism under the draconian UAPA once it appeared that the allegations under PMLA might not be proved in the Court. This conversion is a dangerous development and this hurts at the very root of the current judicial system.

The fact is that the enforcement directorate (ED) has made allegations of money laundering under PMLA rules against the portal NewsClick and its founder editor Prabir Purkayastha and the case of ED is being heard in Delhi High Court since 2021. So far the hearings have not proved that NC violated the foreign funds laws. NC says that the RBI has found no violation and NC management has full faith in the judgment of the court. Without waiting for the judgment of the Delhi High Court, not ED, but Delhi police struck against the portal staff under a FIR lodged in August this year under UAPA. Nobody knew about this FIR till October 3. Now the case is not of money laundering, but under clauses of terrorism and conspiracy.

The ED has every right to take action under the PMLA rules against NC if they could prove in the court the violations of the official rules including the RBI guidelines, but they did not wait for the verdict since it was becoming apparent that the transactions were made as per existing laws of the country. The Government agencies could not therefore wait for the hearing to be completed, the task of teaching lessons to a prodigal portal was passed over to the Home Ministry from the Finance Ministry which controls ED officially.

Since October 3, NC Editor Prabir Purkayastha and the HR head Amit Chakraborty

others to make India a vibrant democracy. This is the time when certainly, the media can look to the other pillar of the judiciary to see whether the executive is functioning to strengthen democracy or to subvert it.

The letter sent by 18 media organisations of the country to the Chief Justice of India Dr. D Y Chandrachud soon after the arrests is very relevant in this context. The CJ has always been a supporter for strengthening the fourth pillar of the Constitution. It was the CJ who said 'the press has a duty to speak truth to power and resent citizens with hard facts enabling them to make choices that propel democracy in the right direction and that India's freedom will be safe as long as journalists can play this role without being chilled by a threat of reprisal.'

Dr Chandrachud, is absolutely right in underlining what the duties of a free press should be. The voices of the ruling establishment don't allow the press to speak truth to power as he wants. They get panicky when the journalists play their role without being chilled by a threat of reprisal. The ruling government and the party BJP want embedded media which the CJ does not want. The journalists under attack on October 3 and 4 have been following the same principles which the CJ has been advocating.

The World Press Freedom Index ranks India at 161, in the bottom twenty of the 180 countries whose status it assesses. The fall has been immense and sharp since 2015. India is also the global internet shutdown capital, with by far the highest number of internet closures per year amongst all democracies.

India has displayed record democratic backsliding, and the state of the press is a vital component of the deterioration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi talks of India as a mother of democracy but in his rule of nearly a decade, the backsliding has accentuated. The Supreme Court under the CJ can rise to the occasion and play a historic role in reverting the present process and restore the vision on the press freedom which the Constitution makers held.

Already, it is too late, but still the media expects that the apex court as the custodian of the four pillars of democracy will take up on priority the issues involved in the NC petition and stand by the ethics so dear to the CJ. Let the New Year begin with an intervention by the Supreme Court in the interests of media freedom. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Let the voice of opposition be heard

Editor,
Recently 13 Lok Sabha members and one Rajya Sabha member were expelled for the remaining part of the session for creating ruckus in both houses of the Parliament. It is general parliamentary practice that any statement of the government is made in Parliament and not outside it but here Amit Shah made the statement on what had happened in and outside the House in an interview to a TV channel and not before the members of both Houses of the Parliament.

the British thousands of Indian were on the roads. It is a historical fact that after the failure of first independence war of 1857 it took 90 years to attain freedom.

Due to the breach of security, parliamentarians were demonstrating in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha but were suspended because of that and in case of Rajya Sabha members they are referred to Privileges Committee and asked to submit the report within two months. If the punishment is harsh then it will go down in the history of Rajya Sabha that a member is being punished for raising a genuine demand and PM as well as home minister had accepted it is a serious breach of security. It is surprising why the members had been suspended for the remaining part of the session under the pretext of misconduct when they were only seeking a statement from either the Home Minister or Prime Minister on last week's security breach. This indicates the government's lack of respect for

the Opposition—which is only doing its job when it asks it to fulfil its function of accountability.

During the regime of Rajiv Gandhi opposition members resigned from Parliament to press their demands on Bofors. On the issue of Shah Bano only one member resigned from Parliament to press his demand and to show resentment against the decision of the Rajiv Gandhi government.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the Lok Sabha and Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh had assured the Opposition before the start of the current session that the Government is willing to discuss all issues. A security breach in the Lok Sabha is an issue in and of itself, one that the government itself calls a "grave national concern." Hence it was expected from the government that they should follow their own commitment to discuss all issues but now the question arises as to why the government is reluctant to have discussion in both

houses of Parliament.

It is true that the security of the Parliament complex is looked after by the Lok Sabha secretariat and Speaker Om Birla has ordered a full-scale review of the arrangements. There is no doubt that the review will identify the gaps in the system and plug them; but that does not mean that the members, and the nation at large, have no right to seek an explanation from the Government. This is also desirable in a country which is the world's largest democracy.

As it stands today, the six people arrested in the case come from six states, and they had been planning their operation for over a year. This shows the malafide intention of all accused. It appears that the government thinks that the nation has no right to know how it runs the intelligence apparatus which failed to nail such a plot. The youngsters who nonetheless acted in a violent way may not qualify to be called terrorists nor was it their intention to strike terror in

the heart of the common man but to call attention to pressing concerns of unemployment, inflation murders in Manipur, but the fact is that their moves got successfully executed under the watch of a government led by a party that prides itself as a champion of national security. This is alarming indeed.

The Party and the Government owes it to the people of India to explain how such a long-duration conspiracy went unnoticed. Also, what is the government planning to do next so that a repeat of this break-in by people with more inimical designs does not reoccur. The country wants assurance from the Government that such acts would be handled properly and there would be no laxity on their part.

The Government may feel that the Opposition is agitating disproportionately to the event but democratic norms mandate that it takes upon itself the job of explaining contentious matters. The Opposition is acting as per its mandate.

Unfortunately, Parliament has been witnessing unruly scenes for quite some time now. It is bizarre that in some instances even the Treasury benches disrupted the proceedings in the recent past as in the case of the BSP MP against whom unparliamentary language was used by a member of the ruling party.

It is important that the government becomes realistic about fulfilling the people's right to information. Running away from its duties or expelling Opposition members from the House cannot resolve anything. Rather it will aggravate the situation. It is the bounden duty of treasury benches to pacify the members of the Opposition in Parliament.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

—T. S. Eliot

The Shillong Times

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School Drop-out Rates Worrisome

THERE has been no improvement in the overall education scenario in Meghalaya. In most human development indicators, the State is competing with Bihar which used to be known as one of the BIMARU states. In November 2022 the Unified District Information for School Education (UDISE) had pointed out that Meghalaya had the highest drop-out rate in Classes 1-5. In 20-21 the drop-out rate in this category was 7.4% and in 21-22 it had jumped up to 9.8%. The Government of Meghalaya, as pointed out by Congress MLA Saleng Sangma has not shown any inclination to tackle this crisis in education. Now, in the latest survey Meghalaya has also recorded the highest percentage of drop-out at the Secondary level in 2021-22 at 21.7% which is the highest in the country and much above the national average which stands at 12.6% only. As usual Bihar follows Meghalaya with a drop-out rate of 20.46%.

Education Minister Rakkam Sangma has been making the right noises and advocated adopting NCERT textbooks as a cure to the educational crisis in the state. But are books the only reason for the poor educational outcomes? The Government of Meghalaya has to admit that although it is constantly giving itself a photo-shopped version of its performance on all fronts the stark reality is that poverty is growing by the day and not much is being done to address rural poverty and landlessness both. Schooling means investment and even if a student is keen to study her parents cannot afford to provide her with the basic necessities required such as books, school fees etc. Above all, in Meghalaya's rural outback a teenager is seen as a potential help in the house. Boys are employed as shepherds; girls look after the home and younger siblings while parents are out working. In the city students can get help at home or from tuition; in villages, students have neither.

According to a study by the National Centre for Education Statistics, students with low family incomes have the highest dropout rates at 9.4%. This is because these children need to get a job rather than go to school so they can help to support their families. A steady income can be a very powerful lure for a young person, especially when that person is from a low-income family and struggles to have their daily needs met. Studies however suggest that the most common reason why parents do not value education is because they don't think that education would make any difference to the child's life as an adult. Other reasons for school drop-out are that schools are distant and inaccessible; the school infrastructure is poor; there are inadequate toilet facilities and teacher absenteeism among others. In Meghalaya the Government needs to do an intensive study on the high drop-out rate and address it before many other more serious issues engulf the state.

Passing important legislations by suspending Opposition MPs is authoritarianism

Amit Shah's Hindu interpretation of new criminal laws

By Arun Srivastava

Passing legislation by resorting to suspensions is a kind of authoritarianism. Knocking down the March 2 directive of the Supreme Court that said that the panel which picks election commissioners and their chief "shall" include the Chief Justice of India was clear manifestation of the autocratic mindset of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who wanted to send the message that the judiciary, one of the pillars of democracy, was subservient to "him" and the Chief Justice was to take directives from the executive.

Ever since D Y Chandrachud became CJI, Modi and his ministers, especially Kiren Rijju, had been making attempts to coerce the judiciary and compel the CJI to listen to his diktats. After trampling the three other pillars of democracy - Legislature, Executive and Media - it was the turn of Judiciary. But Modi could not succeed fully.

The petitioners will challenge the new law but how far this will serve the judicial cause is not sure considering the prevailing mood and approach of the court. Undoubtedly, the Modi government's move to nullify the radical judgment of the Supreme Court is deplorable. It points to a major political catastrophe to come.

Modi's move to suspend nearly 150 members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha ought to be viewed in this context. He wants to be "guaranteed" that none of his moves face deterrence on the floor of the House. With most of the MPs thrown out, the government rushed through not only the Election Commission bill but also the three critical criminal law bills, without any meaningful debates. After their passage in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, the three bills were passed by the Rajya Sabha through voice vote.

In politics all actions have well-defined motives as well as meanings. Suspension of nearly 150 opposition MPs from the Lok Sabha, and the Rajya Sabha, is the central component of the well-planned plot to destroy the legal structure of the country. That, too, inside the Parliament, the temple of democracy. Modi, especially his mentor, the RSS, was not cozy with the present legal system and its judicial structure.

The Sangh has been contemplating for long to bring about basic structural changes in the judicial system and reshape it along the lines of the Hindu legal system. The RSS model was based on the politics of Hindutva. The larger design is to segregate

Muslims, make them fall in line and follow the Hindu judicial system. Apparently the three redrafted bills -- Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill -- were to do away with the vestiges of colonial era rules, but in reality this is an ingenious strategy to "Hinduise" jurisprudence. The hurry to push through the bills and get it passed in one go on Wednesday underlined the religio-political importance.

While honouring the suggestion of the Modi government, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and Chairman Rajya Sabha Jagdeep Dhankar were busy suspending MPs. Modi's Home Minister Amit Shah was using the opportunity to accomplish Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission to deprive Indians of their basic human rights and moving closer to turning India into "Hindu Rashtra".

Shah said the old laws were reflective of the colonial mindset with the intention to punish and not impart justice. "The three new bills seek to establish a justice system based on Indian thinking... The three proposed criminal laws will free people from colonial mindset and its symbols. New criminal laws will ensure speedy justice, no more 'tarikh-pe-tarikh', the phrase borrowed from a popular Hindi film.

Shah's words "bills seek to establish a justice system based on Indian thinking" ought to be analysed in proper perspective. What does he mean? He did not elaborate the content and nature of Indian thinking. He did not clarify what he actually intended to convey by using the words "Indian thinking". Did he intend to convey to the people of India that till December 21-23 an alien, a non-Indian, law will continue dictating their lives?

It is a known fact that this change is the brainchild of the RSS - alter the modern legal system into a Hindu legal system to suit its politics of Hindutva. Through this change, the RSS intends to introduce a Hindu system of judiciary for India.

In comparison with modern law, the classical Hindu legal system followed a unique arrangement of law and polity with its own set of values. The main aim of the law in the Vedic period was to preserve "dharma" which consists of both legal duties and religious duties. Dharma provided the principal guidance by which one

endeavored to lead his life. The sources of law during this period were Sruti, Smriti and acharas (customs).

Sruti consists of the four Vedas, namely Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. These Vedas chiefly dealt with religious duties, practices and customs. The jurist Manu, who endorsed the division of society on caste lines and did not believe that women and shudra (Dalit) deserved respect. Later, commentators like Vachaspati Misra, described the judicial system and legal procedure which prevailed in India from ancient times till the close of the Middle Ages.

Shah's explanation that financial challenges have been a big barrier to securing justice in the country - "...justice is not delivered timely...tarikh pe tarikh milti hain (prolonged trial), police blame courts and government, courts blame police, the government holds the police and judiciary responsible... everyone keeps shifting the blame on each other" - was merely a ploy to conceal the real intention.

If the intentions were honourable, Shah and Modi would have allowed a debate. But the intentions were not honourable. The government alibi was that members were not allowing the house to function. Instead of calming down the members, the government threw them out.

It was not such a big demand. Modi and Shah could have conceded. The Congress was right when it said that the suspensions were to ensure the passage of the three criminal law bills. "Has the government really dumped the British 'colonial' criminal laws? Consider the fact that 90-95% of IPC, 95% of CrPC and 99% of Evidence Act have been cut, copied and pasted in the three Bills: can anyone deny or debate that fact? In fact, the government has immortalised Macaulay and Fitz Stephen who drafted the original IPC and Evidence Act".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge was absolutely right in saying, "Passing important legislation by suspending Opposition MPs is not Democracy. It is the worst kind of authoritarianism". Modi through his actions made it clear that his government was for the RSS and would implement its plans. If at all Modi and Shah had any respect for democracy and democratic functioning they should have listened to the small demand of opposition and Shah must have made a

statement in the house on the security breach. But instead of coming to the house he made a statement outside. This was nothing but manifestation of disrespect and contempt to the house.

December 21, the INDIA bloc took out a march from the old Parliament building to Vijay Chowk, about a kilometre apart, carrying a large "Save Democracy" banner and placards saying "Opposition MPs Suspended! Is This The End of Democracy?" and "Parliament Caged, Democracy Expelled!". Kharge and other Congress leaders came out with the suggestion that Rahul Gandhi should lead another yatra that could become the pivot on which a powerful campaign could be built for the 2024 battle. But they must realise that these actions would not be enough to counter the designs of the RSS.

The INDIA leadership must set a counter narrative in the backdrop of the latest moves of Modi/Shah and especially RSS. It is sure that RSS and Modi will use the new laws to help them gain superiority over INDIA. The new EC will not dither in facilitating them to win the election. It is for the INDIA leaders to evolve a mechanism to fight any such attempt. Suspicions are making rounds of the political circle that some senior INDIA leaders would be arrested and put in jail just ahead of the election. Expulsion of MPs is the biggest example of arbitrary exercise of power in democracy. The possibility of Modi turning more aggressive and resorting to high order of autocratic discipline cannot be ruled out. With democracy already in tatters, the question of accountability and preserving the "spirit of Constitution" does not arise.

Former Vice President Hamid Ansari cited reports of the rise of authoritarianism across the world. India is certainly not an exception. He warned that nearly half of 173 countries assessed were experiencing decline in at least one metric of democracy. In this backdrop Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankar bringing casteism to Parliament does not augur well.

Mimicking is not a crime. But projecting it as a criminal act and using it to arouse communal feelings certainly falls within the ambit of a wrong act. Dhankar had given vent to his anguish in the Rajya Sabha, saying he was personally hurt as his farmer and Jat backgrounds were targeted. Strange. How could he relate mimicry to caste? Did he extend even moral support to the Jat farmers who were agitating for MSP? (IPA Service)

What ails civic management: The search for answers

By Biswajit Dutta

As we bid farewell to another year of struggle living in Shillong and get ready to welcome a new year, a statement that rings in our ears is, "Where did we go wrong?". Why did Shillong turn into what it is today? While we continue to blame each other and try to find fault in the work of others and clamour about our jurisdictional rights and powers, we fail to realize that in the meantime the city of Shillong has grown much beyond its limits and continues to expand like an organism and that there is no real boundary which demarcates our localities, our city waste and our city infrastructure. As we end the year and look back there seems to be very little reason to rejoice. Things have only gone from bad to worse.

Despite efforts to make Shillong smart and beautiful, traffic has become worse, footpaths and roadside spaces taken over by hawkers and vendors, parking is nightmarish, the water supply is in a state of fluid, waste collection and disposal throwing up

Whatever little regulatory function on safe building activity that it was doing has also been taken away from it. The need of the hour is that citizens of Shillong, the state government, the District Council and our Dorbars to have the courage to discuss and build up a consensus as to how best to go forward and manage Shillong's problems instead of remaining stuck on jurisdictional issues and self rights. We have to look beyond our local issues to see the future of Shillong Urban Agglomeration.

Why can't Shillong have a civic body covering the Greater Shillong area? Give it adequate powers. Call it by whatever name you want, have a state-centric municipal act, suited to our conditions and represent members in whatever way you want, elected or nominated. It is extremely demeaning when even for a complaint of garbage or water supply, or sanitation for that matter, one has to call up the MLA or the Rangbah Shnong. Although they have been



more garbage than solutions, sanitation leaving a stink everywhere and the state of our rivers, streams and drains a disgrace to our city. The skyline is changing from an idyllic hill town skyline of pine forests and pitched roofs to a skyline of jagged concrete squares and rectangles. After 50 years of our statehood, if we continue to live in a state of denial and keep on finger-pointing at each other, there will not be much left of Shillong to live in.

The question that arises is why things went so bad. The reasons are not very far to see, there is a total lack of coordination among the multiple agencies that claim authority over the city. Although everybody is playing its part and efforts are being made, coordinated and concerted efforts have been lacking. Why are we yet to get ourselves a civic body to manage the civic needs or a Planning and Development Agency for the long-term planning and implementation of the infrastructure facilities of the entire city? How long can we flog the Shillong Municipal Board whose jurisdiction covers little more than 10 per cent of the city area? Systematically we have starved that institution of its funds, taken away its assets, made it dependent on the state government and turned it into a white elephant. It is today a redundant institution with the sole function of garbage management.

The same is true of MUDA. Although MUDA was set up for the planning and development of Shillong and other towns and cities, today it is rediscovering the wheels in the small confined municipal area of Shillong.

doing this yeoman service for many many years, sadly this may not be the role for which they were elected by the locality. There has to be a civic representative for every locality responsible for the same. The piecemeal approach is not going to work.

Parallely there should be legislation for a Planning and Development Agency for the Greater Shillong area including the New Shillong Township area. It is alarming to see villages around Shillong growing rapidly into towns and urban centres without any regulation or controls in place. Time and again we have heard of Town Committees being set up for the new towns but sadly, neither is there the expertise, resources or wherewithal to constitute and run the same. In such a situation, new legislation to set up a development agency for the entire city headed by a professional and consisting of representatives of all stakeholders in the city primarily to draw up infrastructure development plans and execute the same, is essential. Such an agency could also be given the responsibility of distribution and management of water supply and sewerage of the city.

Although the problems of Shillong appear insurmountable and things seem to be turning from bad to worse, there is always hope and things can improve if we set aside our petty differences and our rights for the general benefit of the citizens and the city we love.

(The writer is Retired Director, Urban Affairs now a citizen of Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

The magic of EVMs!

Editor,
The latest victory of the saffron party in Madhya Pradesh by capturing about 165 out of the 230 total seats cannot but be complimented even by its bete-noire the Congress. The final results must have surprised and shocked the psephologists as they have anticipated that the Congress party would emerge victorious in this State. And, contrary to all expectations the saffron party registered a thumping majority.

Conversely, it was reported that in this State when the postal ballot papers were counted the Congress party was leading in 199 seats, but lo and behold, when the counting of votes from EVMs was accounted for, the results dramatically tilted in BJP's favour.

While recapitulating the foregoing narratives, it may be recalled that since the introduction of EVMs in our electoral scenarios the same have unleashed a welter of unabated cynicism amongst the voters as some experts in the field of electronic components have opined that any machine with a chip could be conveniently hacked! Coin-

identally, in 2018 when our State of Meghalaya was on the verge of holding the Assembly elections, and when the saffron party was at the helm of powers at the centre, the then BJP president of Meghalaya Shibun Lyngdoh had boasted that his party, the BJP, would spring a surprise by winning a large number of seats to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. And in apt riposte, one of the UDP leaders commented, "Yes, you'll spring surprises by bringing in those tampered EVM machines from UP and Bihar."

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Why school dropouts on the rise

Editor,
This is about the sad tale of the Class 10 students of Meghalaya who walk out of the education system each year. Once celebrated as the educational hub of the Northeast, the state has now earned disrepute due to whopping 33.5% dropout rate. Is it not ironic that we talk of digital India and smart classes while the majority of the state's citizens consider it

a luxury to send their children to college?

Needless to say, among the weaker sections of people, where every rupee is meant for survival, education certainly loses to more immediate needs like food and shelter. I strongly feel that they are not just dropping out of higher secondary classes; they are being dropped from a narrative that promises progress and prosperity.

Another bigger question is whether the dropout youths are suitably employed. It is doubtful amidst this employment crisis. Let's not forget young girls, whose stories are often more pathetic if we make deeper studies. In a twist of societal norms, some are pulled out of school much earlier to help at home, and as a result, their aspirations are locked away in the kitchen or the fields. Early wedlock or teenage pregnancies have also become a serious concern, leading to an increase in school dropouts. Young women will have to face various unforeseen challenges, impacting the whole family and society at large.

It is very important that the government, NGOs, and spiritual leaders come together to address all these pressing concerns. It is not just about building schools,

but to build dreams and raise mass awareness for a healthy society. Yes, initiatives that understand the "root causes" of these dropouts are crucial. After all, it's not just about getting children back to school, it's about keeping them there, engaged and inspired so that they excel in the academic sphere.

So how do we address these issues? Do we need more schools, better infrastructure, or scholarships? Of course, they are indispensable. But the answer also lies in empathy and action on a war footing to improve the "socio-economic" status of the underprivileged.

Truly speaking, the government needs to consider taking a "holistic approach," focusing not only on educational reforms but also on enhancing the economic status of each household. Value-based education and skill development programs designed to address "local needs" and resources can empower students with marketable skills. Such initiatives, ranging from agriculture-based skills to vocational training, can open new employment avenues both in rural and urban areas. These programs definitely foster sustainable livelihoods that resonate with the local popu-

lace.

As we work towards this goal, let's remember that each adult child brought back to the classroom is a step towards a brighter, more equitable future. The prosperity of the state is always ensured when the employability of the youth with quality education is ensured.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Acute water scarcity

Editor,
We the residents of areas near Pine Mount School have been facing erratic water supply for several weeks now. There are days when there is no supply of water and when we do get water the pressure is very low. We have complained to the people in charge but the problem has not been solved as yet. We never had this acute water shortage before. Hope those in charge of water supply from the Sericulture Farm source/ Shillong Municipal Board/ Water Works Department/ PHE will take note of our grievances through your esteemed paper and reinstall/ repair/ restore the water supply as soon as possible. Otherwise this festive season

seems bleak for us due to the water shortage.

Yours etc.,
J Jyrwa,
Via email

BJP's double standards

Editor,
The news report about the mimicry of a TMC MP did not mention that he used a single word against the community of the Chairman of Rajya Sabha. Yet the mimicry which happened during the Opposition's protest on the stairs of Parliament is being criticised as an insult to the whole community of the latter. Interestingly, a few months ago, a BJP MP used the most vulgar and communal words regarding a particular community against another Member of Parliament of the Opposition bench on the floor of Parliament. But no action has since been taken against him despite the existence of audio visual proof.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

Overeating at Christmas may not cause permanent weight gain



The holidays are a time of indulgence, with most celebrations centred on having festive food and drinks. It's no wonder then that most people expect to gain some weight over Christmas.

Indeed, plenty of research suggests that people can gain a couple of kilos over the festive period. But whether this weight gain is only temporary or not depends on many factors.

First, it's important to note that our body weight varies quite a lot from day to day. One study of three European countries suggested that adults tend to be 0.35% heavier on a Monday than they were the previous Friday.

This might be due to people eating differently at weekends. Or it could be down to natural fluctuations in our weight - with one study finding weight can change by an av-

erage of 1kg in a single day thanks to activity levels, fluid retention and food intake.

But when it comes to the Christmas period, weight gain tends to fluctuate more. Research shows that at Christmas, people saw their weight increase by 1.35% on average (about 1.2kg or 3lb).

Research from Australia also shows that adults gain around 0.65% body weight over the Christ-

mas period (which falls during their summer). This is particularly interesting, as the study found participants tended to weigh 0.23% less in the summer compared to the winter.

This suggests that Christmas weight gain may be solely down to overeating - not because people are exercising less during the cold winter months.

But is this weight gain actually

due to an increase in body fat? Or is it simply because of bloating, fluid retention and having more food in our stomachs?

Calorie count

When looking at how much people eat on Christmas day itself, there's little in the way of rigorous research.

But if we look at American Thanksgiving - a holiday similarly characterised by indulgence and overeating - research shows people eat around 3,960 calories at Thanksgiving dinner alone. This translates to an approximately 0.5kg (1.1lb) weight increase at the end of the Thanksgiving period.

That's nearly double the daily recommended calorie requirements for the average adult woman and almost one-and-a-half times the recommended requirements for an adult man.

But just because it's double the amount of calories we need, this doesn't mean we may necessarily gain weight.

For many years, it was believed that consuming an additional 3,500 calories or more over a week would result in 0.5kg of weight gain. But research now suggests this might not necessarily be true for everyone. Many factors can affect how easily a person gains weight - and how many additional calories per week it takes to do this.

For example, it seems that, in general, men gain weight less easily than women, linked to differences in body composition and where fat tends to be stored.

Other factors - including body size and weight as well as how much muscle you have, age and how physically active you are - can also affect how easily you might gain weight.

Additionally, your genes and some health conditions (such as an underactive thyroid) can influence how easy it is to gain weight.

So it's possible that even if different people eat the same number of extra calories over Christmas, one person may gain more weight than the other.

Another consideration is that many of us are eating additional calories on more than just one day over

the holidays. For some of us, the holiday indulgence begins in early December, or even late November. This increases the likelihood you'll gain weight over the holidays.

But let's say you're only going to be indulging on Christmas day. It's unlikely you can eat so much in a single day as to lead to significant weight gain. This is partly because of how our metabolism works - which balances itself over several days.

Still, you might feel that single day of overeating for a few days afterwards as a result - meaning you feel "heavier", even if you haven't actually gained weight. Also, if you do gain a little weight, once you go back to your normal routine your body weight will also go back to normal.

Even if you do gain weight at Christmas, research suggests this weight can also be lost after the holidays and your lifestyle settles down.

But if you do want to be mindful about what you eat during the holidays, a dietitian would suggest the following things.

- 1. Be mindful.** Your enjoyment of the holidays doesn't have to be based on how much you eat - it can be about being in the moment and enjoying the holidays and food more mindfully. But when you do indulge, try to be mindful of how much you're putting on your plate - don't just snack without thinking.
- 2. Eat plenty of veggies, salads and fruit.** Save the calorie-rich festive treats as the highlight - rather than the main event of meals.
- 3. Try to get a bit of exercise.** A Christmas or Boxing day walk with family and friends can help to offset some of the calories and may also help with digestion and bloating.

If you still feel like you might have overindulged over Christmas, it is not recommended that you rush into making New Year's resolutions. Instead, it is encouraged that people should make small changes to their diet and physical activity levels, which are easy to stick to. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 24, 2023

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon opposite Venus on your solar return chart brings in favourable tidings and developments. Your ideas will be well received by others, as you are vocal and articulate. Some of your experiments will yield satisfactory results. There will be a noticeable change in your approach and this positive change will help you immensely. You might consider furthering your education; it is a fabulous time to do so. You exhibit financial acumen and make some smart moves. Some unexpected expenses would need to be made. Relationships need to be nurtured at this time; and some need to be revived too. The family unit becomes more cohesive as you would like it to be.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The week begins on a positive note. The planetary configuration indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. Your outlook on life has been a little more serious and responsible. In the past while, you might have reached out to others in an attempt to validate yourself, looking for ways to boost your confidence. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more likely to be successful.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This week brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your physical body and mannerisms are a focus. There would be a newfound identity and a realistic understanding of your own limitations and your capabilities as well. In terms of career and projects, outward signs of progress would lay a foundation for future success and progress. Lifeless or outworn relationships may have been especially hard to bear for you. You could take up some form of physical program that completely changes the way you feel about yourself. The things that give you joy and positive feedback figure prominently and you feel renewed and regenerated.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings success in professional and personal relations. You would feel particularly strong and personally powerful. There is no such thing as playing the victim, you're the victor and you feel it. You enjoy an increased ability to concentrate and focus on what really matters to you. It would be wise to make something of your hobbies—even if it doesn't bring an income, you might find that expressing yourself creatively really helps to define yourself and to understand yourself better. Health is likely to be balanced.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and an opportunity to travel. Try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bolder in expressing your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. A strong desire for companionship dominates at this time.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The first phase of this year increases confidence and courage at work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Friends and loved ones take priority. You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached

on a personal level as you feel drawn towards religion and spiritualism. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't waste your energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration brings success, responsibility and maturity. You have much energy for new moneymaking projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. Relationships take on a fun outlook and activities with children increase. You possess extra charm in your professional interactions. A new affair is in the offing for the unattached. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is apparent. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, marketing, promotional activities and other such endeavors are favored now. You may face some minor ailments on the health front.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel drawn to intellectuals with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not along with the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the limelight during this phase.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. If single, you are more than willing to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering at this time. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources. Social life takes priority in your life. You would become serious about family relations and feel responsible towards them. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Taking care of business is your main focus. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. Striking a balance between your attention to your career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either.

Serene digital detox getaways



Kee Monastery in Spiti Valley

In a world that's constantly connected, the need for a digital detox is becoming a top trend. Are you feeling the need to unplug from the digital world, escape the noise, and find inner peace? Here is a list of serene and tranquil destinations perfect for a digital detox. Reconnect with nature, rejuvenate your mind, and discover a sense of calm in these off-the-grid getaways. With Yatra Prime, travellers can book flights not just at zero convenience fees but also avail ongoing offers, special fares on domestic flights, and more, thereby fitting itineraries within a desired budget range.

Yoga Retreat and River Serenity - Rishikesh: For a spiritual digital detox, head to Rishikesh. Experience yoga and meditation and take a dip in the holy Ganges River. For a perfect blend of spirituality and natural beauty Rishikesh is the best place for you. Located in the northernmost part of the country, it will become your favorite destination.

Disconnect to Reconnect - Leh-Ladakh: Surrounded by the stunning Himalayas, Leh-Ladakh offers a perfect digital detox. Enjoy the breathtaking landscapes, pristine lakes, and monasteries that make this region a haven of tranquility. Explore the Nubra Valley, Pangong

Lake, and Tso Moriri for a true escape from the digital world.

Discover Calm in Coorg: Known as the "Scotland of India," Coorg offers a lush, green landscape for relaxation. Reconnect with nature here, whether you're exploring waterfalls, wildlife, or simply enjoying a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

Island Paradise - Andaman and Nicobar Island: If you enjoy adventure sports and activities, the Andaman Islands are a fantastic choice for you during this time. Get away from the digital hustle on the pristine beaches of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Enjoy scuba diving, sunsets, and relaxation at Radhanagar Beach. It's an island paradise that encourages you to disconnect and unwind. This is the best island destination for discovering forests where more than three-quarters of the region is indefinable and unimaginable.

Spiti Valley - Remote Himalayan Retreat: The Spiti Valley offers beautiful scenery that seems to be from another planet for those looking for a remote and serene getaway. Disconnect from Wi-Fi and connect with nature by trekking, visiting ancient monasteries, and stargazing in this high-altitude haven.

Wayanad - Escape to the West-

ern Ghats: Nestled in the Western Ghats, Wayanad is known for its lush greenery and serene lakes. Visit the heart-shaped lake - Pookode Lake, and explore the rich biodiversity of the region. Unwind and escape the digital noise in the lush green forests for a more calming experience.

Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh: Ziro Valley, known for its lush green landscapes, is an unspoiled paradise. Disconnect and enjoy the peace, along with cultural experiences like the Ziro Music Festival.

Manali, Himachal Pradesh: Manali offers a serene digital detox during the winter months when the town is covered in snow. Opt for cozy cabins, enjoy hot cocoa, and indulge in winter sports like skiing, snowboarding, and sledding.

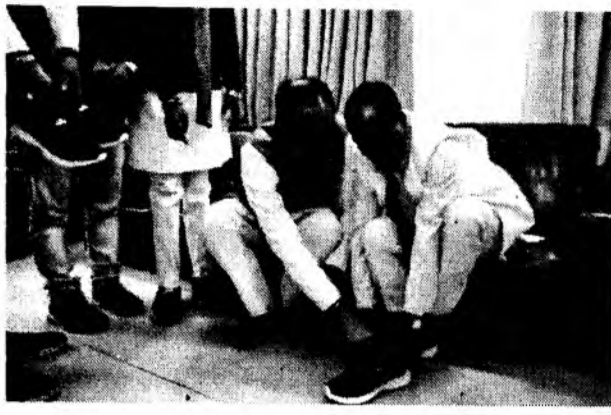
Pondicherry: Embrace the French charm and tranquility of Pondicherry. Explore the serene beaches, practice yoga, and indulge in delicious cuisine while you unplug from your digital devices.

Varkala, Kerala: Varkala is the perfect beachside digital detox destination. Let go of your gadgets and immerse yourself in yoga, Ayurvedic treatments, and the calming sound of waves crashing on the shore. (*LANSLife*)

BJP eyes big boost in vote share in crucial 2024 general elections

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The BJP has set its sights on an "overwhelming" win in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking key organisational leaders to work towards boosting the party's vote share by 10 per cent, sources said. Addressing the BJP's national office-bearers and state presidents on the concluding day of the two-day brainstorming meet on Saturday, Home Minister Amit Shah said that the BJP's performance should leave the opposition "stunned", the sources said.

With the opposition INDIA bloc planning to put up a one-on-one fight against the BJP, Modi called for raising the BJP's vote share by 10 per cent from its show in the 2019 polls when the ruling party had fetched over 37 per cent of votes while the National Democratic Alliance led by it had bagged around 45 per cent votes. Since coming to power at the Centre in 2014, the BJP has continuously striven to



Former MP CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan helps BJP's Anuppur district president Ramdas Puri wear shoes. Puri, who had vowed in 2017 not to wear footwear till the party forms a government in the state, started wearing it again on Saturday, days after the party registered a resounding victory in the assembly polls. (PTI)

raise its vote share to 50 per cent in state assembly polls and succeeded in this feat in many elections. Shah, like Modi a day before, underlined the primacy of organisation in elections and said it should score such an "overwhelming" win that the opposition thinks many times before challenging it,

sources said. The prime minister emphasised the need to reach out to women, youth, farmers and the poor - whom he has often described as the four biggest "castes". He asked party leaders to connect a maximum number of these people with the ongoing 'Viksit Bharat Sankalp

Yatra', which aims at saturation of his government's flagship welfare schemes. The sources said the party's top brass did not set any specific seat target but emphasised on ensuring a win which should be bigger than its 2019 performance when the BJP had bagged 303 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

They accused the opposition of resorting to lies and spreading fake narratives but expressed confidence that people would reward Modi with a third straight term at the Centre.

Chhattisgarh CM meets Modi

Newly elected Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his residence on Saturday and apprised him of the steps being taken by his government to fulfil the party's poll promises, official sources said.

Sai also paid a courtesy visit to Home Minister Amit Shah and received his "guidance". Deputy Chief Min-

isters Arun Sao and Vijay Sharma accompanied Sai in his meetings with Modi and Shah here.

During his meeting with the prime minister, Sai apprised Modi of the steps being taken by the Chhattisgarh government to fulfil the promises made by him during the assembly elections. They also discussed the formation of the state cabinet, the sources said. Sharing pictures of the meeting, Sai said in a post on X that he had a detailed discussion with the prime minister regarding various public welfare schemes related to development, progress and public interest of Chhattisgarh and received his guidance.

"Under the able guidance of the prime minister, the double-engine government of the BJP will definitely establish new records of service, good governance, public welfare and development in the state," the chief minister added in his post. (PTI)

Congress's five-member NAC holds its first meeting in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The five-member National Alliance Committee (NAC) formed earlier this week by Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge held its first meeting on Saturday.

In the meeting, it was decided to first hold talks within the party state-wise before holding talks with the parties from the INDIA bloc, sources said.

The first meeting of the NAC, which is chaired by senior Congress leader Mukul Wasnik, with former Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, senior party leaders Salman Khurshid and Mohan Prakash as its members held its first meeting on Saturday.

According to sources, the committee will first hold meetings within the party with state leaders to know their preparations.

The source said that the meeting with the party leaders will begin after the De-

cember 28 massive public meeting in Maharashtra's Nagpur on the occasion of the Congress' 138th foundation day.

The source said that once the meeting with the state leaders concludes, the committee will then hold talks with the regional parties to decide on the seat sharing formula for the states.

The source said that the process will be completed within three weeks time as the Lok Sabha elections are also inching closer.

Kharge had announced the five-member committee on December 19, the day for the fourth meeting of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc parties at Hotel Ashoka here.

The Trinamool Congress and several other parties had asked the Congress to finalise the seat sharing deal at the earliest so that the regional parties too can start preparing for the Lok Sabha elections and also plan for

eight to ten joint public meetings of the bloc to take on the BJP-led NDA in 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Sachin Pilot made gen secretary in-charge of Chhattisgarh

The Congress on Saturday appointed Sachin Pilot the general secretary in-charge of Chhattisgarh and Avinash Pande the general secretary in-charge of Uttar Pradesh, replacing Kumari Selja and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, respectively.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will now be a general secretary "without any assigned portfolio", according to a statement issued by the Congress.

The appointments come two days after a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), party's highest decision-making body, which was chaired by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and attended by senior leaders, including Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. (Agencies)

National nuggets

Karti appears before ED

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Congress MP Karti Chidambaram on Saturday appeared before the Enforcement Directorate for his questioning in a money laundering case linked to the issuance of visa to some Chinese nationals in 2011, official sources said. The ED case stems from a CBI complaint. The agency recorded the statement of the 52-year-old MP from Sivaganga Lok Sabha seat in Tamil Nadu, under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Karti had earlier said the ED probe was a "fishing and roving" enquiry and that he has earlier submitted documents to the agency. He sought more time to collect documents as he skipped appearance on December 12 and December 16. The CBI, last year, raided the premises of the Chidambaram family and arrested S Bhaskararaman, a close associate of Chidambaram. The ED case pertains to the allegations of Rs 50 lakh being paid as kickbacks to Karti and Bhaskararaman by a top executive of Vedanta group company Talwandi Sabo Power Ltd (TSPL), which was setting up a power plant in Punjab according to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) FIR. (PTI)

Azam Khan, son acquitted in 2019 attempt to murder case

RAMPUR (UP), Dec 23: A special sessions court here on Saturday acquitted Sanjaywadi Party leader Azam Khan and his son Abdullah Azam in a 2019 attempt to murder case while upholding their seven-year sentence in a four-year-old forgery case. Special Sessions Judge Vijay Kumar granted Azam Khan, his son and two other relatives relief in the attempt to murder case for lack of evidence, Senior Prosecution Officer Amarnath Tiwari said. It was alleged in the case that Azam Khan, Abdullah Azam and two of their relatives had threatened a neighbour to vacate a plot of land, following which police had filed a charge sheet against them under sections of the IPC, including 307 (attempt to murder) and 323 (causing grievous hurt), Tiwari added. However, in the other case registered in 2019 the court rejected a plea by the SP leader, his wife Tazeer Fatima and their son against the seven-year imprisonment awarded to them by a lower court on October 19. The trio had appealed against the judgement. (PTI)

India making border infra robust with seriousness it deserves: Jaishankar

GANDHINAGAR, Dec 23: The country is making its border infrastructure robust with the seriousness it deserves to strengthen national security, with the construction of roads, bridges and tunnels along the China border at a much faster pace compared to what was achieved in previous decades, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said here Saturday.

Despite the setback India faced in 1962, in the war with China, due to "complacency" and "neglect" for infrastructure along the border areas, it failed to learn a lesson until the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi started approaching the domain of security with the seriousness it deserves, he said.

Speaking at the third convocation of Rashtriya Raksha University (RRU), the Union minister said India has deeply embedded security factors into its diplomatic strategy. "Acquiring and developing weapons, and building related capacities have not only been at the core of our defence policies, but also of our diplomacy," he said.

Even when logistics has been a key to security and warfare, it remained a neglected dimension till recently, he said. "Take our border areas facing China as an illustration. And let the figures speak for themselves. Today, road construction is 2x, bridging and tunnelling 3x, and the border infrastructure budget 4x compared to what was the commit-

ment and achievement of the last decades," he said in his address to graduating students of RRU. "But it is not just the length and number of the roads, tunnels and bridges, but the consequences that they have for our operational capabilities. In the last decade, we have seen all-weather connectivity to Ladakh and to Tawang, focus on access to critical passes along the LAC (line of actual control), and the construction, in fact, of the world's highest motorable road," he said.

He said that "complacency" and "neglect" in the domain of security can cost the nation dearly. "We saw that graphically in 1962. But sadly, its lessons were not apparently learned by those who came later. It is only

now that we are approaching border infrastructure with the seriousness that it deserves," he added.

The application of new technologies and construction techniques has yielded visible results, accompanied by a reform of entities like the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), he said.

Jaishankar said that even by the traditional metrics of security assessments, India faces exceptional challenges. "Strenuous efforts have since been made, especially in the last decade, to correct the shortcomings of the previous decades. The overall development of our national strengths that we have seen since 2014 have clearly had positive repercussions in the security field," he said. (PTI)

V-P Dhankhar invites Kharge to residence on Christmas

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Saturday invited Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge to his residence on December 25 for an interaction on the issue of disruptions in Parliament and the suspension of opposition MPs, saying despite his repeated requests, such a meeting could not happen during the Winter session.

The vice president said the disorder in the House was deliberate and part of a strategy. "I do not seek to embarrass you by indicating the predetermined role of the main opposition party in this communication, but will share with you when I have the benefit of interaction with you," he said.

In a fresh letter to Kharge, who is the leader of opposition in the House, Dhankhar wrote, "We need to move

ahead" and invited him for an interaction on December 25 "or a time of your convenience" at his official residence.

Responding to Kharge's December 22 letter, the Rajya Sabha chairperson said he wished that the Congress leader's assertion that "we firmly believe in fostering dialogue and discussion" was reflected in actions in the House. "During the entire session, despite my repeated requests, in the House and by way of written communications to secure your indulgence for interaction, the same did not fructify," he wrote. Dhankhar said the premise of suspensions, contrary to Kharge's stance, was deliberate disorder in the House by way of sloganeering, raising placards, entering the well of the House and gesticulating towards

the Chair. "Before taking the unpleasant step, all efforts and initiatives were exhausted at my end to secure order in the House, including by way of brief adjournments and seeking interactions in my Chamber," he said.

Kharge had on Friday told Dhankhar that the suspension of MPs on such a large scale was detrimental to the core principles of India's parliamentary democracy.

In his letter to Dhankhar, Kharge had said he was pained and agonised at the suspension of so many MPs and felt frustrated and disheartened. The Congress president was responding to an earlier letter by Dhankhar in which he had said rendering the House dysfunctional by making a demand to the Chair that cannot be acceded was unfortunate. (PTI)

PK - Naidu meeting raises eyebrows in AP

AMARAVATI, Dec 23: Election strategist Prasanth Kishor met TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu here on Saturday. However, it was not clear what the agenda was, and it raised eyebrows among political circles in Andhra Pradesh. Kishor, TDP general secretary Lokesh and three more persons landed at Gannavaram Airport near Vijayawada around 3 pm today in a private jet. A video of Lokesh and Kishor arriving from the airport and boarding a black SUV went viral. A source confirmed to PTI that Kishor met opposition leader Naidu at his residence. Meanwhile, Andhra Pradesh Irrigation Minister A Rambabu mocked the political rendezvous between Naidu, Lokesh and Kishor. YSRCP chief Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy hired the services of Kishor in 2019 polls. (PTI)

ED arrests three vivo-India executives in money laundering case

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The Enforcement Directorate has arrested three vivo-India executives in connection with its money laundering probe against the Chinese smartphone maker and some others, official sources said on Saturday.

Interim CEO of vivo-India Hong Xuquan alias Terry -- a Chinese national -- Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Harinder Dahiya and consultant Hemant Munjal have been taken into custody under the provisions of the Prevention of Money

Laundering Act (PMLA), they said.

They were presented before a court which sent them to ED custody for three days, the sources said. An email sent by PTI to a company spokesperson seeking comments on the development remained unanswered.

The Enforcement Directorate had earlier arrested four people -- mobile company Lava International's MD Hari Om Rai, Chinese national Guangwen alias Andrew Kuang, and chartered accountants Nitin Garg and

Rajan Malik -- in the case. They are in judicial custody at present. The federal agency had filed a charge sheet against these four and vivo-India before a special PMLA court in Delhi. The court recently took cognisance of the charge sheet.

Special Judge Kiran Gupta summoned the accused on February 19. The ED had claimed in its court papers presented for the earlier four arrestees that their alleged activities enabled vivo-India to make wrongful gains that were detrimental to the eco-

nomic sovereignty of India. It had raided vivo-India and its linked persons in July last year and claimed to have busted a major money laundering racket involving Chinese nationals and multiple Indian companies.

The ED had then alleged that Rs 62,476 crore was "illegally" transferred by vivo-India to China to avoid payment of taxes in India.

The company had said that it "firmly adheres to its ethical principles and remains dedicated to legal compliance". (PTI)

Lifting hijab ban raises concern about 'secular nature' of edu spaces: BJP

BENGALURU, Dec 23: The BJP on Saturday strongly reacted to Karnataka government's decision to withdraw the ban on wearing hijab in educational institutions in the state, saying the ruling Congress is carrying forward the British policy of 'divide and rule'. The saffron party also stated that the move raises concerns about the "secular nature" of educational spaces. The reaction comes a day after Chief Minister Siddaramaiah had said that he ordered lifting of the restrictions on wearing hijab, while observing that choice of dress and food is personal.

Addressing reporters in New Delhi, BJP Karnataka chief, Vijayendra accused Siddaramaiah of 'vitiating' the academic atmosphere. Condemning the Congress government's decision, he said, "The Chief Minister made an irresponsible statement that he will revoke the ban on Hijab. This way, he has spoilt the educational atmosphere in the state. At least, he should have spared children from his dirty politics."

The BJP state president alleged that while the Congress wants to lift the ban on hijab, on the other hand Hindu women who went to appear for an exam were forced to remove their 'mangal sutra' and toe rings.

Accusing the Congress of indulging in 'appeasement politics' ahead of Lok Sabha elections, Vijayendra claimed, "even after so many years of independence, the literacy and employment rate among minorities is still 50 per cent. Congress never tried to elevate the condition of minorities." "Congress believes

in the divide and rule policy which the British rulers had adopted. It amounts to carrying forward the British legacy," he added.

Earlier in a post on 'X', Vijayendra charged the state government with 'dividing' young minds along religious lines.

"CM Siddaramaiah's decision to withdraw the Hijab ban in educational institutions raises concerns about the secular nature of our educational spaces," the Shikaripura MLA said. "By allowing religious attire in educational institutions Siddaramaiah government is dividing young minds along religious lines, potentially hindering the inclusive learning environment." The BJP state chief stressed that it was crucial to prioritise education over divisive practices and foster an environment where students can focus on academics without the influence of religious practices.

In 2022, the previous BJP government banned wearing of hijab in educational institutions in Karnataka.

Former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa on Saturday condemned the Karnataka government's decision to lift the ban on hijab.

"I condemn the decision taken to appease minorities," he stated. "This will not bring honor. As they are in power, they want to enact a political circus. Let us see how long this will go on. There will be no protest from the BJP regarding the matter. The people will teach the Congress government a lesson in the upcoming Lok Sabha election," he stated. (Agencies)

Fresh ED summons to Tejashwi in land-for-jobs case

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The Enforcement Directorate has issued a fresh summons to Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav in the railway land-for-jobs scam case, asking him to appear on January 5, official sources said Saturday. He was earlier called to appear on December 22 but the 34-year-old skipped the summons. He had called the ED notice a routine affair.

In the same case, his father and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad Yadav has been asked to appear on December 27 at the ED headquarters in Delhi.

The alleged scam pertains to the period when Prasad

was the railway minister in the UPA-1 government.

"There is nothing new in the summons. All these agencies -- ED, CBI and I-T department -- have summoned me so many times in the past and I have duly appeared every time. But now it seems to have become routine," the RJD leader told reporters on December 21 in Patna.

He was one questioned by the ED in this case on April 11. It is understood that the summons come following the questioning of an alleged "close associate" of the Lalu Prasad family, Amit Katyal. He was arrested by the ED in November.

It is alleged that from

2004 to 2009, several people were appointed to Group "D" positions in various zones of the Indian Railways in return for land they transferred to the family members of Prasad, the then railway minister, and a linked company named AK Infosystems Private Limited.

The ED case, filed under the criminal sections of the PMLA, stems from a complaint lodged by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Prasad, his wife Rabri Devi and Tejashwi Yadav were granted bail by a trial court in October after the CBI filed a chargesheet against them in this case. (PTI)



President Droupadi Murmu feeds sweets to a women soldier during the Integrated Fire Power exercise conducted by the Indian Army at Pokhran, in Jaisalmer district, on Saturday. (PTI)

COVID fears resurface

PREVENTION is better than cure. It's time again to be careful and cautious not to get inflicted by the new Covid-19 variant that's again raising anxiety levels. Less than 700 daily cases were reported in various hospitals a day ago, showing a slight decline from the highest number of infections in a single day on May 21. Yet, governments are putting the people on alert and advising them to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour -- meaning wearing of masks, avoiding crowded places etc. It's a matter of relief that the JN.1 sub-variant is reckoned to be less harmful even as it's "spreading fast."

Notably, the first Covid-19 hit in India came shortly after China reported its first case from Wuhan in December, 2019. What started as a trickle snowballed into the worst-ever health emergency for the nation, the geographical region and across the world but affecting especially life in the US and Europe for a couple of years. To India's credit, it managed to come up with its own brand of vaccines from two labs in Pune and Hyderabad, ensuring easy availability and facilitating exports to other needy nations as well. Covid-19 was thought to be an old story in recent months and the nation regained a sense of confidence. The national as well as global economy mostly recovered from the adverse impacts of Covid-19. With four deaths confirmed in the present spell, however, the fear factor is again creeping in. Both India and the world have by now gained adequate experience to handle such a huge humanitarian crisis. This would help humanity deal with a similar crisis in future.

Notably, there were those who fished in troubled waters, mainly the private sector hospitals. Hospitals and health care professionals as a whole, bore the brunt of the pandemic's assaults. Yet, many private hospitals minted money by way of Covid-tests and related treatments. Caught in a major crisis, the health authorities could not invoke the regulatory mechanism for much of the affected period. The prices fixed for the vaccines were high even as the government itself went for bulk purchases and distributed the vaccines to hospitals across states. When firms like the Serum Institute and the Bharat Biotech raised the nation's confidence level, the huge profits they minted from the sales at that critical hour was unjustified. The nation bore the brunt by paying through its nose. Also, fears persist about the long-term adverse impacts of these vaccines, which were produced and supplied without adequate periods of trials. Rumours that heart attacks and other ailments are being caused to those who took the vaccines might not be evidence based as yet, however, it is important now to revisit all such concerns

Hamas's urban warfare expertise decimates IDF's officers

By Arun Srivastava

Reverses suffered by the Israeli army in 80 days of the 'War on Gaza' is reminiscent of the Vietnam War. The then US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, invaded Vietnam to check the communism juggernaut. Today, POTUS Joe Biden is commanding the Israeli Defence Forces much to the disgust of centrist liberal forces.

Then, it was the start of the Cold War; today, Biden is fighting terrorists. Biden and Netanyahu have vowed to finish Hamas. But the nature and character of the 'War on

Biden cannot ditch Israel for his own second term. Though a moderate Democrat, Biden wants to 'eliminate democratic and liberal forces. To achieve his mission Biden supports the likes of Benjamin Netanyahu. The US is talking ceasefire but then why did the US boycott the vote on cease fire and veto the proposal for ceasefire. He talks of asking Netanyahu to stop civilian deaths but there is always

situation for Israel. Now bank employees, workers, vendors and shopkeepers are fighting Hamas and becoming easy victims. The total number of Israeli soldiers and officers killed, since Oct. 7 is 469. These many deaths have had its effect on Netanyahu. The war, which was initially perceived to be a cakewalk for Israel, has acquired a much bigger dimension with Hezbollah also taking a hand. The Lebanon-based

As the war enters 80 days, Israelis appear resigned. Uncertainty has gripped them. The only option left is to agree to a ceasefire. Bibi is also scared of his loss of face. Before the declaration of war he had given the impression that he would win the battle. But in the prevailing situation it does not appear to be feasible. War experts and diplomats are of the opinion that Netanyahu has committed a blunder by underestimating Hamas.

While his popularity has been badly battered by the



Gaza' make it explicit that the IDF is targeting civilians along with Hamas. Israel claims to have killed nearly 3000 Hamas terrorists. But that is only 10 percent of the 40,000-strong Hamas. The reality is Israelis have killed nearly 18000 Palestinians.

These figures contradict Netanyahu. The attack is not only to finish off Hamas. The attack has an ulterior motive. The goal is to take control of Palestine. The US has been eyeing this oil producing region. So much so, Biden has put his political career at stake. And Americans are hitting the streets against Biden goading Netanyahu.

One thing is clear, the 'War on Gaza' would have ended if Biden hadn't stood firm with Netanyahu. The genocide in Gaza is also of Biden's doing. Does Israel have the support of "most of the world" -- of the US, UK, EU? Truth is, the war against Hamas is only part of the 'War on Gaza'. After 80 days of fighting, Biden is like Lyndon Johnson -- on the verge of losing the war. Biden is bidding on 'Bibi' Netanyahu to do his bidding. The fact is

something fishy about Biden and his statements. He could have come out with this suggestion long back, but he is waiting for the end of Hamas, which will not happen in a 100 years.

A week ago, the United Nations called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and Biden realised Israel was losing international support because of the "indiscriminate" bombing of civilians in Gaza. The 193-member UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for ceasefire. 153 countries voted for and 23 abstained. But the US and Israel voted "against".

A Hamas official in exile, Izzat El-Reshiq, echoed the general reaction: "Israel must stop its aggression, genocide, and ethnic cleansing of our people." Israel had created an impression that its forces would finish Hamas in ground action. But reports paint a gloomy picture. So far the IDF has lost 152 soldiers. Hamas terrorists are reportedly targeting officers who know the geographical features of Gaza.

The killings of officers have created a precarious

terrorist group has with its security apparatus, political organization, and social services network, the reputation of "a state within a state" and is fighting for the Palestinian cause.

The US on December 22 released newly declassified intelligence reports that suggested Iran is "deeply involved in planning the operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea". Houthi rebels have launched more than 100 attacks against commercial and merchant ships transiting the Red Sea. The US has accused Iran of being "deeply involved" in the attacks. The Houthi are driven by their hate for Israel and their resistance to the West interference in the Middle East.

That said, it is not just military reverses but also the hits taken by the economy that has Netanyahu restive. Israeli businesses have come to standstill and traders, bankers and students are signing up to join the military. The situation has further worsened with thousands of people hitting the streets to protest against the 'War on Gaza'.

security failures in the wake of Hamas attack into southern Israel on October 7, the lingering war and Israel's huge losses have exposed even Mossad. The masterminds of "October 7" Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif continue to be at large and Israeli officers say they may need months more to complete their mission. To add to Netanyahu's woes, Israeli Defence Forces have poor knowledge of urban warfare in which the Hamas terrorists are experts.

As for India's role, right from the beginning, India has taken a wrong line. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's declaration that "We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour" might have had a soothing effect on the RSS, but it did not reflect the leadership's political maturity. Finally, Biden appears to be getting little credit for his warring efforts. Some strategists caution that even if Biden did take a harder line with Israel, it would alienate him from Democrats who want him to strongly support the Jewish state. (IPA Service)

The 3 new criminal laws betray a narrow spirit of nationalism

Replacing British era criminal laws with the 'Modi Sanhita'

By Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

The vaulting ambition of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to overturn existing structures is the hallmark of his nearly 10 years at the helm. Take the case of the three new laws that have replaced three colonial-era laws and the authoritarian streak in Modi sticks out like a sore thumb.

The three new laws replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedure Act, 1973 and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. Their replacements are "Hindi" -- Bhartiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita (BNS), Bhartiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita (BNSS) and Bhartiya Sakshya (Second) Bill (BSB) respectively. It is a wonder, Stalin's DMK hasn't yet raised the red flag against this saffron affront.

Union home minister Amit Shah, replying to the debate in the Lok Sabha on the three Bills, arguing like a right-wing nationalist politician, said that the colonial-era laws were to defend British interests but their replacements will deliver justice, and not just punish.

Shah's partisan rhetoric struck listeners. "Under the leadership of Modiji, I have brought Bills that lay emphasis on Indian-ness, the

principles enshrined in the Preamble and the fundamental rights of Chapter III of the Constitution are contemptible things because they want a safe society even if it means living without basic freedoms.

This is not peculiar to educated Indians. It is a desire of many middle-class people everywhere in the world. That is why many Indians and others praise Singapore as the paradise of safety, and the absence of basic freedoms in the city-state does not matter to them.

Shah indulged in sophistry when he claimed that sedition as a crime had been removed from the new law because it was used by the British to imprison freedom-fighters such as Balgangadhar Tilak, Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel -- of course, he would not mention Jawaharlal Nehru, who spent the longest time in British-era prisons because of the visceral hatred that his party and its mentor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, have for Nehru -- but in the new law, those who speak against the country would be punished, though criticism of the government's policies will be spared because it is part of the freedom of speech.

"The test of the pudding lies in the eating. So, whatever the merits or demerits of these new laws, it will depend on how the law and order machinery uses them and how the courts interpret them. A colonial police structure whose main intention is to wield the baton to intimidate people can undermine the best of laws."

Indian Constitution and the well-being of the people. The laws are being changed in the spirit of the Constitution."

It is common knowledge that the Indian Constitution is in spirit an Anglo-Saxon one, with its emphasis on freedom, the rights of the people and democratic governance, which Indians never had in their 5,000-year-old history, despite Modi's excessive claim that India is the mother of democracy.

Having said that, changes in laws, if they are for the better, are always welcome. What is to be looked at is the intent and spirit of the laws. If it is mere rewording of the old ones, it is a forgivable sin on the part of Shah and Modi. It is an infirmity of politicians that they want to credit themselves with the little things they have done and the big things they have not.

The basic principle of the English common law -- the spirit behind the colonial laws -- was that justice means not punishing the innocent, accepting that a person is innocent until proven otherwise and letting a hundred criminals go free rather than punish a single innocent person.

For many in India, who have lived under the colonial laws before and after Independence, the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of law had no attraction. Not that this idealistic principle of justice is alien to Indian culture. It is only that the deracinated right-wing nationalists of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) kind and their admirers are not aware of it.

There is the shining example of Kannagi, the protagonist of the Tamil epic, Silappadikaram, who curses Madurai to be burnt down because an innocent man was put to death by the king, and that innocent man was her husband.

Many nationalist Indians, in their zeal to decolonise their minds, do not have the moral imagination that Ilango, the author of Silappadikaram had.

Similarly, for many Indians, especially the educated majority, the fundamental

Shah brought back sedition under a new rubric. Sedition in any democratic country is only when violent means are used to overthrow a democratically elected government, and it does not imply that you cannot speak against the country. If a citizen says that India is a dirty country, that Indians are casteist and communal, that India's past was in many ways unfair and unjust and undemocratic, they are not committing sedition.

These are arguments that can and should be made in a free country. The new law comes down heavily against it. It is not surprising that a right-wing BJP government, with its claustrophobic philosophy of blinkered nationalism, should be bringing in these laws. A country that refuses to be self-critical is doomed. India became a backward country because it did not have a self-critical spirit. The test of the pudding lies in the eating. So, whatever the merits or demerits of these new laws, it will depend on how the law and order machinery uses them and how the courts interpret them. A colonial police structure whose main intention is to wield the baton to intimidate people can undermine the best of laws. A good law in itself is no guarantee that it will be administered justly.

A police force with casteist and communal prejudices can only inflict cruelty on helpless people. Judges who look over their shoulders at their political masters will never stand up for the wronged man or woman in the street.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's narrow-minded vision of a powerful India is a naïve one, and it is this naivety that lies behind the claims made for the laws by Shah. These new laws are suspect because they emerge from a government with an authoritarian attitude, which believes in the fascist ideology of Mussolini: "Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State." (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

True meaning of Christmas

Editor,

Amid the sound of jingle bells, let us reflect on the three teachings of Jesus Christ.

Peace.

Jesus Christ said, "For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace." (1 Corinthians 14:33 KJV). We get strength in peace. This is the reason why William Shakespeare said, "Our peace shall stand us firm as rocky mountains." In peace, we feel the magic of egalitarian divine love that rains cutting across social divisions just like the love of the sun. The sun's egalitarian love ensures a bigger share for the have-nots than the haves.

The problem arises when we equate laziness with peace and thus give peace a bad name. But static inertia must not be passed for peace. Sri Aurobindo said, "In a certain sense this inertia and the peace are the bright and dark counterparts of each other, tamas (darkness) and sama (equality) - the higher nature finding repose in peace, the lower seeking it in a relaxation of energy

and a return towards the sub-conscious, tamas."

There is a conflict within us. The psychic energy in us wants peace not for lying in bed but for moving forward physically or mentally. On the other hand, the matter in our body seeks peace to enjoy material comfort and rest. But the latter takes us to the deceptive quicksand of the status quo.

It discourages us to attain inner peace. When we feel thirsty, we fetch a glass of water and drink. The activity of taking a glass out and drinking water, gives us satisfaction without which we cannot attain peace.

My mother used to say, "sukher cheye shanti bhalo." It is a Bengali saying which means peace is better than material comfort. As a matter of fact, the unending desire for more material comfort cannot give us peace. Rather it destroys the calm without which it is impossible to acquire inner peace. "Peace," said Sri Aurobindo, "is a calm deepened into something that is very positive amounting almost to a tranquil waveless Ananda."

Secularism.

Christmas also tells us to be secular and to keep

religions totally out of the domain politics. According to Mark 12:17, Jesus Christ said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Here Caesar means government. This is a clear message in favour of a secular government which is not connected to any particular religion. Had we always followed this teaching, we could have stopped Rasputins from enjoying political power.

History witnessed big and small Rasputins doing great damage after coming out of an unholy alliance between religion and politics. So we need to be very cautious about the tendency of political leaders to use religion as a diversionary tactic to hijack our rights and freedom.

Fraternity

Jesus Christ said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:37 - 39). History shows that hatred and its product divide and rule spell, disaster for a country. Today living amid the rat race, many parents brainwash their children into thinking that conflict instead of cooperation would make them more competitive and smart. This wrong notion is the driving force of machismo, incidents of ragging

and behind the story of many action movies. But this is absolutely a bogus idea. Can anything survive without cooperation? If various parts of our mobile phone start competing among themselves then we have to take it to a mobile care shop. Cooperation is the key for survival of everything be it a simple or a complex machine and similarly be it a rural or an urban society. Many advertisements pamper this popular misconception of giving priority to hate and envy in order to achieve success in life like a TV advertisement which used to say, "neighbours envy, owners pride." But we must understand that it is a fallacy. All of us should not aim to become the neighbour's envy but try to be His pride by spreading His egalitarian love. Merry Christmas!

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Medical treatment and patients' vulnerability

Editor,
The letter under the cap-

tion, "NEIGRIHMS hospital and it's sickening services" by Salil Gwali mirrors a disturbing picture of the NEIGRIHMS Hospital. I fully agree with Salil Gwali that a delay in dialysis treatment is not just an inconvenience. It can turn into a life-threatening situation, leading to severe complications to patients and affecting their vital organs. I even had a bitter experience two years ago with NEIGRIHMS Hospital for not being able to get the various medical tests and their reports in time, as a result of which the patient's health further deteriorated. We later took the patient to Hyderabad for treatment. We have lost all hope in NEIGRIHMS since then.

I am equally concerned about the exploitation by private hospitals and doctors. Many families, out of desperation, rush to private healthcare facilities. Unfortunately, these institutions often take advantage of the urgency of the situation. They prescribe several medical tests, which involve a huge amount of money. This practice only drains the financial resources of the poor patients and their relatives. The saddest thing is that healthcare has increas-

ingly become a lucrative business opportunity at the cost of patients' vulnerability. When we were younger our parents taught us to consider doctors as God but now it is completely the opposite. They are becoming very corrupt these days. The government should take necessary steps to check the devious practices of the private nursing homes and doctors.

I personally assume that the need for expanding and upgrading healthcare facilities at NEIGRIHMS is not just a matter of enhancing a service; it's about preserving human lives and dignity. It is high time that the management and government authorities recognize the seriousness of the situation and take immediate action. Expanding the capacity, ensuring the availability of services 24x7 and improving the overall management of the hospital are critical steps that cannot be delayed any further.

Yours etc.,
Deva Dani Goswami,
Via email

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

"The road to profits is paved with unfair advantages."

— Lewis Howes

The Shillong Times

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Rudderless 'India'

WITH Parliament polls nearing, the best electoral bet for the BJP and its NDA alliance today is Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. At the end of two terms in power, Modi remains popular. It is in selecting a matching face that the Opposition is groping in the dark. With several aspirants for the PM's post, no consensus is possible. This was evident also in the last conclave of the INDIA grouping. A proposal to name Mallikarjun Kharge as the Opposition's united face for the PM post won the backing of only 12 out of the 28 parties. For obvious reasons, the Congress itself is not enthused at this prospect. Those who have proposed Kharge's name might not have done it with the best of intentions either. For, despite the high slot he holds, Kharge has not built a clout that can remotely match that of Modi. Keeping him as the mascot for the INDIA alliance might, in itself, undercut the cause against the BJP and Modi.

Seasoned strategist for the Opposition, Sharad Pawar, has come up with a view that it is not necessary to project a PM face now. He cites the case of Morarji Desai being made Prime Minister after the grand victory of the Janata Party against the Congress led by Indira Gandhi in the post-Emergency 1977 elections. What Pawar obviously seeks to hide is that it was a vote against Emergency, a time when people's freedom was suspended and excesses were committed by the Congress government under the influence of those like the ham-handed Sanjay Gandhi. More importantly, the charge against the Congress and Indira Gandhi was led by a highly respectable figure like Jayaprakash Narayan from the Hindi belt of Bihar. He was the last among a generation of leaders inspired by an idealism that underpinned the Freedom movement. In the present age when leaders excel in manipulations, self-aggrandizement and corruption, there is no leader who matches the aura of a JP, who had shunned power and promoted people's causes.

All said however, despite the scams of the past, the Congress party holds considerable public support. It emerged as the main rival to the BJP in three out of the five states that went to the polls and captured power in Telangana. Only those who have a vested interest to undercut the principal opposition party can afford to ignore this reality. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra through 12 major states, covering 3,500km in 150 days that concluded in January last, proved the mass base of the tricolour party. Yet, curiously, the regional satraps do not want the Congress and Rahul Gandhi in the forefront of the 2024 general election campaign.

U Kiang Nangbah and Abrogation of Article 370

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

On the 30th of December, we are commemorating the 161st death anniversary of U Kiang Nangbah, (the commoner), who led the local resistance movement, also known as the Jaijitia rebellion, against the British Raj. The movement is an integral and vital part of the freedom movement in the Land of Hymniewtrep. It is also to be remembered as the peoples' resistance movement for Independence by the people of the erstwhile Hima Sutnga.

The memories of Kiang Nangbah and the resistance are mostly sourced by the written records of the British and other imperial historians. It is only much later that the story of Kiang Nangbah's uprising was transported across the Land of Hymniewtrep and India. Unfortunately, the Kiang Nangbah movement is also being viewed through a myopic communal lens and today there are interest groups who are appropriating this historical piece to suit their grand imperial scheme pan-India. Such readings are nothing but the distortions of history and must be challenged.

Since the early decades of the 19th Century, local uprisings against the British were common which were led by the Syiem or traditional Chieftains of respective Hima and Prof MPR Lyngdoh coined it as the "Khasi Challenge." The earliest was Syiem Bormanick of Hima Shyllong who marched to Dimuria to seize the revenue collected illegally by the British officials in 1828. A year later, U Tirot Sing of Hima Nongkhlaw rose up in arms against the British East India Company and it resulted in the "Nongkhlaw Massacre." Although the British Company had won the Syiem of Hima Sohra to their side, several other Himas (chieftainships), like Mawmsai, Sohbar, Wahlong, Pamsangngut, Mawdon, Shella and Dwara Nontyrm formed an alliance to challenge the usurpation of political power by the British Company over their territories.

The Hima Sutnga or Jaijitia was one of the major and biggest Khasi States. It stretched from the "Thor" or valley in the present-day Bangladesh to the "Bhoi" or slope land and in between lies the "War" or steep land and the "Pnar" or table land. As early as 1774 the Syiems of Hima Sutnga had come into conflict with the British and as recorded by Pemberton, "In 1774 the Jynteah is said to have been attacked by a force under Major Hen-

niker..." Later, Hima Sutnga was brought under the direct rule of the British in 1835 and the hills portion of the Hima was converted into the British territory which later formed the part of the Khasi & Jaijitia Hills District. During the British rule, the Land of Hymniewtrep was divided into the Khasi & Jaijitia Hills District and the Khasi Native States. The former were British territories and all laws passed by British Parliament for India were applied and extended to them, whereas the latter were Independent States and had separate treaties with the British.

Under the direct rule of the British, Hima Sutnga was subjected to certain exploitative rule; one being the imposition of house tax and income tax in 1860 and 1861 respectively. The imposition of these arbitrary laws was the immediate cause for the people of Jaijitia hills to resist and challenge the British regime. The imposition of these tax laws was unjust, arbitrary and directed against the poor, the infirmed, widows and even the deaths were not spared. As quoted by Prof M.P.R Lyngdoh from the statement of Bang Doloi of Raliang and Long Sutnga, "The very poorest, including widows had to pay... Old women who had no one at all to support them had to pay... The tax was oppressive, and the deceased people were included in the tax assessment..."

Against the backdrop of these arbitrary laws and atrocities perpetrated by British Officials who were interfering in the local religious festivals at lalong village, the "u khun u hajar" or Citizens of Hima Sutnga rallied behind their leader, U Kiang Nangbah, who had convened the peoples' Dorbar at Syntu Ksiar (a locality in Jowai). The Dorbar discussed at length the impact of these tax laws on the people of Jaijitia Hills, especially the peasants and the poor. The Dorbar resolved that the people must reject the foreign British rule and that the peoples' uprising was mandated. The enraged people of Hima Sutnga rose up in the resistance in 1860, but it was subsequently suppressed in 1862, whereby Kiang Nangbah was hanged in public at lawmsiang in Jowai.

When India attained independence on August 15, 1947, there were twenty-five (25) Khasi Native States which had separate treaties

with the British Crown, and they were entitled to regain their sovereignty. Excepting Kashmir and Khasi States, all other Native or Princely States had merged with the Dominion of India and handed full and exclusive authority, jurisdiction and powers to the Dominion of India. The Maharaja of Kashmir had signed only the Instrument of Accession and issued the proclamation to this effect that he accepted the Constitution of India. However, Article 370 was inserted in the Constitution of India to provide special provisions for Kashmir. On the other hand, in the case of the Khasi States which also signed the Instrument of Accession, it was opined that they had expressed their acceptance to be governed by the Constitution of India by their participation in the first general elections in 1952 (L.G Shullai, Ka Kashmir bad Ki Khasi States (Kashmir and Khasi States). Although, the Sixth Schedule is appended to the Constitution to deal with the assertions of the Indigenous people of Assam, no special provisions were granted to the Khasi States, regardless of the Instrument of Accession that was signed between the Dominion of India and the Khasi States as stated in the Annexed Agreement.

In the Constituent Assembly held on 27 January 1948 two amendments to Rule 51 were moved and adopted thus: (i) that "representative" of any Indian State or States means the person who is chosen as a representative of such State or States in the Assembly in accordance with the provisions contained in Schedule to these Rules" and (ii) it includes a candidate whose name has been reported by or on behalf of the Ruler or Rulers of an Indian State or States to the President in the manner provided in the Schedule to these Rules as a duly chosen representative of such State or States.

The Schedule to Rule 51 subsequently changed thereby appointing the Maharaja of Tripura as convener for the group consisting of Tripura, Manipur and Khasi States. He was also responsible for selecting a representative for these Native States. In the Constituent Assembly session held on 4 November 1948, Mr. G S Guha was chosen to represent Tripura, Manipur, and Khasi States. Similarly, the Maharaja of Kashmir

had the authority to select representatives and Kashmir sent four representatives to the Constituent Assembly, including Sheikh Mohamad Abdullah, Mirza Mohamad Afzal Beg, Maulana Mohamad Sayeed Masoodi, and Shri Moti Ram Bagda who attended their first session on 16 June 1949.

The constituent assembly played a dual role as both the parliament and the body responsible for drafting the Constitution during the interim period of power exchange in India. Therefore, it provided the space for diverse independent ethnic groups across the board to negotiate for special provisions and assert self-rule within the framework of the Constitution.

However, in 2019 the concept of autonomy was completely destroyed when the NDA led government by a brute majority, abrogated Article 370 and reduced the State of Jammu & Kashmir to two Union Territories. Subsequently, several petitions were filed in the Supreme Court. While the petitioners had pinned their hopes in the Apex Court, but it was to no avail as the Supreme Court upheld the abrogation.

Several generations ago, when Kiang Nangbah led the resistance, he might not have foreseen that nearly a hundred years later, the Khasi States would combine to negotiate for self-rule and autonomy. Thus, in the light of abrogation of Article 370, the question must be asked, what are the implications on the idea of autonomy which several ethnic groups in Northeast India, including the Hymniewtrep people are still clamouring for? There is Article 371 and Sixth Schedule which grant special provisions to several States and the States in Northeast India.

Should Article 370 be restored to Kashmir? Is it plausible? The answer is positive, and we must not forget that the Government of India is still engaging in the negotiations with several insurgent groups, like the NSCN (IM), HNLC etc. and is yet to agree to a future framework of self-rule and autonomy with these ethnic groups. Meanwhile, what kind of iron clad guarantee will the Indian State give and assure that special provisions under Article 371 and Sixth Schedule will remain intact? Will the abrogation of Article 370 not impact the right to land, resources so far enjoyed by the Hymniewtrep people of Meghalaya?

Modi's psycho-political warfare has several faultlines

Declining vote share is PM Modi's Achilles' heel

By Dr Gyan Pathak

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's psycho-political warfare for electoral battle 2024 began on December 23, the concluding day of the BJP's two-day meet. He asked party leaders to increase vote share by 10 percent compared to the 2019 elections. Union Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah said the BJP's performance should leave the Opposition "stunned" with an "unprecedented majority".

The psychology of warfare plays a crucial role, but giving expression to such impossibilities cannot alter the ground reality of the BJP's falling vote share in the last five years in the state elections, including in Gujarat. Even in the recent elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, BJP vote shares had slid despite the party winning the elections.

This is the chief fault-line in the Modi-Shah strategy which will leave its impact on the general elections. At the national level, it may look like a 10 percent increase is possible because the BJP vote share in 2019 was only 37.36 percent. However, looking at the BJP's declining vote

which reduced to 36.59 percent in the state election held only a few months later. That was a decline of 21.53 percent. In Assam its vote share had reduced from 36.05 percent in 2019 to 33.21 percent in 2021, which was a decline of 2.84 percent.

Karnataka Vidhan Sabha election result of May 2023 shows that BJP could get only 36 percent of votes while the party had bagged 51.38 percent of votes in Lok Sabha elections 2019, however, in the Vidhan Sabha elections, 2022, it could get only 41.29 percent of the votes, a decline by 8.27 percent.

BJP depends heavily on Uttar Pradesh from where the party had the largest number of MPs in the Lok Sabha. The party had bagged 49.56 percent of votes in Lok Sabha elections 2019, however, in the Vidhan Sabha elections, 2022, it could get only 41.29 percent of the votes, a decline by 8.27 percent.

As for Delhi, the BJP had won all seats in 2019 Lok Sabha elections by bagging 56.56 percent of votes. However, in 2020 Vidhan Sabha elections, it could get only 38.51 percent of the votes. It was a decline



share in the last five years in state elections would make it apparent that a 10 percent increase is unlikely.

Take Gujarat for instance. It is the home state of the Modi-Shah duo, where BJP bagged 62.21 percent of votes in 2019 compared to the Congress's 32.11 percent. Even riding on the Pulwama wave in favour, the swing in the BJP's favour was only 2.1 percent over and above the 2014 election.

This time there is no BJP wave. How can it increase its vote share to 72.21 percent? It is just impossible. Further, if we look at BJP's declining vote share in the state elections 2022, BJP's share of votes reduced to 52.5 percent, which was a decline of 9.71 percent between 2019 and 2022. Since the state elections in 2022, there is no perceivable political factor that could enable BJP to increase its vote share to 72.21 percent.

In the recently held elections in five states - Mizoram, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Telangana, the BJP's vote shares declined considerably. In Mizoram, BJP's share of votes declined by 3.03 percent compared to the election 2018. We cannot compare the BJP's loss compared to 2019 since the party did not field any candidate and its alliance MNF had won the seat. MNF has lost 2023 election in the state and it has also parted ways from the BJP.

Decline in BJP's vote share in the November 2023 election compared to Lok Sabha election 2019 was 17.38 percent in Rajasthan, 9.99 percent in Madhya Pradesh, and 5.17 percent in Chhattisgarh. Even in Telangana BJP's vote share has reduced from 19.45 percent in 2019 to only 13.90 percent, which was a decline by 5.55 percent.

In Bihar, BJP's vote share in Lok Sabha election 2019 was 23.57 percent when it contested with JD(U). Now, JD(U) has parted ways and is part of the INDIA alliance. In the state election in 2020, BJP's vote share was reduced to 19.46 percent, which was a decline of 4.11 percent. It should be noted that the party had registered a fall despite the JD(U) being with the BJP at that time.

In Haryana, BJP's vote share in 2019 was 58.02,

of 18.05 percent. BJP's vote share in Lok Sabha election 2019 in Arunachal Pradesh was 58.22 percent, in Goa 51.18 percent, in Himachal Pradesh 69.11 percent, in Jammu and Kashmir 46.39 percent, in Maharashtra 27.59 percent, in Manipur 34.22 percent, in Odisha 38.37 percent, in Punjab 9.63 percent, in Tripura 49.03 percent, in West Bengal 40.25 percent, in Jharkhand 50.96 percent, in Uttarakhand 61.01 percent, in Chandigarh 50.64 percent, and in Daman and Diu 42.98 percent.

However, in Vidhan Sabha elections BJP's vote share has shown declining trend. In Arunachal Pradesh election in the same year, the party got 50.86 percent of the vote, in the Goa election 2022, its share was 33.31 percent, in Himachal Pradesh election 2022, its share fell to 43 percent, in Jammu and Kashmir no election was held after 2014 and hence no comparison is available. In the Maharashtra election 2019, its vote share declined to 25.75 percent, in Odisha election 2019, BJP's vote share fell to 32.49 percent, in Punjab election 2022, BJP's vote share reduced to 6.6 percent, in Tripura election, 2023, its vote share fell to 38.97 percent, in West Bengal election, 2021, its vote share declined to 38.13 percent, in Jharkhand its vote share declined to 33.37 percent, and in Uttarakhand, the vote share declined to 44.33 percent.

Only in Manipur election 2022, the BJP's vote share rose by 3.61 percent to 37.83 percent compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections but the violence due to its hate politics since May 2023 has dampened the party's political prospect not only in Manipur but in the entire Northeast, which is reflected in the recent Mizoram election results.

All these show that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's charisma is not working and BJP's share of votes are declining fast. The point to note is the Modi-Shah duo will not be able to reverse the declining trend of the BJP's vote share in time for Lok Sabha elections 2024. Hence, the duo's psycho-political warfare calling for a 10 percent increase in votes to stun the Opposition is just a thought and nothing more. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Unjust treatment of contractual staff in Central Govt Depts

Editor,
I am writing to express my concern and bring to your attention an issue that has been affecting many dedicated individuals who have served as contractual staff in various Central institutions across the country. It is indeed commendable that the Central Government is taking steps to fill up the long-pending vacancies in central departments. However, the process seems to be overshadowed by a critical matter that demands immediate attention. The contractual staff, who have been tirelessly working for 15 to 20 years, find themselves in a precarious situation. The age limit for Group C and Group D posts, often set at 27, pose a significant barrier for these experienced individuals to transition into permanent roles.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, one would have expected the Central Government to consider extending the age limit for aspiring candidates applying for central positions. Unfortunately, this crucial aspect has been overlooked, leaving dedicated contractual staff members in a dilemma,

unable to secure stable employment after years of service.

What is disheartening is the apparent lack of a comprehensive policy to retain contractual staff in central institutions during this transition period. Institutions such as NEHU, NEIGRIHMS, AIIMS, ICAR, SSC, UPSC and others are swiftly filling vacancies, but the fate of the loyal contractual staff remains uncertain. The absence of a structured plan for their retention raises questions about the ethical and moral implications of replacing individuals who have dedicated their professional lives to these institutions.

Furthermore, the recent NEIGRIHMS exam, conducted in Guwahati for girls and Dibrugarh for boys, has led to a distressing situation for the students. Despite numerous requests, the exam was not held within the state, thereby creating a challenging and potentially discriminatory environment for aspirants. The lack of reservation for the local populace in the recruitment process further exacerbates the problem, as northeastern youths struggle to compete with candidates from other regions without proper coaching facilities.

The silent displacement of contractual staff, who are the backbone of these Institutions, is a matter of great concern. Their plight goes unheard, and their years of dedication seem to be

overlooked in the rush to fill vacant positions. I earnestly request the media to investigate and shed light on this issue. It is crucial to draw public attention to the challenges faced by contractual staff and advocate for fair and just treatment.

I also urge representatives of the Central Government to address these pressing concerns and engage in a dialogue with their superiors to implement policies that consider the well-being and livelihoods of contractual staff. The central government should not merely focus on showcasing the successful filling of vacancies but should also ensure a just and humane transition for the individuals who have been the backbone of these institutions for years.

I trust that the media's influence and your editorial platform will contribute to raising awareness and fostering positive change in this matter.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki,
Shillong

Empathy a much needed human quality

Editor,
Ashika Singh, a Madhyamik examinee was unable to find the right bus for her destination in the absence of her parents. As there was not much time left for the start of

the examination, she became nervous and began crying. When Souvik Chakraborty, a police officer-in-charge of Howrah Bridge traffic guard in West Bengal, saw the unknown girl crying alone near Howrah bridge, he realised that the time was really short to reach her to the examination centre.

He then promptly took her to his police vehicle and dropped her off at the venue after taking help from his colleagues and seniors in Lalbazar police headquarters on their way green, ensuring a clear pathway. On reaching the centre in the nick of time, he wished the girl all the best for her examination.

According to the Cambridge dictionary the word "empathy" means the ability to share or experience by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. The action taken by Souvik Chakraborty is an excellent example of empathy.

A few months ago, the Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud rightly pointed out that India needed institutions of empathy more than institutions of eminence. He also suggested some steps to stop such nasty incidents like the suicide by a Dalit student at IIT Bombay and another Dalit student's suicide last year at National Law University in Odisha. Indeed, every society needs empathy, that is the ability to share the feelings of others more than eminence which is nothing

but fame or acknowledged superiority within a particular sphere.

A society needs good human beings rather than highly intelligent serial killers or extremely greedy, unscrupulous business tycoons. These people may be superior and smart in their respective fields but they damage and destroy the country, society and environment and do not do anything constructive. Whereas an ordinary, honest and caring person contributes a lot to the society.

The tunnel collapse in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi flooded streets in Chennai after a few hours of rain, highlights that there is something wrong in urban planning. We do not need smart brutes but smart human beings to make anything be it city or a country look smart.

Parents and educational institutions must realise that cooperation is a more important quality than competition among citizens for a country's survival and progress. Media has a great role to play in this regard. They should highlight and report elaborately about acts of empathy like the 12 rat-hole miners who rescued 41 trapped workers from a tunnel in Uttarkashi after working at a stretch for nearly 24 hours inside a narrow steel pipe of 800mm diameter on their toes.

After the rescue operation, one of them said, "Labourers have saved fellow labourers. Maybe someday we

will be trapped somewhere during work and these rescued workers will save us." This very thought, "Maybe someday we will be trapped" blooms from "the ability to share or experience what it would be like to be in that person's situation."

Such acts of empathy need to be highlighted and discussed in educational institutions at least in one period every week so that what the Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud underscored could be translated into reality.

A teacher can use empathy cards to help young children develop their ability to empathise. Each card outlines a particular situation and asks how the person would feel if he or she were in that very situation.

Now let us play with empathy cards. Suppose I myself get an empathy card asking, "Imagine you were a Kashmiri; how would you feel now if you have been living in Jammu and Kashmir before and also after it became two union territories?" Honestly, my answer would be, had my state been turned into two union territories, it would have made me sad.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity."

—Ralph Nader

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Water as Poison

REPORTS that water in certain localities of Meghalaya's capital city have been found to be unsafe for drinking purposes is worrying. But what's worse is that the Minister in charge of the Public Health Engineering Department – Marcuse Marak instead of treating the matter with some concern, decided to deny the findings. Now the National Green Tribunal has found that water in Meghalaya and 23 other states and Union Territories contain arsenic and fluoride. Scientific literature informs that arsenic poisoning, or arsenicosis, occurs when humans ingest or inhale high levels of arsenic. Arsenic is a type of carcinogen that's grey, silver, or white in colour. It is extremely poisonous to humans. What makes arsenic especially dangerous is that it doesn't have a taste or odour, so humans can be exposed to it without knowing it. While arsenic is naturally occurring, it also comes in inorganic (or "man-made") formulas. These are chemicals used in agriculture, mining, and manufacturing.

Arsenic poisoning usually occurs in industrial areas and affects people who live and work in such areas. In Meghalaya it is seen that garages and car servicing centres are allowed to operate anywhere and everywhere. In fact vehicles are allowed to be washed in the middle of rivers. The river Umiew in Smit for instance is extensively used by vehicles owners to wash their vehicles. The same river water is also used for public distribution after it reaches a certain destination. Obviously the different chemicals from the vehicles leach into the water and remain there unless they are specifically treated.

The fact that there are no designated manufacturing sites in Meghalaya and that the industrial areas are also hugely polluting and with no visible measures taken to address this issue is a matter of grave concern. However, what is also a matter that deserves critical attention is that the rivers in Meghalaya, some of which are sources of water supply are now polluted through human intervention. The release of septic tanks directly into rivers is a matter that needs immediate attention and adequate laws to tackle them. Unless the National Green Tribunal (NGT) comes down heavily on such polluters our river systems will continue to degenerate and rivers will turn to sewers. It is good that the NGT has come down heavily on pollution of water sources since both arsenic and fluoride have serious health consequences. It is a different matter that citizens in Meghalaya are hardly agitated about the state of the rivers and the water that enters every home. Those that can afford high grade water filters might think they are safe but there is no knowing if such water is completely safe for drinking. And what about the large majority that cannot afford to purify their water? Governments are elected to care for public health but it is also the citizen's right to demand safe and clean drinking water.

Christmas the victim

By Albert Thyrianiang

In his birth place, at Christmas 2023, Jesus was 'born' among the rubble. In Bethlehem, 'Israeli-occupied' West Bank, Palestine, about 10 km south of Jerusalem, in a Lutheran church, instead of the usual decorated crib, the nativity scene was of the baby Jesus lying in the rubble. The poignant representation was not the only one. About 3,530 miles away in the UK a 'Rubble' crib was created at the Abbey Church of St Mary the Virgin to draw attention to the suffering of children in Gaza and Israel during this war time. In fact the 'broken brick and stone' manger that replaced the traditional crib in the Tewkesbury Abbey was on display since early December.

In solidarity with the Palestinians in ravaged Gaza, leaders of all denominations, in unison, decided to cancel all public Christmas celebrations all over Palestine, notably in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus and Nazareth, his hometown. The historically and religiously significant locations, a cradle of Christianity, the annually exuberant and beaming tourists' favourites bore a deserted look as a pall of sadness descended on the under-siege Gaza and the West Bank where severer restrictions since October 7 have been imposed.

Christmas trees, lights, Christmas markets, parties and religious parades went missing. Sales of Christmas related materials dropped dramatically due to the lack of tourists. Christians had to be content with attending quiet services while limiting themselves to a single meal on one of the grandest annual celebrations. This near-absent celebration has never occurred in the 80 year old conflict that began in the 1940s. Even the second Palestinian intifada (uprising from 2000 to 2005) had less impact.

Ever since the October 7 unimaginable massacre reports say more than 20,000 have been killed in Israel's relentless retaliation in Gaza that include bombardments and ground offensive. Of them are 9000 or more innocent children. The atmosphere of death and mourning does not seem like it will end any time soon as the Israeli right wing government is determined to wipe off the Hamas and avenge the terrorists' murder of 1,400 people, some three months ago.

The ugly war touched the minority Gaza Christian community hard as on December 16 a mother and daughter were shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in the Holy Family Church premises,

Gaza's only Roman Catholic church. On October 19, at least 16 Christian Palestinians were bombed at the third oldest church in Gaza where 400-500 Christians and Muslims were taking shelter. Christian religious leaders, including the Pope, condemned the incident terming it a terrorist act.

The current Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been holding the world's attention because the media decides to do so. 20,000 deaths, including 8000-plus children, are not a small number. However, in Syria 207,000 civilians have been killed till March 2023, including 25,000 children. The war in Sudan has killed up to 9,000 people in six months creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Media coverage is minimal. In the Middle East the following few examples are cited. In Iraq from 2013 to 2017 more than 165,000 were killed; in the Yemen Civil War from 2015 up to 377,000 and in the Syrian Civil War from 2013 anywhere between 500,000-600,000 civilians have perished. The media focus is not as vigorous as the turmoil involving Israel and Palestine.

The pro-Palestinian supporters and sympathisers who hatefully raised genocidal chants against Israel have no tears to shed for children and civilians who died in Muslim countries. As for the media, their limited perspective is that the 'Zionist' Jews who migrated to Israel prior to 1948 were largely Europeans. This is the grudge the Palestinians have. Why should the Jews, who have been away for two million years just 'returned', and justified by the Bible forcefully took possession of the land, cities, towns, villages and homes of the 'owners'. The present right wing government led by Benjamin Netanyahu is accused of perpetuating the 'Zionist' ideology of occupation and 'apartheid'.

Another party that is responsible for the never ending conflict are the Arab leaders. In 1948 and earlier, more than the Palestinians, it was the Arab leaders who rejected the creation of the state of Israel. Unwilling to accept the advent of a Jewish nation, the six neighbouring Arab countries waged wars, including in 1948 against the new-born state. As a result the victorious Israel annexed territories occupied by Jordan, Syria and Egypt. While the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt, the West Bank and the Golan Heights are still under Israeli control.

The Gaza Strip, today's war's epicentre was handed over to the Palestinian authority in 2005 after a complete military and civilian pull out. Repeated peace efforts of 'two-state solution' (Israel and Palestine) have been rejected by Palestinian groups of which Hamas is one among them, backed by some Arab and Muslim countries.

Arab leaders accuse Israel of apartheid while Israel says only that check point exists to prevent terrorist attacks. All citizens, including non-Jew Israelis have equal rights in Israel. Palestinians accuse Israel of ethnic cleansing, reminding the world especially of the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from Israel. Israel denies this and says that in a war terrible things happen. Jews instead point to the ethnic cleansing of the 900,000 Jews who fled or were expelled from Muslim-majority countries in Africa and Asia from 1948 to the early 1970s. Their former homes were in the Arab world like Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Lebanon. While Zionism is fuelled by economic factors, the Israeli government's policy of "One Million Plan" return of Jews were factors that evoked anti-Semitism, persecution and pogroms. Anti-Israel groups and individuals are relentless in pointing fingers at the occupation. Israel counters by reminding everyone of history. Palestine was always under occupation. The West Bank and East Jerusalem were annexed by Jordan in 1950 until the Six-Day War in 1967. Similarly the Golan Heights were seized by Israel in the same year from Syria's occupation. For a long time Gaza was under Egypt. Palestinians and their sympathisers made no issue of these occupations because the occupiers are Arab and Muslim countries. The bitterness is only against Israel for religious and scriptural reasons not for historical facts. Palestine had no historical owners. Palestinians are a diverse group, an artificially coined term. Palestine never existed as a nation. So the question of occupation does not arise as the counter to the occupation charge. Of course, Israel is not innocent. Under international law the West Bank is illegally occupied. In certain parts of the territory west of the river Jordan, settlements by Jews are illegal even under Israeli law. In the illegal occupied areas even universities have come up. Palestinians feel strongly against this illegal occupation. They are often

harassed and discriminated against. Thus we see children confronting Israeli soldiers. Radical elements spring up and are determined to resist the 'enemy' and 'liberate' Palestine from Israel's clutches.

Much of the claims and counter claims are political rhetoric from both sides. Both, particularly radical groups, cling on to their own perspective of history and religious fundamentalism. A pragmatic middle ground is not considered for a lasting solution. The resulting consequence is that the innocent Palestinians have to suffer. The minuscule Christian population in Gaza and Palestine territories are caught in the war. Their churches are bombed. They are part of those killed, displaced, hungry and deprived of basic necessities. They had no Christmas. Their fellow Palestinians have had to forgo the pomp and gaiety of the birth of their 'Saviour'. They, understandably, had little to celebrate. What is worse is that Israel, through ICJP Public Affairs and Communications Office, dared to deny the very existence of Christians in Gaza so that brutality in the war zone is justified.

In India, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi celebrated Christmas at his residence along with prelates and church leaders. He listened to a Christmas carol, interacted with children and selected guests. He praised Christ and admired Christians. However, in Bhopal and elsewhere Hindu groups protested against Christmas celebrations in schools. He talked of Christ being a model of 'an inclusive society and justice for all', but the saffron brigade warned children against participating in schools' Christmas events. While he recalled his 'long and warm' friendship with Christians dating back to his Gujarat days, his admirers spread hatred against the community at Christmas. While the PM saw Christ's values of unity, radicals binged division. While he stated that Christ is a guiding light for the development journey of our country, goons challenged parents who gave their consent for their children to have a view of the 'guiding light' being born in a manger. While he proudly acknowledged the contribution of Christians to the country, hardliners who are devoted to the PM harass Christians endlessly. The PM won't condemn the anti-Christians and anti-minority outfits. The Delhi Christmas celebration is a publicity to garner votes in 2024.

In the Middle East and India (and certainly elsewhere) Christmas is a victim of politics.

Christianity and the great Indian civilizations

By Dr Nsungbemo Ezung

For the Christian minority of India, the 2023 Christmas was a mixed bag of feelings as their fate of existence in India hangs under a vulnerable threat of secularism; this very secularism, which is supposed to be the foundational principle of India as a nation and society, has been threatened to be demolished by the rising powerful majoritarian communal elements.

On the eve of Christmas, the Tripura unit of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had launched a campaign to demand from the government authorities to "delist" the tribals of the state who had embraced Christianity from the Scheduled Tribe category. This effort by the RSS in the easternmost and one of the smallest states of India to dispossess the right of the tribals just because the latter did not share their faith with the former is not insignificant as this in recent years had become a pattern all over the country with the right-wing communal elements in the country waging an aggressive campaign to discourage, if not threaten, the religious minorities of the country to abandon their faith, and return to the fold of the majority religious group. This coercive politics/tactics adopted by the majority religious group of the country not only undermines the rights of

by a minority of more than 26 million Indians. It formed an important component of the great more than two thousand years old Indian civilization. Albeit being a minority the place of Indian Christians in Indian history is not insignificant. Ever since Christianity had taken its root in Indian soil in the first century AD, the Indian Christians took part and witnessed the major development and transition of India. Prominent Indian Christian leaders including KC Banerjee, founding member of Indian National Congress (INC), Mother Teresa, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Harendra Coomarr Mookerjee, vice-president of the Constituent Assembly of India, took a leading part in the social and political transformation of India.

In fact, the survival of Christianity in India, as a religion followed by a negligible number of followers, along with other religious minorities like Islam, Buddhism and Jainism for more than two thousand years is a mighty testament to India's unique and inspiring tradition of tolerance and social harmony, and further cemented India's status as a plural, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation/society where different groups of people adhering to different religious faiths co-



the religious minorities but threaten the very foundation of modern India.

However, on Christmas day, in a rare reach-out gesture, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had hosted a Christmas event in his official residence in New Delhi which was attended by a good number of Christian leaders and priests representing different Christian denominations. In his Christmas message, Narendra Modi invoked Jesus Christ as an ideal that "serves as a guiding light for developing India". He had showered praise on the Indian Christian community for playing a consistent and vital role in guiding Indian society and always being at the forefront of serving the poor and marginalized, and further urged Christian educators and medical professionals to take the lead in raising awareness of nutrition, mental health and anti-drug movement in the country.

Well, I don't know whether any other Indian prime ministers of the past had ever hosted a Christmas event at Prime Minister's official residence, but this year's historic Christmas event at 7 Lok Kalyan Marg, New Delhi and Narendra Modi's special Christmas message for the Indian Christians should reassure not only the Christian minority but also all other religious minority groups of the country that the central government and the state governments across the country will take care of the welfare and well-being of the religious minorities, and that the government, both central and states, will not only protect their right to practice their religious faith, but also will not tolerate any communal fringe elements in their motives to disturb the communal harmony in the country by undermining the rights and privileges of the religious minorities.

Narendra Modi was right; the teaching and ideal of Jesus Christ has not only been serving as a guiding light in modern India but also for the past two millennia. Christianity, in the Indian context, is not only a religion followed

exist in perfect harmony. The social and political upheaval in India in the last two thousand years that had brought so many changes in India did not affect this fine social harmony in the country. It makes us wonder how a Christian religion established by a few Roman Christian converts, who had escaped from persecution under their oppressive Roman regime, could take such a firm root, and thrive and survive for more than two millennia. It can happen only in a tolerant society like India. And that was India's glorious past. And it's up to present-day Indians and the Indian government to choose whether to continue to live with that past reputation, or abandon it by giving in to the pressure of a few fringes.

The RSS leadership may not have been aware, or chose to ignore, this great glorious past of India when they tried to project Christianity as something alien and a threat to Indian culture when in reality Christianity very much was and continues to be an integral part of Indian culture and society. By trying to delete Christianity and other minority religions from Indian history, the RSS and its associates are only distorting the history of the great Indian civilization which they are trying to promote and glorify.

One can called Indian civilization and Indian society great only when Christianity and other minority religions can find their place where it is due, and when the religious and ethnic minorities can freely practice and propagate their faiths and ways of life without any discrimination from the authority and society at large; because the greatness of India cannot be attained by uprooting the more than two millennia of Christian religious faith and tradition that had already been firmly rooted in the country. India's greatness lies in the fact that India is a land of minorities where many religious and ethnic minorities formed an integral part of the Indian ways of life.

Letters to the Editor

Appeal for safety

Editor,
The ongoing repair of the Umiam Bridge marks a significant milestone for our state, and promises enhanced transportation infrastructure. However, with it comes the responsibility to ensure the safety and longevity of the structure. It has come to our attention that some vehicles, including double-decker buses, are standing on the bridge during construction. Hence we urge the concerned authorities to address this issue promptly.

While we celebrate the advancements in our local infrastructure, it is crucial to consider the potential risks associated with the current practices on the Umiam Bridge. The plea is simple: prevent vehicles, especially double-decker buses, from standing on the bridge when one side is open for regular traffic. This precaution is vital to safeguard the integrity of the bridge and minimize stress on its structure.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki
Shillong

Christmas a tool for Politics & commercialisation

Editor,
As I walked the streets I noticed extravagant lights and decorations, people risking their health and lives trying to see these lights, posing in front of them, causing

traffic jams etc. I have no problem whatsoever with this, yet, I feel as if all this is just a cover up to make up for the fact that roads aren't being built, people aren't being paid, jobs aren't being given out schemes are being stored away, work is not being done. I call it a tool for politics because this shows how blind we can get.

Instead of being fooled by the splendour of the so called Christmas spirit of the people and the government who are in charge of decorating the streets with such lights, don't you think we should be asking the question how come for all this there is money to pay for the electricity yet there is no money to pay the people and to provide proper electricity to us the people?

My cousin told me it doesn't feel like Christmas this year and I felt that she was right Christmas is being used commercially to attract money and sure there is nothing wrong with that; it's just we're losing sight of the real thing, the real reason why we celebrate Christmas.

We are so involved with all the latest trends and commercialization of the simple things that we don't seem to understand how precious moments are, how people are affected by all this. All we see are lights and decorations but can't we see the how and the why?

Children went for caroling on a bus and got stuck in traffic for hours. People are getting sick in the traffic jams in the winter cold. People are drinking and driving causing

accidents and embarrassment and harassment on the roads and yet none of this matters? We're absolutely fine with having bright lights everywhere throughout the night and not having lights during working hours, during the winter cold and during the rains?

We are not getting paid because funds are being diverted to booze, drugs and other distractions.

Hey I'm not saying having festivals and lights and beauty and splendour is a bad thing. We need them but we also need to think about the coming year; the loadshedding in the middle of the day and throughout the nights, the people who aren't getting paid, the roads, the people and the environment and most importantly the health, wealth and prosperity of the residents of Meghalaya especially in a place like Shillong where alcohol and drug addiction is spreading like wildfire.

I end my letter by saying I have nothing against anything but I do wish we could see more work getting done for public good than just distractions and excuses.

Yours etc.,
Shailin H Lyngdoh
Shillong - 11

Unhygienic public toilets

Editor,
This is about the dirty, unhygienic and unclean public toilets at petrol pump stations. They are in a very pathetic condition where one

has to hold their breath and close their eyes while using one. It's important to note that unhygienic public toilets can pose a serious health risk, especially for women. Inadequate sanitation facilities can lead to Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and other health issues. Therefore, I would like to request the concerned authorities to look into the matter and to ensure that public toilets are maintained with proper sanitation standards.

Yours etc,
A. Blah
Shillong.

Another Yatra by Rahul Gandhi

Editor,
It is good news that after deep reflection The Congress party has ultimately declared that Rahul Gandhi will start the Nyaya Yatra from January 14 to March 20 covering a distance of 6200 km and the yatra will pass through 14 states and 85 districts. This step will be helpful for the Congress party in particular and for the Indian democratic process in general. The country had already seen such type of long marches which I quote below:

The Rath yatra by LK Advani and Cycle yatra by Akhilesh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh as well as Narmada yatra by Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh and Kanyakumari to Delhi yatra by Chandra Shekhar. It is a fact that all the above mentioned yatras proved successful for the party that organised it. Due

to Advani's Rath Yatra BJP captured power in states and the Centre. Akhilesh became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh after completion of Cycle yatra. In Madhya Pradesh the Congress came to power after completion of Narmada yatra by Digvijay Singh.

The YSR Congress came to power after completion of the yatra in the state. Such yatras remain peaceful in general but it was only the Rath Yatra by LK Advani which created chaos and law and order situation in the entire country. It is an accepted fact that such yatras make democracy stronger as people from all sections participate in them.

In the previous bharat jodo yatra, Rahul Gandhi had developed as a mature politician and this was shared in Parliament too. However, there are two schools of thought that disagree on the timing of the yatra, but its actual impact will be visible after the Lok Sabha election results.

The Congress has to organize its functions are Nagpur which will be a big show by the party as claimed by the workers and this will gear up their workers. No doubt the Congress party lost in three states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh but the silver lining in the recent assembly elections is that the Congress got more combined votes than the BJP.

The I.N.D.I. ALLIANCE is dependent on the role of the Congress and Rahul has to participate to settle differences among the various

parties. During the yatra it is expected that Rahul Gandhi will play an important role in the I.N.D.I. ALLIANCE.

But it's a tough job ahead for the Congress to settle the issue of seat sharing as there are contradictions in many states such as Punjab, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh and there is great need for maturity to resolve the issue.

It is also expected from the Congress party that it sticks to its core issues of secularism and nationalism. The I.N.D.I. ALLIANCE should also clear its stand on the Ram Temple which will be inaugurated on Jan 22 by Modi as well as by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. The Communist Party declared that they would not join the function as they consider it a political function and not a religious one. Other constituents have to take their decision in this regard and also take into consideration the parliament elections. The I.N.D.I. ALLIANCE will have to clear its stand on Art 370 also.

Hopefully the citizens of this country will convey their good wishes for the long journey of Rahul Gandhi with the hope that this will strengthen democracy due to the participation of all citizens. Hope too that the roots of secularism will grow deeper.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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"Dreams are illustrations from the book your soul is writing about you."

—Marsha Norman

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 139 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2023

Complacent Silence of the Church

THOSE closely watching the situation unfolding in India rue the gradual normalising of some of the things they would not have tolerated ten or twenty years ago. On Christmas Day Christian leaders were invited to the Prime Minister's residence for a goodwill meet. That was a great opportunity for the Christian leadership to draw the attention of the Prime Minister to the violence in Manipur which resulted in the burning of over 300 churches. If as is claimed by the BJP-led Government of Manipur that the violence is due to the Government's war on drugs and poppy growers and had nothing to do with religion then why were the churches targeted and burnt to ashes? What is the logic there? If the church leaders were truly representing Christ on earth they would have used the opportunity to question the Prime Minister on his studied silence over the Manipur conflict which claimed over 200 lives and resulted in internal displacement of over 60,000 whose houses were burnt and who till date live in relief camps with even the bare necessities of life unmet. They could have asked the Prime Minister why he did not deign to make a single visit to Manipur

Church leaders who represent the Christian community of this country should have asked why the Prime Minister's party the BJP and its sister organisation the RSS and other fringe elements continue to attack Christians in different parts of the country. On the contrary the church leaders sang a different tune. They lauded the Prime Minister for his contribution towards the Christian community which is a minority in India. Irony could not have been starker than this! What has made these Christian leaders so subservient and so lacking in courage to stand for the truth as Christ would have wanted them to. Which chapter of the Bible are they following when they seem to have forgotten the atrocities meted out on their flock? The Christmas spirit should not dilute the sufferings of ordinary Christians who daily suffer from the impunity of their state governments such as is happening in Tripura and brazen acts of the political fringe which does not have any respect for the Constitution of India and its guarantees of freedoms to the citizens.

In Meghalaya, the Christian members of the BJP have been complicit in their silence over what happened in Manipur and elsewhere, where Christians are persecuted. Videos showing how Christians have been told to trash their Bibles and are being mercilessly flogged for believing in Christ have gone viral but there has not been a single condemnation from the BJP in Meghalaya or any of the North Eastern states; not even the Christian majority states of Nagaland and Mizoram. This complacency of Christians who have embraced the BJP is very troubling indeed. It just goes to show that the hunger for power trumps over their religion.

Remembering U Kiang Nangbah – A clarion call

By Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah

did it by establishing cultural and using them to expand hegemony over the locals. and their base by the church



This is done by arguing that the local cultures were decadent and inferior and that those of the colonial masters were superior. The conversion of a number of Jaintias caused suspicions about the real intentions of the British in the minds of the people. However, the anti-British feelings started when the British India Government

"The British realised that political, administrative, and financial control exercised by them was primarily based on the bayonet, they attempted to justify their colonial power on ideological grounds. They did it by establishing cultural hegemony over the locals. This is done by arguing that the local cultures were decadent and inferior and that those of the colonial masters were superior."

were superior. The conversion of a number of Jaintias caused suspicions about the real intentions of the British in the minds of the people. However, the anti-British feelings started when the British India Government

attempted to impose taxes and interfered with the custom and religious activities of the people. These acts are viewed by the people as an attempt of the British to impose authority and make the people "submissive to the authority" and to "acknowledge the supremacy of the British government". In 1860-61, The British imposed a house tax and income tax and also prohibition of cremation of the dead - a traditional practice of the indigenous faith. These activities led to the revolt of the Jaintias against British imperialism. A man of commitment to his people, U Kiang Nangbah could not remain indifferent to their plight. He took up leadership of the Rebellion in January 1862 to wage a war against the colonial ruler. The colonial records attest to the fact that it could be suppressed after prolonged and arduous military operations and that the government found it difficult in the face of his guerrilla tactics.

The British had to reinforce regiments to conduct a full-scale military operation against U Kiang Nangbah and his men and yet the British described it as a "Little War".

Today we are constrained to admit that the dreams of our freedom fighters have largely remained unrealised even if India can justifiably boast of having maintained its image as the world's largest democracy. India - a nation that was built with pluralism under a democratic leadership today has been transformed from democracy to mobocracy. But what is more alarming is the social unrest that has gripped the nation with mounting assault on minorities as an integral part of the majoritarian onslaught which has increased phenomenally in the recent past. If U Kiang Nangbah is alive he would be in tears to see the state affairs of his beloved country.

Today, as we remember the supreme sacrifices that U Kiang Nangbah and other freedom fighters had contributed for the freedom of our motherland, let all differences and squabble, allergies and misunderstanding, be set aside, join hands and march shoulder to shoulder to fight the enemy from within. Jai Hind!

POLITICAL DELICACIES

By Rahil Nora Chopra

Who will be India Bloc's Prime Ministerial face?

The fourth meeting of the INDIA Bloc saw high drama as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee proposed the name of Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge for INDIA bloc's PM candidate against PM Narendra Modi. Now, Nationalist Congress Party supreme Sharad Pawar says no prime ministerial face was projected during the 1977 Lok Sabha polls (post Emergency). Pawar's remark came even as the INDIA bloc is yet to project a prime ministerial face for 2024. Then, in 1977, after the polls Morarji Desai was made Prime Minister. There are no consequences if a face is not projected," Pawar said. "If people are in the mood for change, they will take a call to bring about that change." But Mallikarjun Kharge himself put an end to prime ministerial ambitions when he said focus should solely be on winning the election.

Ram Temple inaugural invite divides secular Opposition

The Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, later this month has left INDIA bloc parties holding different views; and whether to attend the inauguration on 22 January or skip? The CPI(M)

should unite against the BJP. However, we will follow what "Behenji" decides." BSP leaders say a divided Opposition would benefit the BJP. BSP's heir apparent Akash Anand might persuade Mayawati to fight the general elections alone. This when big numbers of non-Jatavs have embraced BJP. Mayawati's political inactivity alienated millions of supporters creating a vacuum in Dalit politics. The challenge for Anand is to win back young Dalits who are looking for other political alternatives. The BSP bagged only one seat in an assembly of 403 seats in the 2022 elections.

Jagan Reddy's sister Sharmila's Congress fetish

Approaching 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Andhra Pradesh CM YS-Jaganmohan Reddy's estranged sister, YS Sharmila, who formed her own party, Yuva Jana Sramika Rythu Telangana Party, two years ago, is in talks with the Congress for a merger. Sharmila held consecutive meetings with Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar a couple of times. Sharmila wants to carve a niche for herself in Andhra Pradesh politics. Congress leaders are supporting Sharmila

"The Congress asserted that the party may go ahead and decide at a later stage. Senior leader Digvijaya Singh said Sonia Gandhi is very positive on this matter. A representative delegation from her side might go. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which is a Congress ally in Kerala, warned the Congress. Muslims might ditch the Congress. So the "Congress is against Hindu sentiments" will roll. Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut said Uddhav Thackeray has not been invited for which the BJP will pay if not now, definitely later. The Ram Mandir trust is likely to invite Uddhav and Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. SP leader Dimple Yadav says she will not miss Lord Ram's "Pran Prathistan" for all the water in the Saryu. Mamata Banerjee has prior engagements."

Letters to the Editor

MPSC examination results

Editor, Recently, the MPSC declared the result of the Preliminary Examination for the post of Meghalaya Civil Services which was conducted on the 4th November 2023 after a gap of only 1 month 11 days. The MPSC must be lauded for its efforts to quickly complete the process of scrutiny of the Preliminary Examination consisting of Paper I and Paper II. However, coming to the recruitment for the post(s) of LDAs in the Head of Departments (2020 & 2019) for which examinations were conducted much earlier i.e. on the May 27, 2023 and May 13, 2023 consisting of only 1 (one) paper, till date the Commission has not been able to declare the results even after a gap of over 7 months. The inability of the MPSC to provide suitable candidates to the departments for up to 3 to 4 years for a single requisition not only deprives deserving candidates of early employment but also cripples the functioning of Government offices as they are understaffed most of the time. The slow nature of the MPSC has already led the Government to form the Medical Recruitment Board to quicken the process for recruitment of Medical & Health Officers and similarly forming of a recruitment board for the Education department

to quicken the process of recruiting teachers for the secondary and higher secondary schools is already in the process. Thus, a time may come where all departments will have their own recruitment board as they cannot wait 3-4 years for the MPSC to recommend candidates and the duty of the MPSC as mandated in the constitution to conduct examinations for appointments to the services of the state will soon diminish due to its incapability. Hence, the Commission should follow the same principles as is being done with the MCS Preliminary exams to speed up the process of conducting examinations and declaration of results for other post(s) also.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Why the indiscriminate bombing by Israel?

Editor, Indiscriminate bombing by Israel in Gaza even on hospitals, schools and refugee camps killed over 21,000 Palestinians. Over 55,000 Palestinians including many children have been injured. In the song, "Blowin' in the Wind", Bob Dylan asked, "Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows that too many people have died?" This question is now blowing in the wind. Over 8,000 children have

so far been killed in the killing fields of Gaza. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres said, "Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children. Hundreds of girls and boys are reportedly being killed or injured every day." Must we welcome the New Year with more dead bodies of children?

Doctors' rights and patient's health both important

Editor, Even if after the best efforts by a doctor the patient dies then in such cases the doctor should not be held responsible for the death of the patient. Doctors should be held responsible for ineptitude. However, there is a thin line between ineptitude and dedication of the doctor towards his/her profession. And it is also agreed that a sizeable segment of doctors bear the brunt of violence from patients' families on charges of negligence.

No less than 5.2 million people die each year owing to medical negligence in India. Thus far, such apathy towards the lives of patients was treated as culpable homicide not amounting to murder. But the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, 2023 has decriminalised medical negligence after the Indian Medical Association made a special

request to the Union Home Minister in this regard. Registered medical practitioners will now face imprisonment for up to two years and a fine if medical negligence can be established.

An additional clause has been introduced if the person at fault flees or fails to report the incident, for which the BNS has set aside imprisonment of up to 10 years. It is encouraging that the IMA's request to grant complete immunity to doctors has not been granted. Some checks are necessary when a life has been snuffed out. This country has seen the attitude of doctors some of whom were not performing their duties diligently, during the pandemic.

But establishing medical negligence remains a challenge as it needs specialised and unbiased opinion and should therefore not be taken lightly. This is especially so in the case of medicine, which is a highly specialised and unpredictable field. It must also be remembered that this vagueness, a legacy of the Indian Penal Code, can be weaponised: Kafeel Khan, a doctor from Uttar Pradesh, had to fight a long battle to exonerate himself of charges of medical negligence levelled by the State.

Doctors, on principle, should be held accountable for their ineptitude. But there are two sides to the story. A good number of doctors bear the brunt of violence from patients' families and others on charges —imagined or real— of negligence.

Although there is no central legislation on this yet, 19 states in India have passed laws to protect healthcare workers and establishments from such unruly mob behaviour. The first such law was promulgated in 2007. Yet, not one single conviction has taken place since then.

Violence against health workers adversely affects the quality of care they can deliver. The sincerity of health workers should not be in doubt unless proven otherwise. Moreover, punitive measures against medical negligence may not be enough to eradicate the malaise. Doctors in India are severely overburdened; this is bound to leave room for human errors. Further, the healthcare infrastructure in the country is beleaguered - India has a shortage of at least 2.4 million hospital beds — and, as such, doctors cannot be held responsible for the deaths that take place owing to the lack of facilities. The punitive response to medical negligence on the part of doctors should be thought through carefully. The rights of doctors matter as do the lives of patients. The crux of the matter is that doctors should carry on and must not fear prosecution unless gross negligence is proven on the basis of amended Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill. As mentioned above, there is very thin line between the negligence of a doctor and the proverbial slip between the cup and lip. This was in evidence when the Union

Home Minister's assurance on the floor of the Lok Sabha was at variance with the actual amendment on the punishment for doctors in cases of death due to negligence. Amit Shah initially said, "If someone dies due to medical negligence by doctors it is treated as culpable homicide not amounting to murder. And he further said that he was bringing an amendment on that day.

Doctors have been exempted from punishment (under this section). The Indian Medical Association had requested (for the exemption) The amended Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (Second), 2023, however did not provide that blanket exemption to doctors

Instead the amended Section 106 (1) specifies that a registered medical practitioner (RMP) shall be punished with imprisonment up to two years and a fine if convicted for medical negligence. In effect, the punishment for doctors as specified under Section 304(A) of the Indian Penal Code that the BNSS replaces, has been retained.

At the end of the day, doctors are expected to carry out their duties according to their conscience — to heal a patient and not be driven by other motives.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

Can't reverse ageing, but these 5 things can help you live longer

At this time of year many of us resolve to prioritise our health. So it is no surprise there's a roaring trade of products purporting to guarantee you live longer, be healthier and look more youthful.

While an estimated 25 per cent of longevity is determined by our genes, the rest is determined by what we do, day to day.

There are no quick fixes or short cuts to living longer and healthier lives, but the science is clear on the key principles. Here are five things you can do to extend your lifespan and improve your health.

1. Eat a predominantly plant-based diet

What you eat has a huge impact on your health. The evidence overwhelmingly shows eating a diet high in plant-based foods is associated with health and longevity.

If you eat more plant-based foods and less meat, processed foods, sugar and salt, you reduce your risk of a range of illnesses that shorten our lives, including heart disease and cancer.

Plant-based foods are rich in nutrients, phytochemicals, antioxidants and fibre. They're also anti-inflammatory. All of this protects against damage to our cells as we age, which helps prevent disease.

No particular diet is right for everyone but one of the most studied and healthiest is the Mediterranean diet. It's based on the eating patterns of people who live in countries around the Mediterranean Sea and emphasises vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, legumes, nuts and seeds, fish and seafood, and olive oil.

2. Aim for a healthy weight

Another important way you can be healthier is to try and achieve a healthy weight, as obesity increases the risk of a number of health prob-



lems that shorten our lives.

Obesity puts strain on all of our body systems and has a whole myriad of physiological effects including causing inflammation and hormonal disturbances. These increase your chances of a number of diseases, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes and a number of cancers.

In addition to affecting us physically, obesity is also associated with poorer psychological health. It's linked to depression, low self-esteem and stress.

One of the biggest challenges we face in the developed world is that we live in an environment that

promotes obesity. The ubiquitous marketing and the easy availability of high-calorie foods our bodies are hard-wired to crave mean it's easy to consume too many calories.

3. Exercise regularly

We all know that exercise is good for us - the most common resolution we make this time of year is to do more exercise and to get fitter. Regular exercise protects against chronic illness, lowers your stress and improves your mental health.

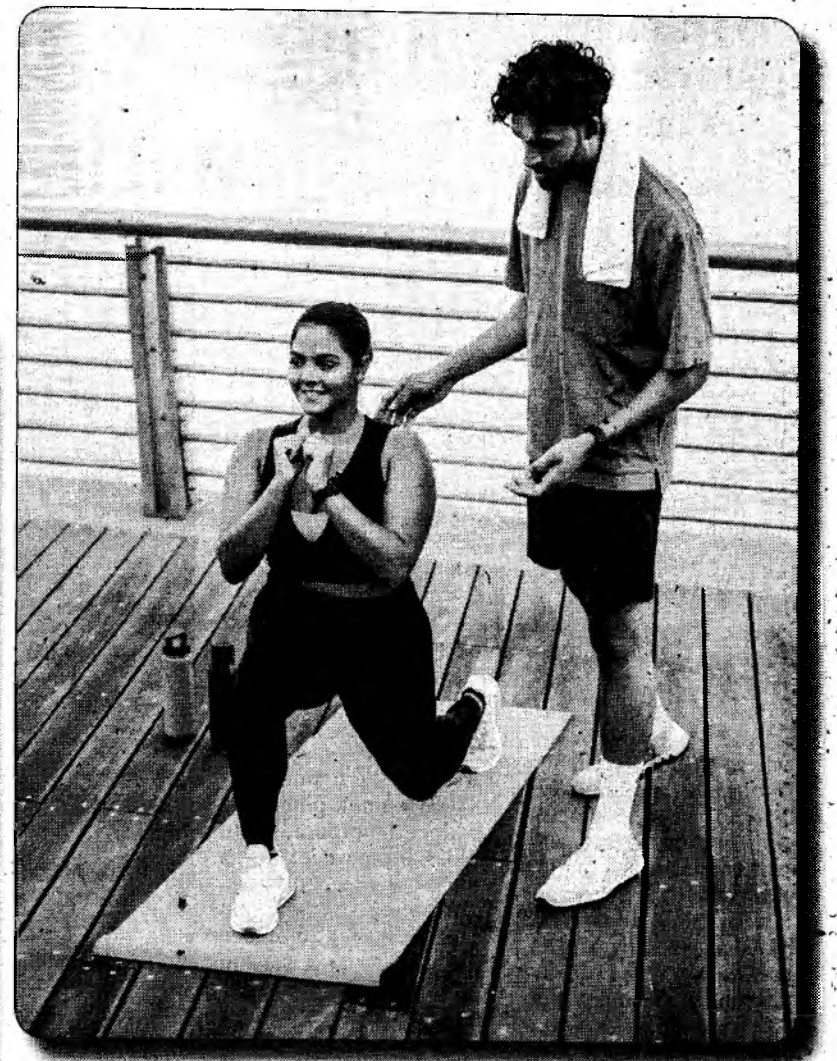
While one of the ways exercising helps you is by supporting you to control your weight and lowering your body fat levels, the effects are

broader and include improving your glucose (blood sugar) use, lowering your blood pressure, reducing inflammation and improving blood flow and heart function.

While it's easy to get caught up in all of the hype about different exercise strategies, the evidence suggests that any way you can include physical activity in your day has health benefits. You don't have to run marathons or go to the gym for hours every day. Build movement into your day in any way that you can and do things that you enjoy.

4. Don't smoke

If you want to be healthier and



live longer then don't smoke or vape.

Smoking cigarettes affects almost every organ in the body and is associated with both a shorter and lower quality of life. There is no safe level of smoking - every cigarette increases your chances of developing a range of cancers, heart disease and diabetes.

Even if you have been smoking for years, by giving up smoking at any age you can experience health benefits almost immediately, and you can reverse many of the harmful effects of smoking.

If you're thinking of switching to vapes as a healthy long term option, think again. The long term health effects of vaping are not fully understood and they come with their own health risks.

5. Prioritise social connection

When we talk about living

healthier and longer, we tend to focus on what we do to our physical bodies. But one of the most important discoveries over the past decade has been the recognition of the importance of spiritual and psychological health.

People who are lonely and socially isolated have a much higher risk of dying early and are more likely to suffer from heart disease, stroke, dementia as well as anxiety and depression.

Although we don't fully understand the mechanisms, it's likely due to both behavioural and biological factors. While people who are more socially connected are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours, there also seems to be a more direct physiological effect of loneliness on the body. So if you want to be healthier and live longer, build and maintain your connections to others. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 31, 2023

'Birthdate Forecast'

New horizons open up as an opposition between Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart. You are assured of success in competition, exam and you get tackle new assignments with aplomb. The astral energy will be stirring up dynamic energy and will feel energized and eager to take on all that life has to offer. Your enthusiasm should sustain itself to see a project through and should not diminish in between. Economy in the home and management of manpower and finances at work keep you ahead and in control of the situation as money matters need to be handled carefully. Romantically you will be starting things off on the right foot.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

This phase brings mixed results. You are able to find a healthy balance between work and home. Relationships and partnerships benefit from expansive, warm energy, or successful new ones are entered into in this period. You are likely to benefit through marriage, business partnerships and negotiations. You need to negotiate with more care than before. Financial benefits could possibly come through partnerships. You may find yourself taking on the role of consultant or advisor. Good publicity may come your way. If your work takes you before the public, you can safely expect popularity.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You would have an excellent aptitude for understanding the fine arts; especially activities related to dance, music and singing. You are more productive with a responsible outlook. Although you have a desire to make contacts, you are now rather pre-occupied with learning or producing. You could feel an unusual pressure to structure your time and effort, and to cut out communication that seems unnecessary. You will have ideally gained a greater depth of understanding, having focused on information and communication that you really can use to feel more effective in the world. You maintain harmonious relations in friendship and love.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

This is a phase that brings fortune, trips, creativity and communication. Plenty of social activities also figure at this time. A strong mental connection with a loved one is likely. You might meet a partner through learning avenues. A tendency to think too much and to focus on serious or even negative issues should be watched. The skills you are working so hard on will be valuable in the coming weeks. Work could involve more counseling or collaborating with a partner. This is a favorable time to reach out for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. You may redecorate your house as you bring new furniture, soft furnishings and decoration items.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This phase brings new beginnings, whether this means a fresh start in existing relationships or new ones altogether. Your struggles are possible in close personal relationships. Your relationships tend to have distinct themes revolving around personal power, domination, jealousy, manipulation, or self-will. Study business offers and professional opportunities in detail before rejecting or accepting them. You are especially fond of higher studies, children and spirituality. It is a time when you need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

The planetary configuration would help to boost your morale and self-confidence as you meet difficult tasks and resolve work related issues. The lines of communication open up between you and your partner. Sharing daily events and going-on with one another gives you much pleasure. This can also suggest a real learning experience with someone with whom you can share ideas and come to a better understanding of how you define yourself. Meeting a partner through travel or educational activities is also possible. Partnering with a co-worker, or working with a partner, could also figure strongly.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23)

This period brings commercial transactions and business deals to the forefront. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. You would have

cordial relations with colleagues and friends and have an enjoyable time in interacting and conversing with your loved ones. Life picks up pace considerably, and you feel like you can move mountains; and you probably can. This is the time to go after what you want. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

Love, romance and excitement in personal relations would be highlighted. Intimate personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get closer and limited relationships are likely to fall apart. It is right to make important decisions. Relationships would move to a completely new level for you. You will form a partnership that either leads to marriage or is otherwise significant. Opportunities for fun and romance are particularly strong. You have tremendous energy at your disposal.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You would exhibit mastery in your field of activities during this phase. You achieve goals and targets on time. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you at this time. Your communications, presentations and style brings you closer to people who matter to you as you make a favourable impression on them. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life. You might also spend a lot of time in physical activities like sports and games.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You are emotional, loving and caring in personal relationships and family situations. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental with your family and relations. If you do get a chance to travel, which could come up quite unexpectedly, unusual, eye-opening experiences may be in store for you. The people that you meet tend to stir you into new ways of thinking. You are more inclined towards a personal philosophy that is traditional now. You may encounter some challenges regarding shared finances or property.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Issues of shared resources, shares and possessions are featured this week. Take charge of your life by taking the necessary steps to make yourself feel secure - on solid financial ground. You have more work and you will be offered a leadership role in your organization. This is a phase of professional stability and good financial returns. You are called upon to take a stand. If you continue to tend to your partner's comfort levels while ignoring your own, feelings of resentment and neglect can affect your relationship.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You would get mixed results this week. You would initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. Finances are a serious matter for you, and you could take pleasure in building your resources and analyzing your cash flow. There is a fine line between financial discipline and worrying excessively about financial details. You tackle domestic and work related issues and handle all these issues successfully. Surprises surrounding personal matters, shared finances and resources and financial support may be in store.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This phase brings cooperation and harmony professionally and enhances your reputation and public standing. You would find more joy in your daily routines. Although work can be rather hectic at times, you tend to enjoy taking care of all the details. A move towards working out of the home is likely for many of you. If you have been trying to land a dream job, this is more likely to occur now. Get in touch with what feels most comfortable for you, and the intimacy level in your relationship will step up. Avoid over-analyzing your relationships, or treating them more like businesses.

HATE SALAD OR VEGGIES? JUST KEEP EATING THEM

Here's how our tastebuds adapt to what we eat

Do you hate salad? It's OK if you do, there are plenty of foods in the world, and lots of different ways to prepare them.

But given almost all of us don't eat enough vegetables, even though most of us (81%) know eating more vegetables is a simple way to improve our health, you might want to try.

If this idea makes you miserable, fear not, with time and a little effort you can make friends with salad.

Why don't I like salads?

It's an unfortunate quirk of evolution that vegetables are so good for us but they aren't all immediately tasty to all of us. We have evolved to enjoy the sweet or umami (savory) taste of higher energy foods, because starvation is a more immediate risk than long-term health.

Vegetables aren't particularly high energy but they are jam-packed with dietary fibre, vitamins and minerals, and health-promoting compounds called bioactives.

Those bioactives are part of the reason vegetables taste bitter. Plant bioactives, also called phytonutrients, are made by plants to protect themselves against environmental stress and predators. The very things that make plant foods bitter, are the things that make them good for us.

Unfortunately, bitter taste evolved to protect us from poisons, and possibly from over-eating one single plant food. So in a way, plant foods can taste like poison.

For some of us, this bitter sensing is particularly acute, and for others it isn't so bad. This is partly due to our genes. Humans have at least 25 different receptors that detect bitterness, and we each have our own genetic combinations. So some people really, really taste some bitter compounds while others can barely detect them.

This means we don't all have the same starting point when it comes to interacting with salads and veggies. So be patient with yourself. But the steps toward learning to like salads and veggies are the same regardless of your starting point.

It takes time

We can train our tastes because our genes and our receptors aren't the end of the story. Repeat exposures to bitter foods can help us adapt over time. Repeat exposures help our brain learn that bitter vegetables aren't poisons.

And as we change what we eat, the enzymes and other proteins in our saliva change too. This changes how different compounds in food are broken down and

detected by our taste buds. How exactly this works isn't clear, but it's similar to other behavioural cognitive training.

Add masking ingredients

The good news is we can use lots of great strategies to mask the bitterness of vegetables, and this positively reinforces our taste training.

Salt and fat can reduce the perception of bitterness, so adding seasoning and dressing can help make salads taste better instantly. You are probably thinking, "but don't we need to reduce our salt and fat intake?" - yes, but you will get more nutritional bang-for-buck by reducing those in discretionary foods like cakes, biscuits, chips and desserts, not by trying to avoid them with your vegetables.

Adding heat with chillies or pepper can also help by acting as a decoy to the bitterness. Adding fruits to salads adds sweetness and juiciness, this can help improve the overall flavour and texture balance, increasing enjoyment.

Pairing foods you are learning to like with foods you already like can

also help.

The options for salads are almost endless, if you don't like the standard garden salad you were raised on, that's OK, keep experimenting.

Challenge your biases

Challenging your biases can also help the salad situation. A phenomenon called the "unhealthy-tasty intuition" makes us assume tasty foods aren't good for us, and that healthy foods will taste bad. Shaking that assumption off can help you enjoy your vegetables more.

When researchers labelled vegetables with taste-focused labels, priming subjects for an enjoyable taste, they were more likely to enjoy them compared to when they were told how healthy they were.

Vegetables are good for us, but we need to be patient and kind with ourselves when we start trying to eat more.

Try working with biology and brain, and not against them. And hold back from judging yourself or other people if they don't like the salads you do. We are all on a different point of our taste-training journey. *(The Conversation)*

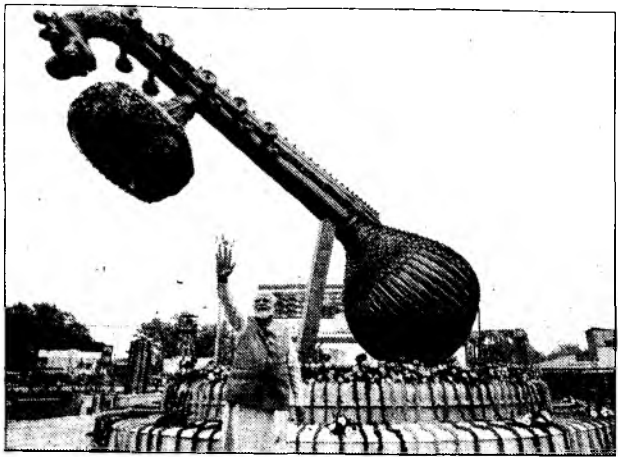


Light Shri Ram Jyoti on Jan 22 at home to celebrate Diwali: Modi

AYODHYA, Dec 30: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said the whole world is waiting for the historic Ram temple consecration ceremony here on January 22, stressing the strength of "vikas" (development) and "virasat" (heritage) will take the country forward.

He appealed to people to light special diyas - Shri Ram Jyoti - in their homes to celebrate the day of 'pran pratishtha' at Ram temple as 'Deepawali' and said the campaign to speed up work for building a developed India is getting a new energy from the city of Ayodhya.

There was a time Lord Ram was "living under a tent", but now he will get a concrete house like the four crore poor people who got pucca houses, he said, addressing a public meeting after inaugurating a renovated railway station and an airport in the city.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits the Lata Mangeshkar Chowk, in Ayodhya, on Saturday. (PTI)

Modi said that for any country to reach new heights of development it will have to preserve its heritage, and it is for this reason that India today is moving ahead by assimilating the new and the old.

"Our heritage inspires

us, shows us the right path. Therefore, today's India is moving forward by assimilating both the old and the new. Today, not only Ram Lalla has got a pucca house, but four crore poor people have also got pucca houses," he said.

"Today, India is not only beautifying its pilgrimage sites but is also dominating the world of technology," he said. "The joint strength of 'vikas' (development) and 'virasat' (heritage) will take Bharat ahead in the 21st century."

"Today in the country, not only Kedar Dham has been revived, but more than 315 new medical colleges have also been built. Today, not only Mahakal Mahalok has been constructed in the country, but more than two lakh water tanks have also been built to supply water to every house," he said.

While people are eager to come to Ayodhya on January 22 it is not possible for everyone to visit on the same day, he said.

Only those who have been invited should come on the day and others can follow later on, the prime minister appealed to the people.

"It is my 'karbaddh prarthana' (prayer with folded hands) because everyone wishes that they (people) themselves should come to Ayodhya to witness the event of January 22, but you also know that it is not possible for everyone," he said.

The prime minister said the entire world is eagerly waiting for the historic moment on January 22.

"Hence, the immense enthusiasm ('atee-utsaah') among the residents of Ayodhya is quite natural. I am a worshipper of every particle of the soil of India and of every person of India. And, I am also eager like you," Modi said.

He also appealed to the people of the city to take a pledge to make Ayodhya the cleanest city of India.

"This is the responsibility of the residents of Ayodhya," he stressed. (PTI)

Bengal opposition parties say PM is mixing religion with politics

KOLKATA, Dec 30: Opposition leaders in West Bengal took a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday for inaugurating a slew of projects ahead of Ayodhya Ram temple inauguration on January 22 and mixing religion with politics. After inaugurating the Maharshi Valmiki airport and the redeveloped Ayodhya Dham station, Modi flagged off two Amrit Bharat and six Vande Bharat trains. He appealed to all citizens to light 'diyas' in their houses on January 22 so that the whole country can bask in the glory of the temple.

The PM also urged people to launch cleanliness drives at pilgrimage sites and temples across the country from 'Makar Sankranti' on January 14 until the temple consecration day.

Taking a jibe at Modi, TMC state spokesperson Kunal Ghosh posted on X,

"This is indeed PM @narendramodi's New India, where 97 crore people cannot afford a healthy diet. Yet, the government slashes foodgrain subsidies for the poor by 63 per cent. Where 2 lakh urban dwellers remain homeless and 6.5 crore reside in slums."

"But you do have selfie booths with the prime minister's cutouts promising that 'achhe din' are soon to come," he added.

Ghosh's senior party colleague and West Bengal minister and Kolkata mayor Firhad Hakim criticised the spree of railway project inaugurations by the PM, saying "the infrastructure does not support running high-speed trains so frequently, compromising passenger safety. Modi is resorting to gimmicks."

He accused the BJP of threatening India's fabric by not giving recognition to ev-

ery religion and violating the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna's preaching "Joto Mat, Toto Path" (as many paths, as many ways) to reach God and include everyone.

WBPC president Adhir Choudhury said, "Modi and his party BJP are mixing politics with religion. The Ram temple is one thing, but undertaking a political campaign in the name of the Ram temple is another."

He said while building rail stations and airports in one place is okay, "people across the country need airports and trains."

Slamming the opposition parties, BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar said, "While Modiji has ushered in great development initiatives, the parties in West Bengal will never learn. Their politics has taken our state backwards in the past and will continue to do so." (PTI)

National Nuggets

Stamp dedicated to Indian-origin Lankan Tamils released

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: BJP chief JP Nadda released a postal stamp here on Saturday commemorating 200 years of Indian origin Tamils in Sri Lanka. The stamp was received by the Governor of Eastern Province Government of Sri Lanka Senthil Thodaman at an event organised for its release at the BJP headquarters here, the BJP's Tamil Nadu unit president K Annamalai said in a statement. "Our national president shared his experience of working for the Indian-origin Tamils in Sri Lanka as the Health Minister and acknowledged the hardships faced by them in the past," Annamalai said. Nadda also elaborated on the need to recognise the "agony" of the community and India's commitment to extending support to the "brothers and sisters of Indian origin Tamils living in Sri Lanka during the last nine years and the years to follow", the BJP leader said. "His Excellency Governor of Eastern Province Government of Sri Lanka, Thiru Senthil Thodaman, acknowledged and thanked the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Government of India for recognising the hardships of the Indian Origin Tamils in Sri Lanka and the steadfast projects implemented by the Government of India in the estate regions of Sri Lanka for the welfare of the Tamil community," the BJP leader added. Union Minister L Murugan, BJP foreign affairs department in-charge Vijay Chauthaiwale, party leaders from Tamil Nadu and other dignitaries attended the event. (PTI)

Eight child labourers rescued

THANE, Dec 30: A total of eight child labourers have been rescued from a ready-made garment factory situated in Ulhasnagar town in Thane district of Maharashtra, officials said on Saturday. They were rescued after the police and an NGO raided the jeans manufacturing unit in Gaikwadpada area on December 28, the district administration said. The rescued children are in the age group of 13 to 17 years who were employed by the factory owner, an official release said. Seven of them are natives of Uttar Pradesh and one is from Nepal. "They are currently shifted to the remand home. They will be produced before the Juvenile Board. (PTI)

IndiGo pilot chants Jai Shri Ram as first flight to Ayodhya takes off

AYODHYA (UP), Dec 30: IndiGo pilot Ashutosh Shekhar chanted "Jai Shri Ram" on the aircraft's public announcement system as the first flight to the temple town of Ayodhya took off from Delhi on Saturday.

Addressing the passengers, 43-year-old Shekhar said he felt fortunate that his company entrusted him with the responsibility to fly the first flight to Ayodhya, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the airport in the town in Uttar Pradesh.

He introduced his co-pilot Nikhil Bakshi and cabin in-charge Kirti to the flyers.

While Shekhar was addressing the passengers, his wife Sweta Ranjan recorded this "memorable" event on her mobile phone.

"It was a lifetime experience," Ranjan told PTI. "Passengers chanted mantras, recited Hanuman Chalisa and

sang Bhajan throughout the about-an-hour journey from Delhi to Ayodhya. The whole atmosphere in the cabin was spiritual," she added.

Talking about the passengers, Ranjan said they were dressed in saffron colour outfits and many of them tied saffron headgear.

"They were carrying gangajal, incense sticks, flowers and sweets. Some of them even carried saffron flags with 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Om' or 'Swastika' on them," Ranjan said, adding that the atmosphere was almost the same when the flight was returning to Delhi with devotees. Union minister V K Singh also travelled in the return flight.

The inaugural flight started at 2:40 pm and landed in Ayodhya at 4 pm. On return journey, the flight took off at 4:40 pm and reached Delhi at 5:55 in the evening.

A day before, Shekhar's

father, 75-year-old Mukteshwar Singh, had spoken to PTI and said that it was proud moment for the family as his son would pilot the first passenger plane to the new airport after its inauguration by the prime minister.

"Lord Ram has been kind to us," said Shekhar's mother Madhurani Singh (68).

"Since the day he entered the aviation sector, it was my dream to see him flying an aircraft to Ayodhya. It has come true after 12 years. What could be more joyous than seeing a dream being fulfilled," she said.

This is a "divine moment", said Mukteshwar Singh. He added that his family's association with Ayodhya goes back four generations when his great grandfather visited the city to become a disciple of Shri Ram Vallabha Kunj Janki Ghat. Shekhar is a disciple

of Guru Shree Ram Shankar Das ji Vedanti of the city, his family members said.

PM Modi's vision lauded by Union Ministers

Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Union Minister of Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia hailed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for the development works undertaken in Ayodhya, including the new airport and the revamped railway station unveiled on Saturday.

Speaking at a public meeting in Ayodhya, Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said Ayodhya has now been connected to the world due to the prime minister's vision.

The inauguration of the Maharshi Valmiki airport and the redeveloped station named Ayodhya Dham comes ahead of the consecration of the Ram temple next month. (PTI)

Dreams of countless diligent youth ruined: Rahul on Agnipath scheme

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Saturday slammed the Centre over the short-tenure military recruitment scheme Agnipath, alleging that the government has ruined the dedication and dreams of countless hardworking and promising youth.

Gandhi shared a video on social media of his recent interaction with a group of youth who, he said, had come on foot from Bihar's Champaran to express their struggle. In his post along with the video, Gandhi said that under the guise of the Agniveer Yojana, "by cancelling the 'permanent

recruitment' of the Army which was to run till 2019-21, the government ruined the dedication and dreams of countless hardworking and promising youth".

"These youth have come on foot from Champaran to express their struggle. Many such youth were given false assurances of appointment after completion of the entire process and in the end they were left to fend for themselves on the pretext of Agnipath," Gandhi said of his meeting with the youth.

"Today these youth are left with nothing but unemployment, despair, and humiliation - they have no

plan B except the army," he added.

In the video, the youth told Gandhi that they had been selected for recruitment in the Army but due to the announcement of the Agnipath scheme, their future had been left in limbo.

Gandhi told them that the government should adequately compensate them.

The Agnipath scheme, announced on June 14, 2022, provides for the recruitment of youngsters in the age bracket of 17-and-a-half to 21 years for only four years with a provision to retain 25 per cent of them for 15 more years. (PTI)

BJP misusing religion: Akhilesh

ETAH (UP), Dec 30: Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Saturday accused the BJP of misusing religion to meet its political ends. He also charged the saffron party with deceiving the public.

Yadav, who was addressing a programme in the Nagla Dandi area of this Uttar Pradesh district, said, "The work of the BJP is to deceive the public. The BJP has been using religion for politics since day one." "Cheating is the behaviour, business and strategy of the BJP. It is working to snatch the rights and respect of people," Yadav alleged and said inequality has increased under the BJP government. (PTI)

NewsClick row: Delhi Police question Gautam Navlakha in Mumbai

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: A team of Delhi Police on Saturday questioned activist Gautam Navlakha in Mumbai in connection with their ongoing investigation into the allegations that media outlet NewsClick received money to spread pro-China propaganda.

Navlakha, who was previously under house arrest in the Elgar Parishad-Maoist links case, was granted bail on December 19.

The questioning took place at Navlakha's residence in Navi Mumbai's Agri area, led by an Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP)-level officer, the sources said.

The Special Cell had registered an FIR against NewsClick in connection with the case on August 17

under different sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

In August, a 'New York Times' investigation had accused NewsClick of taking funding from a network linked to US millionaire Neville Roy Singham to promote Chinese propaganda.

Recently, NewsClick's human resources head Amit Chakravarty had moved a Delhi court seeking its permission to turn approver in the case.

Chakravarty and NewsClick's founder and editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha were arrested by Delhi Police's Special Cell on October 3 following raids at about 30 locations across Delhi, Noida, Gurugram, Mumbai and Ghaziabad.

Chakravarty filed an application before Special Judge Hardeep Kaur, seeking pardon in the ongoing case.

He claimed to possess material information that he is willing to share with the Delhi Police.

Kaur has scheduled the matter to be presented before a magisterial court for the recording of Chakravarty's statement.

Police sources have indicated that a decision will be made regarding supporting his application after thoroughly reviewing the information he provides in his statement. The court on December 22 had granted 60 days to Delhi Police to complete the investigation.

Both Purkayastha and Chakravarty are under judicial custody till January

20 when the matter will be heard next.

The case is based on ₹ 38 crore that the news portal had allegedly received as foreign funding.

Chinese entities infused funds into NewsClick to propagate pro-Chinese content, say Enforcement Directorate sources.

Purkayastha and Chakravarty, who were arrested by the Delhi Police in October after it conducted raids at the homes of several journalists and employees linked to NewsClick, were charged with terrorism under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

The Enforcement Directorate also conducted raids on the firm's premises to probe its sources of funding, the sources said. (IANS)



Bihar CM and Janata Dal United national president Nitish Kumar is welcomed by JDU supporters, at Jai Prakash Narayan Airport in Patna, on Saturday. (PTI)

Congress' alliance panel to apprise leadership on tie-ups soon

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: The Congress' National Alliance Committee, set up to facilitate seat-sharing talks with INDIA bloc allies, held a slew of meetings over Friday and Saturday with state units to get their feedback on tie-ups and would apprise the leadership of the ground situation after a couple of days.

The committee has held meetings with almost all state units, including Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, with only deliberations with the Punjab unit and a few others left, an alliance committee member said.

"Our job was to get ground-level feedback from the workers and party leaders and make assessments as to what needs to be done going forward," he said.

The member also stated that the committee has sought time from the party's leadership and would have a meeting with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and senior leader Rahul Gandhi where it would place before them, the details of the feedback and the panel's assessment.

The meeting would be held after a couple

of days as Kharge and Gandhi may be travelling, the leader said.

After a meeting with the alliance committee, Congress general secretary and Uttar Pradesh in-charge Avinash Pande said ways to strengthen the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc successfully were discussed at the meeting.

"The report of the committee will be placed before party president Kharge, Sonia ji and Rahul ji and on (January) 4th, a meeting would be held on all these meetings and whatever decision the high command takes, we will move forward in that direction," he told reporters.

The negotiations with the allies will formally start next week after the panel gives its feedback to the party leadership, sources said.

The five-member National Alliance Committee formed last week is headed by senior Congress leader Mukul Wasnik and has Ashok Gehlot, Bhupesh Baghel, Salman Khurshid and Mohan Prakash as its members. (PTI)

Gujarat residents under scanner in 'donkey flight' incident

AHMEDABAD, Dec 30: A team of Ahmedabad Police has been questioning 20 Gujarat residents in connection with its probe into suspected illegal immigration network, an official said on Saturday, adding that those being questioned were onboard

the 'donkey flight' that was grounded earlier this month in France.

These individuals were aboard a Nicaragua-bound flight, which was rerouted from France amid human trafficking suspicions.

The Airbus A340, after being halted in France, landed in Mumbai in the early hours of December 26.

Among the passengers, at least 60 hailed from Gujarat and have since returned to their native places.

The ongoing investiga-

tion by the police aims to determine if they had intentions of illegally entering the US after arriving in Latin America.

The statements of these passengers, who claimed to be tourists, are being thoroughly scrutinised.

A source in the know of the things said that officials were exploring every aspect of this case, noting the "challenge in extracting concrete information" from the individuals questioned. The journey, initially undertaken by a Romanian charter company, Legend

Airlines, was interrupted by French police during a technical stopover in Vetry, near Paris. French authorities have since initiated a judicial investigation into the trip's purpose, with a special unit for organised crime leading the probe. (IANS)



A senior official said that the CID has been verifying the documents of these individuals to confirm their authenticity and to investigate any possible forged documentation used for the journey. The passengers' financial transactions are also

examined to establish if their travel expenses align with those of regular tourists.