

"Never let hard lessons harden your heart; the hard lessons of life are meant to make you better, not bitter."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

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Internet and new rules

The new guidelines introduced by the Centre for regulating Internet functioning are an improvement on what existed in that form since 2011. Several safeguards are brought forward in the Information Technology (intermediary guidelines and digital media ethics code) Rules 2021 to ensure that people's fundamental rights are protected. Obviously, such regulations are also going to stonewall the freewheeling style of social media. It remains to be seen how things will change for the better. Freedom without regulations is unacceptable even in a democratic set-up. It was to the luck of the social media that it could hold forth with a lot of freedom — unlike the established media that often faced muscle-flexing from the government. So much so, social media became the principal source for the people to have access to hidden information, be it hidden by the government or by individuals or other entities. Complaints however are that several of the stipulations are unconstitutional and would stand in the way of free expression. Digital news and OTT video content providers are apparently the main target of government regulations also for the reason that these have large viewership almost matching with that of television among the urban populace. Those like WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter and Signal have emerged as the principal source of individual-level information-sharing in recent years.

A registration system, under the ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which has been brought into force for online news media was long overdue. Yet, how these will impact the free flow of information even with good intention is a big question. Obviously, several such news and video sites have gone overboard. Rights of women have been trampled in gay abandon, many were shamed and some even ended their lives. As long as regulations are done with a fair mind-set, the public will encourage and appreciate such controls. At the same time, if the government uses such regulations to muzzle dissent, the scenario would change. It is also worth a watch how courts will take a view of the new changes. A guideline demand of publishers of news and current affairs including aggregators like Google is to publish a monthly compliance report listing the grievances they received and what they have done to correct wrongs. Also, if a social media content is found to be offensive by the government or court, the entity that uploaded it will have to pull it down within 36 hours; and within 24 hours if it is sexually offensive content. There cannot be any reservations on such regulations; nor on the one relating to national security.

The story of Lakadong turmeric is a story of a singular and unceasing blessing of nature to the people of Jaintia hills. Lakadong is a gift to the state for the unique plant is endemic to the area. The plant has now become not only the pride of the district from where it originated but it is also the pride of the state. Now the name of Lakadong turmeric has spread far and wide but has the state done enough to make the best use of this unique gift that nature had bestowed on the state? Has the government done enough to protect this unique plant that was gifted to the land? What has the government done to promote the plant?

This scribe's story with Lakadong turmeric has so far been unsatisfactory. It has been many years since this writer had started following the story of Lakadong turmeric but unfortunately not much progress has been made either with regards to research or development of this unique crop or its commercial use. Many of the readers of this newspaper would know that there are two types of indigenous turmeric that people in Jaintia grow, one is Lakadong and the other is Lakacheh. Lakacheh is not as popular as Lakadong as it is considered inferior because it has low curcumin content.

There is another important question that begs the answer and that is whether any of these varieties of turmeric or the Lakadong variety for that matter have been patented or registered under Geographical Indication? The government has so far not come up with a specific sign or symbol specifically for Lakadong which may be used to claim that Lakadong that Jaintia hills district is the specific place of origin of this particular turmeric. The GI indication protects the crop from being used by a third party and for the State or its people retain ownership of the crop. One of the conditions for GI registration is that any product needs to have sufficient proof that its origin is linked to a particular geographical area. But the question is whether Lakadong turmeric has been registered. If not why hasn't it been registered? The answer like

have been preceded by tragedy of MLA's death in harness. In my view, the voters primarily tend to choose a successor because of their old connections and a sense of comfort, if not trust with the family. Obviously, personality, acumen and flair of the candidate also make a big difference between success and failure. I also need to repudiate the other contention that money makes it possible to ensure dynastic politics. That's far from true. The stark reality is that every candidate in the fray has to spend money. Those having better chance of success spend more. Yes, I agree with the writer that money is the name of the game. First you 'invest' and then you 'reap'! Isn't this Meghalaya's making and unmaking?

I also wonder why the writer has singled out the Congress Party for the lack of second rung leadership. Which party has produced leaders? Leaders (read elected representatives) are either made by fortune or personal ability. Isn't Meghalaya suffering for throwing up some elected representatives who are simply not up to it? Compare the quality of our leaders of the first Assembly who were as good as any in the country.

Lakadong Turmeric: The golden powder

By H H Mohrmen

the famous singer and poet laureate says, 'is blowing in the wind.'

While one is unsure if the State Government has got GI registration for Lakadong, yet recently this scribe came to know from the farmers that there are two varieties of Lakadong turmeric. The indigenous variety of Lakadong the rhizome of which of which the farmers traditionally preserve and the variety supplied by the Government. When asked how farmers know the difference between the crops the answer is that the very looks of the two varieties is different. Now the government has this additional issue to deal with. With regard to GI registration of Lakadong, the last time around the challenges that the officials encountered was that there are two villages with the name Lakadong in the erstwhile Jaintia hills. One in the East Jaintia Hills where there is no history of turmeric cultivation and the other in West Jaintia hills District where a large section of the farmers are engaged in the activity.

It is heartening to know that the government is embarking on a venture to promote Lakadong turmeric by starting Mission Lakadong. The main goal of the mission as of now is to increase production by increasing the area cover under Lakadong plantation. The effort to increase its production in the district is laudable, but is this enough? The government had done a study on the value chain of the crop but what are the interventions it has made so far apart from increase in production? How was the rhizome selected and stored before being planted? But the most important question is how it was dried and then ground into powder before it is sold in the market?

Till today turmeric is dried in the open mostly in frontage of the house which is susceptible to contamination from the surrounding areas. And even if the pulp is ground into powder using machines, the facilities need to be improved. The point is there is no proper quality control from the time the crop was harvested to the time it was ground into powder. If the

government really desires to promote this golden powder, it needs to intervene at the different points in the production of Lakadong turmeric.

The other pertinent question is whether the Government has conducted any other study like for example the types of soil that is good for Lakadong or other studies in connection with this important crop. Questions like how is the crop planted; how it is dried and how the dried rhizomes are ground into powder? Hopefully the government has documented the traditional practices of growing Lakadong that have been passed down from one generation to another. In fact these indigenous practices will be of immense help to the government if and when it applies for GI registration of the crop.

It is also sad to know that in spite of Lakadong gaining a special place in the list of crops in the state, yet there is no facility for testing yet in the entire West Jaintia hills district to test the curcumin content of Lakadong produced from the area. In the absence of such facility, now the trade of turmeric by common farmers is based only on trust. The Government needs to do an awful lot more if it really wants to strike gold for its people from the golden powder. It needs to make the best use of the crop, which it has not been able to do till date.

Not only turmeric but the other tuber crop popular in the state is ginger. In Jaintia hills there are two varieties of ginger. The popular ginger available in abundance in the market and the indigenous ginger which is smaller in size but much more pungent than the one available in the market. Locals call the ginger endemic to the area 'u syif khian' and it is commonly used by traditional medicine practitioners because it is believed to have medicinal properties. The government is yet to study the commercial potential of this variety of ginger too.

Tribute to AKN
This is an unusual closing to a weekly column because for the first time the column ends with a tribute to what this scribe considers to be a very important person. It is

a tribute to AK Nongkynrih who has influenced many lives (particularly young people) in the state. A chance meeting with Kyrham was in Kolkata in the early nineties (at the Meghalaya House, Russell Street), when he was on his way to Singapor and Hong Kong with a group of young Don Bosco past pupils. Later he visited this scribe in Jowai and from then on the bond strengthened as the two of us shared a common goal of using our time and energy to work for the welfare of the underprivileged section of the population.

Along with many others we were part of the journey of North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS). He was vice chairman of the organisation till he breathed his last. In fact it was from NESFAS Chairman, Phrang Roy that I came to know about his illness and the condition of his poor health. He is one scholar who during his younger days had visited and stayed in many villages in Jaintia hills.

Of all the meetings we had, the visit to his office at the North Eastern Hill University was the most memorable one. He was informed that the team of visitors from abroad under the banner of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Committee would pay him a visit and he graciously welcomed the team with open arms. When he was introduced to one particular gentleman, he could not help but ask the professor again to ensure if he is what he had in his mind. Bah Kyrham rose from his chair and shook hands again saying, "I never expected that a person of your eminence would visit my office." Dr Richard Ford of Clark University who had worked in 25 African countries was the first person to adopt the concept of Rapid Rural Appraisal which in fact was the beginning of the participatory rural appraisal (PRA). Dr Ford spent four decades working in Africa and it is from Africa that PRA spread to other developing countries. That was a beautiful moment and I consider it to be the meeting of minds. Bam kwai ha duar U Blei Bah Kyrham!
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Wolves of Meghalaya

By Deepa Majumdar

This article is dedicated to the memory of Raju Mondal, and to his co-workers who survived. I live thousands of miles away in another country. But Aminul Islam's grief-stricken face will remain etched in my mind for a long time. How he and his surviving friends will heal mentally from the cowardly attack (described by *Shillong Times* as "blood-curdling") they suffered on Feb 24 night, on the premises of St. Xavier's College, Umoid, is beyond me. How they brought the body of twenty-year old Raju Mondal, who died as a result of this attack, back to his family, especially to his mother, is again, beyond me. What did they do to deserve this dastardly act of violence? Will the attackers face the stiff punishments they deserve? Will their own families hand them over to the police, like they should? I always thought America's drone attacks were the most cowardly form of violence ever. Yet, the violence of ISIS matched that of America in strange ways. Although an unholy David-Goliath in their disproportion, they matched one another in their hatred, with ISIS' crude old world techniques of killing mocking America's technologically advanced weapons. Both matched one another also in their barbaric cowardice. Despite the technical gulf in their weapons, both used armed assailants to attack innocent unarmed victims.

But the Umoid attack,

"outsiders" or on identity politics as such? Shouldn't Khasi civil society reflect on what causes their young men to become so hate-filled? If it is identity politics that causes this kind of hatred then it is surely imperative to introspect and throw aside those narcissistic aspects of the Khasi identity that cause hatred towards non-Khasis? When George Floyd died, America saw the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest movements erupt nationwide and spread overseas. Will Meghalaya or Assam, leave alone India, see any protests for Raju Mondal, who died needlessly, and for his injured friends who survived with physical and mental wounds? Or, are their lives not worthy, since they are impoverished "outsiders"? To the rest of India, caught up in the hypocrisy of modernity, Meghalaya may be a quaint place to visit as tourists. They may not even know of the history of violence against non-tribals in Meghalaya. Or, they may fall for Meghalaya's sob stories of fears of extinction, without heeding the violence committed by tribals against innocent non-tribals to prevent extinction! Moreover, the sense of Indian brotherhood may not be strong enough as yet, to rouse protests of the scale and order of the George Floyd demonstrations.

But surely Assam should divert all its communal anger in a more righteous direction to protest loudly and clearly this horrific tragedy and to demand recompense? Surely

It is almost a law of the universe that violence always boomerangs back to perpetrators. I have read of American soldiers returning with broken bodies and minds because of the acts of violence they were forced to commit.

while on par with ISIS and drone attacks in its barbarism and cowardice, takes my breath away. More cowardly than cowardice itself, these armed assailants numbered more than three times the number of innocent unarmed workers they attacked. What is most disgusting is the fact they attacked their victims while they were sleeping. What can be more cowardly and evil? Yes they attacked with sticks and knives, which are old fashioned weapons compared to drones. But the deeds they committed were no less evil. Besides racism what else could have motivated these killers? Their victims were innocent workers with proper documentation, whose only "fault" was the poverty that brought them to Meghalaya. That this barbaric attack took place on the premises of the Jesuits is all the more disconcerting, because it shows that nothing is sacrosanct to the lawless (not religion, proper documentation, or rules and regulations). It proves how emboldened the assailants felt, perhaps because they knew that law and order in Meghalaya is toothless.

The peace rallies that have already taken place to protest this tragedy, are commendable. But surely more is needed. I understand the need to separate church and state, this being an ancient wisdom in the western world. But given the barbaric nature of this premeditated crime, shouldn't religious leaders of Shillong call for a day of penance for this dastardly attack, with prayer vigils for the speedy recovery of the survivors, and for the soul of Raju Mondal, as well as prayers for the souls of their attackers, whose minds must be in a state of living hell right now? Shouldn't there be a day of reflection on the broader issue of Khasi violence against

Delhi should protest this sort of barbaric racism and probe into the failed state Meghalaya is turning into? Above all, surely Meghalaya should be filled with uncompromising protests against this act of barbarism, alongside setting aside days of atonement? To protest this crime for fear that the Jesuits will now leave Meghalaya is too self-serving to qualify as true atonement. Where is the sincere hand wringing and penance in a state filled mostly with followers of the gentle Christ? Although money can hardly compensate for loss of life, surely Raju Mondal's impoverished family should receive reparations for his loss of life? Surely, the six workers who survived, should receive monetary compensation for the traumas they suffered and the jobs they lost?

It is almost a law of the universe that violence always boomerangs back to perpetrators. I have read of American soldiers returning with broken bodies and minds because of the acts of violence they were forced to commit. I remember reading of one such soldier washing his hands again and again. When asked why he did so, he replied he was trying to wash off the blood of his victims from his hands. Yet, this kind of remorse happens only to those souls that are still capable of shame. Once the threshold of shame is crossed, the only solution is appropriate (proportionate) redemptive punishment. The armed men who attacked Islam and his friends were not soldiers forced into impossible situations of violence. They are cold-blooded murderers, who are too far gone, well beyond the threshold of shame, to experience remorse. They deserve the stiffest punishment, short of the death penalty, which is and always will be morally wrong.

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TO THE EDITOR

Money, not dynasty the problem

Editor,

Apropos the letter, "Why promote dynastic politics?" (ST Feb 18, 2021) by Marcellious Kharsati, I have seriously pondered on whether the contention of the author is correct or whether he has a strange fixity of ideas? I tried very hard to convince myself about it and have come to the conclusion that it is more a perception rather than reality. Let's forget the national scene where out of lakhs of political families only a microscopic few have occupied political space owing to family connections. I would appreciate if anybody better informed can correct me here.

But allow me to confine myself to our own state. Since 1972, as far as I can recollect, there won't be more than a dozen families that have seen sons and daughters (and in a couple of cases widows) of former politicians, retired or expired, succeeding their father or husband.

Here is my list: Late P.G. Marbanjiang's son RG Lyngdoh; Late Amparen Lyngdoh; Late GG Swell's son Late Sanbor Swell Lyngdoh; Late E.K.

Mawlong's son George Lyngdoh; Late P.A. Sangma's two sons Conrad & James Sangma and daughter Agatha Sangma; Mukul Sangma's daughter Miani Shira and wife Dikanchi Shira; Late Don Kupar Roy's son Balajied Kupar Syrem, Late T.H. Rangad's widow Jopsimon Phanhuh; Late Korbar Singh's widow Roshan Warjri; Late P.N. Chaudhuri's two sons Ardhendu and Manas Chaudhuri; Late Humphrey Hadem's son Late Edmond Speakeron Lyngdoh. That makes a total of mere ten families who have held their dynastic flag flying in politics since 1972. Evidently, I can't see there has been a plethora of succession politics in Meghalaya, as the letter writer seems to have us believe.

On the other hand, many of the political stalwarts like Capt W.A. Sangma, B.B. Lyngdoh, P.R. Kyndiah, D.D. Pugh et al have not thrown up successors to their political "fiefdom." That may be due to varied factors, ranging from lack of ambition and/or ability to absence of progeny. However, it is also true that sympathy has played a significant role in the electoral successes of these "dynasts." It is significant that many of the above named successions

have been preceded by tragedy of MLA's death in harness. In my view, the voters primarily tend to choose a successor because of their old connections and a sense of comfort, if not trust with the family. Obviously, personality, acumen and flair of the candidate also make a big difference between success and failure. I also need to repudiate the other contention that money makes it possible to ensure dynastic politics. That's far from true. The stark reality is that every candidate in the fray has to spend money. Those having better chance of success spend more. Yes, I agree with the writer that money is the name of the game. First you 'invest' and then you 'reap'! Isn't this Meghalaya's making and unmaking?

I also wonder why the

same cannot be said for the many that have followed subsequently. Meghalaya is not doomed because of "dynastic politics"; it is the diminishing ability of our elected leaders to run the administration efficiently and lawfully which is taking the state down the precipice.

Yours etc.,
Pynshngain Jyrwa,
Via email.

Arguments on merit only

Editor,

At the outset, I take strong exception to the contents of the letter written by one Mason Lyngdoh titled, "Each voice must be heard" (ST Feb 26, 2021). Personally, I have no mood to dignify his ad hominem attacks against me with any answer. Therefore, let me jump straight into the other aspects of his letter which require urgent rebuttals.

If Mason Lyngdoh or any other person for that matter has any valid evidence to present on specific merits of a suit under litigation, why not make their voices heard at the appropriate legal forum by getting themselves impleaded in the case? Writing strong worded letters to newspaper on the merits of a case under

litigation is easy, but presenting the same before the competent court is an entirely different matter. Furthermore, comparing my previous letter relating to the MCS Mains exam with the ongoing MCS case" (ST Feb 20, 2021) does not make any logical sense and Mason Lyngdoh should revisit the points on which my letter was worded. My concern in the said letter was solely on the delay of the MCS Mains exam results, and not on any other legal point. That has now been resolved and I am thankful to the MPSC for that. I must add here that in every examination, even academic examinations for that matter, there will always be people or unsuccessful candidates who will never accept the winners and such people will try to find technical faults to pull the successful lot down. So, it's either their way or the highway. Nonetheless, that does not deter us from putting our faith in the legal system for complete justice.

As regards to the issue raised by the author on the so called "Reservation within Reservation", I direct the attention of Mason Lyngdoh to our State Reservation Policy vide No. PER. 222/71/138 dated January 12, 1972 which has clearly reserved certain percentages of seats for

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S
Via email

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent."

— Isaac Asimov

The Shillong Times

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Attrition in Meghalaya Congress

THE Congress Party in Meghalaya seems to be losing its members faster than they can count. Across the state Congress Party members are resigning and joining the National Peoples' Party (NPP). There's something that attracts people to the NPP. It looks attractive as every party in power tends to do. Being in the Congress now is being in the doghouse. Those in business (and which politician isn't) find the going tough. Contract works are all cornered by those close to the MDA Government. So what's the point in hanging on to a train that has neither speed nor gravy? It makes sense to be on the winning side. And judging by the manner in which the Congress leadership at the national level is dithering with senior leaders having to come to the rescue of Rahul Gandhi and defend his verbal indiscretions, it doesn't look as if a revival of the Party is in the offing. At the national level Congressmen and women have to deal with the BJP and its muscular and authoritarian nationalism but they find that the leadership is not up to that challenge. At the state level too, the Congress has not been able to decide on a leader who people can rally round. There is not even an official spokesperson. Every Congress MLA seems to speak for himself/herself. Clearly there is a leadership void and the Party cannot be revived in this vacuum.

The Congress Party in Meghalaya is also hamstrung by the fact that at the national level there is no intent to infuse democracy in the Party by holding elections to the highest body – the All India Congress Committee and to do away with the practice of nominating leaders. To give credit where due, the Congress Party in Meghalaya has discharged its role as a credible Opposition and raised important issues in the House from time to time. They have within their fold some dynamic, young, politically savvy and intellectually robust legislators. It would be an immeasurable loss if the attrition is not halted. Unfortunately, it appears that the leadership is not up to this challenge. And politics being what it is, preparations for 2023 are already under way.

Political aspirants are gauging whether it is politically viable to continue to remain in the Congress or whether it is better to be on the winning side. Politicians cannot be accused of political opportunism. To be in the Government is also to be able to serve the constituents better. Look at the constituencies represented by Congress MLAs today and the development vacuum to understand why being in the ruling party is important. Also the burning question is whether the Congress Party is salvageable.

'Dkhar' in nature, why then the hatred?

By Albert Thyrsniang

When Ardent Basaiawmoit sought time from HYC, Sohiong circle to prove its allegation of his involvement as CEM of KHADC to incorporate non-Khasi ('Tang Jait') into the Khasi society he named a couple of Khasi surnames which were results of the 'tang jait' stating that the practice is not a new phenomenon. I compile a list of two of the Khasi surnames in alphabetical order with the initial 'Khar' namely, Dkhar Kharbhih, Kharbani, Kharbithai, Khardeusaw, Khardoh, Kharheli, Kharjhrin, Kharjami, Kharkongor, Kharliiu, Kharlyngdoh, Kharawlong, Kharmawphlang, Kharmabi Kharphuli, Kharsati, Kharsandi, Kharshiing, Kharsyntiew. This is not to embarrass anyone nor to humiliate anyone. This is to state the truth and to reflect on it. It is a reality that many of us have 'dkhar' roots. If you consider 'dkhar' roots from the father's side like this individual then the number only increases.

Then why the hatred for 'dkhars' (non-Khasi)? The unprovoked and totally unprovoked assault on eight workers at the newly established St Xavier's College in Umoid near Mawkyrwat, South West Khasi Hills at the dead of the night on February 24, resulting in the murder of one of them and causing injuries to the others symbolises this extreme hate. It is an unnatural phobia. It is intolerance in spite of the fact that we ourselves share a 'common' heritage with the victims. The skilled labourers were taken to construct a specialised portion of a building after obtaining the work permit from KHADC. The authorities also met the Chief Minister, the Home Minister and the leaders of pressure groups in the process. In spite of this elaborate arrangement the criminals executed the barbaric and uncivilised attack.

Some of those who have been arrested bear the surname 'dkhar'. They have been remanded to police custody. Do they not realise they too descended from a 'dkhar'? Can they deny their ancestry? Having been beneficiaries of the 'Tang Jait' why are they so anti 'dkhar'? What harm will those eight out-state-labourers do? They did not sneak into our territory. They did not infiltrate into the state. They did not even come on their own. They were requested to perform

the task that would contribute to the cause of education in the area that so urgently requires attention. After completion of the work they are going to return home. They are not going to settle in Umoid or in South West Khasi Hills or in the state. Then why harm them? Why attack them?

At least two of the five suspects arrested are reported to be members of the KSU and another a former member. Investigation will (will it?) reveal if the Union or a unit is involved in the seemingly pre-planned and orchestrated violent act. However, the Union needs to reflect whether granting of membership is too casual. Are many of its members school drop-outs? Or are there far too many who have not undergone normal intellectual pursuits? Have members not excelled in intellectual discipline? No one is against them. They have a place in the society. But then how can they represent the student community? How can they appreciate intellectual excellence? How do they value education? How do they understand the nuance of education? When you have 'unqualified' members the end result is violence because they are unable to reason out. They only follow the crowd without thinking critically. They often become part of a mob with frenzied sentiments. How can members of a body that is supposed to promote education perpetrate such a crime on the novel institution? If the allegation is true then what example does the student union give to the student community? Should they teach the young generation to take the law into their own hands? Are those involved capable of thinking? Where is logic and reason?

Zealous and vocal pressure groups who claim to exist and work for the identity and purity of the Khasi tribe abound in the state. One sees some leaders with the 'khar' surnames. Is it a case of defence mechanism? A classmate of ours in the 90s had a very hostile attitude toward all 'dkhars' but it was found that his mother was a non-Khasi. This writer right here speaking to you through this pen was one of the kids who used to volunteer to catch non-local construction labourers in the village in the late 80s

who dared to befriend Khasi girls. Patriotism 'ended' when one day while filling up a form I realised that my dad was also a 'khar'. I came to my senses. It brought a sense of reality deep down. It brought a different perspective to life.

Being a descendent of a 'khar' or a 'dkhar' does not mean we welcome every 'outsider' into our home or our land. It does not mean we allow them to settle in our backyard. It does not mean we let them buy land and property in the state. It does not mean we do away with the Sixth Schedule. It does not mean we don't preserve our culture, tradition and culture. It just means we are all human beings, after all. It means a respect for fellow human beings. It means a reverence for the sanctity of human life. I don't think the perpetrators of the Umoid incident have this balanced perspective.

We boast of a community that is founded on two philosophies, 'Tip brier tip Blei' (literary, to know man and God) and 'Ka hok ka sot' (honesty). The Umoid incident and many other cases of violence in the past have shattered this belief. It has questioned this foundation. While beating up people in their sleep do the criminals remember God and know that innocent souls are human beings too? The horrific act is not an act of honesty. It is an attack against people who earn their livelihoods through honest means. Armed with knives and sticks and hiding themselves behind masks is not an act of bravery. It is a cowardly act. By no means are they are 'Khlur Ka Ri'.

We also take pride that the 'Tip brier tip Blei' and 'Ka hok ka sot' has found a perfect destination in Christianity. The 'Niam Tip brier Tip Blei' (Indigenous Khasi faith) is believed to have discovered its fulfilment in Christianity. The two are supposed to be a perfect blend. The whole of South West Khasi Hills is Christian. The Umoid and Diwah area too is Christian. None probably is a non-Christian. We eulogise ourselves as Christians. We are not apologetic about it. We have no qualms in calling ourselves a 'Christian' state. Are we a 'Christian' state only in terms of numbers (80%)? Or are we Christians in terms of values and virtues? Is there a mismatch between the 'Tip brier tip Blei' and 'Ka hok

ka sot' with Christianity? Where is the mismatch? Umoid is not an isolated incident that is anti-Christian and anti-human?

The entire South West Khasi Hills is backward. Successive governments have also neglected the area. This writer has highlighted the pathetic road conditions in the area several times in this very page. Tender has been called for the Nongstoin-Wakkaji road but no one has any clue as to its take-off date. The district may not even get the demoted life-line road. The youths should focus on the development of the district rather than indulge in destructive activities. The district has good tourist attractions like the Jakrem Hot Spring, the untapped Phod Umbah view, the Wah Rilang view near Mawkyrwat, the Ranikor beauty etc. The shameful Umoid incident is no advertisement for tourism for the district and the whole state in this age of social media.

The entire South West Khasi Hills has no college worth its name. St Xavier's College is supposed to fill that big void and give a filip to education in the district. Umoid will delay the completion of the college buildings. It has already affected educational activities as classes are indefinitely suspended. The villainous act has put a spanner in the works of the institution that is thought to keep on rolling in the area that looks to be off the government's map.

Condemnations right from the Chief Minister to the Home Minister to the Church to the local headmen to the general public have found echoes in the state and outside the state. It appears the police are on the job. The suspects must be apprehended, charged in the court of law and convicted. There is a broad consensus among scientists that all the different species of human were descended from ape-like creatures that walked upright in Africa more than six million years ago, strongly suggesting that there is only one race – the human race. As humans moved to different continents and locations physical conditions changed their colours and features. No doubt we appreciate differences and strive to preserve them. In India and Meghalaya we have constitutional provision to do so. Violence is out of the way, completely.

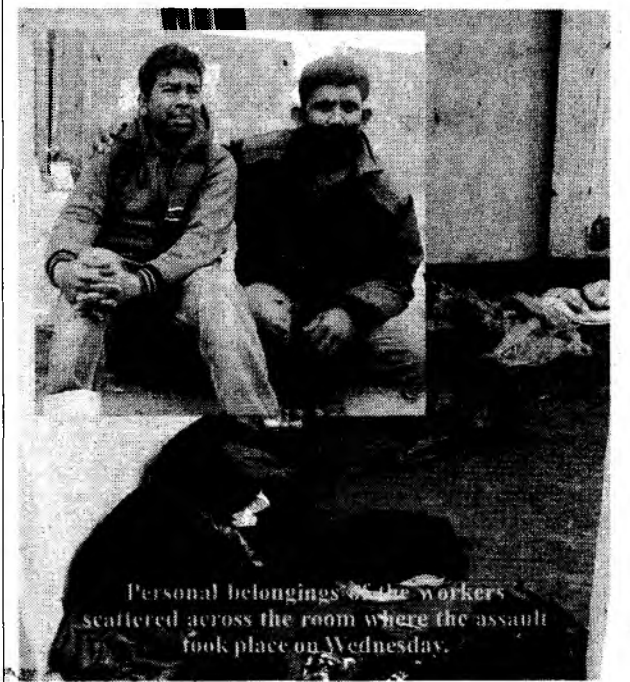
A barbaric solution

By Barnes Mawrie

The recent ghastly incident at St Xavier's College campus in Um-oid, Mawkyrwat on February 25, where a group of local people killed a non-local labourer and injured seven others, casts a slur on our State in the eyes of the world. The incident demonstrates the lack of respect for human life and a sense of false insecurity displayed by the local people or probably a display of jealousy. It is evident that these outsiders were seen as usurpers of jobs meant for local people. While the aspirations of the local people that jobs should be reserved primarily for them, is legitimate but the method of implementing it is rather barbaric and not in keeping with a civilized society. Those persons concerned should have approached the College authorities and the contractor and expressed their reservations to them. Thereby a peaceful solution or a compromise would have

whatsoever although there are some who are commendable. It is not because our local labourers lack expertise or ability to do a fine job, but solely because they take their responsibility too lightly and not with a spirit of professionalism. With this sort of attitude towards work, no contractor would be inclined to recruit more local labourers as they do a haphazard job and that would mean a bad reputation for them. These two factors are responsible for the influx of non-local labourers into the State. Had our local labourers been efficient in their work, no contractor would have hesitated in recruiting them.

What I would like to recommend to our people here is, "stop influx of non-local labourers not with threats and violence, but with a change of attitude towards work." Our local people need to imbibe a spirit of hard work and professionalism in whatever they do. Our



Personal belongings of the workers scattered across the room where the assault took place on Wednesday.

been reached and no violence would have taken place. To resort to violence of this kind leading to loss of life is outright condemnable. Perhaps it is good to reflect on the root causes of such incidents which take place from time to time.

In my opinion there are two important factors that lead to such unfortunate actions. First of all, most local contractors prefer to employ non local labourers because they are hard working and they do a fine job. On the other hand, local labourers in general, are more lethargic and their performance is not up to the mark. I have personally seen our Khasi labourers reaching

youth complain that they have no jobs, but they should realize that if they display the right attitude to work, there would be many who will be willing to recruit them. Our young generation are so crazy about aping the people of the western world especially in dresses, hair styles, food habits, entertainment and life styles. These things are a wasteful exercise for they do not help them at all in life. Instead, they should learn to imbibe western values of hard work, punctuality, discipline and a sense of value of time. Why are they not willing to learn even from these non-local labourers about the importance of hard work and per-

TO THE EDITOR

Raise entry age for college teachers

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I would like to draw the attention of the Education Minister of Meghalaya, the officials in the Education Department and in the Directorate of Higher and Technical Education of the need to raise the age of entry for the post of Assistant Professor in government as well as in deficit colleges. At present the age limit prescribed by the state government for various teaching posts is identical whether at the primary school level or college level though these levels require different qualifications ranging from Class XII with two year Diploma on Elementary Education (D.El.Ed) for primary school teachers to Doctorate/Master's degree with NET for college teachers.
A student can acquire qualifications required for primary school at the age of 20 years while he/she can acquire the qualifications for Assistant Professor in colleges at the minimum age of 23 years. If a candidate is a doctorate, the minimum age for completion of Ph.D. is about 29 years. A Ph.D. degree has become imperative for teachers at the college level both for their individual career advancement and for enhancement of the quality of higher edu-

cation especially with the adoption of the National Education Policy 2020. A college served by many non Ph.D. faculties suffers a handicap for assessment and accreditation by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and such an institution suffers in terms of capability in carrying out research work on whatever little that can be done and required at the college level.

As per the present requirement of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi a teacher convening a seminar is required to possess Ph.D. degree to avail funding from the Council. In view of these realities, it would not be wrong to consider it illogical to put the minimum age for entry for the post of Assistant Professor at 18 years and the maximum age at 32 with a relaxation of another 5 years for SC/ST using the same criteria as primary school teachers. It is, therefore, prudent to enhance the minimum age for the post of Assistant Professor to 23 years and the upper age limit to 37 years with a relaxation of another 5 years for SC/ST candidates. It may be noted that the upper age limit for the post of Assistant Professor in states of Manipur and Assam is 38 years (5 years relaxable for SC/ST candidates) and in Arunachal Pradesh it is 37 years (5 years relaxable for SC/ST). In Nagaland the

upper age limit for candidates possessing Ph.D. degree is 35 years (5 years relaxable for SC/ST candidates).
Again, it is worth noting that for the post of Medical and Health Officer which requires MBBS as an essential qualification, the age prescribed by the government of Meghalaya is 23 years as the minimum age and 41 years as the upper age limit with a relaxation of 5 years for SC/ST candidates.

Umiat bridge in danger!

Editor,
Rising traffic congestion is an inescapable condition in Shillong at present. Commuters are often frustrated by the inability of policy makers to do anything about the problem, which poses a significant public policy challenge. Ever since the deterioration of the Dwar Ksud bridge, heavy goods vehicles are entering or exiting the city at all hours of the day and night, although the order reads only from 9 pm to 6 am. Traffic jams are common when the snail pace heavy duty trucks move or develop snags and are parked on the main thoroughfares. What is more alarming is the decision to allow heavily loaded trucks to ply through the Umiat bridge

which I believe has crossed it's lifespan. A 60 year old bridge which in today's term is meant for small vehicles to cross to Shillong and Ri Bhoi area is now being tortured and put under tremendous pressure by these highway kings. Traffic jams are also a common sight on this bridge with 35-40 light and heavy vehicles stuck on this bridge due to slow traffic though there is a sign-board that reads, 'only one loaded vehicle is allowed to cross the bridge at a time.'

Now let us be more practical. If a 7-year old Dwar Ksud bridge built with modern technology and engineering cannot bear the brunt of these notorious trucks, how on earth are we expecting a more than 60 year old Umiat bridge which technically has crossed its expiry date to defend itself from the onslaught of these extra heavy trucks? God forbid if this bridge cracks and collapses then the people living downstream and also people commuting through the bridge are in grave danger and Shillong will be put out of gear and in total chaos, darkness and crisis. Interestingly both the District administration of East Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi are less concerned about this danger as it seems that this bridge is located in 'no man's land.' It's only a question of 'When' rather than 'If' this bridge can withstand the torture. The government has to immediately take

note and act on this so that the city and its citizens are protected before it is too late.

Yours etc.,
Manuel Carey Lymba
Shillong 08

Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Editor,
On the September 3, 2020 Persons with Disabilities and Special Educators had submitted a memorandum to the Government of Meghalaya through the Chief Secretary Mr MS Rao. This memorandum was signed by Persons with Disabilities, Teachers, Special Educators, Senior Citizens, Rangbah Dong and Rangbah Shnong. This memorandum was to highlight the problems that people in general face and mostly persons with disabilities with regards to mobility and accessibility. The memorandum was also to make the Government aware of the Rights to Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, which was passed by the Indian Parliament. However, we are really disappointed that even after six months the Government has done nothing to address these problems.

I have worked for over ten years for persons with disabilities and if there's one thing I have learnt is that

they are not disabled; it is their surroundings that have disabled them. Most persons with disabilities have jobs and also need to commute to work and back home, which some years back was possible but now not only is this commute challenging it is impossible and dangerous. The pavements and footpaths wherever they exist are not only in a deplorable condition but are also all occupied by vendors, hawkers, beggars and recently even serve as parking for two wheelers.

It is mind boggling as to how an NGO or NGOs have the authority to direct these vendors and hawkers and give them permission to sit and sell their wares claiming that it is their right to earn a livelihood. Yes, nobody can deny them that right but they cannot have their rights by taking away somebody else's right.

A classic example is Laitumkhrath. It has many schools and colleges within its boundaries and also a municipal market, yet the footpaths are choc-a-bloc with vendors, hawkers and beggars. Even the Police Point bus and taxi stand is occupied by these people so where does one walk or get on and off public transport? Or are we all just going to shut up and like it or lump it?

Yours etc.,
Tina Nonghuloo,
Via email

"Those persons concerned should have approached the College authorities and the contractor and expressed their reservations to them. Thereby a peaceful solution or a compromise would have been reached and no violence would have taken place."

the work place as late as 10 am. Then they spend a lot of time in smoking and taking tea and their lunch break extends to more than an hour. These days of smart phones, these labourers waste a lot of precious working time surfing their mobile phones or playing games. For this reason, a job that could be done in one month takes two to three months to complete. This implies that the contractor has to spend more money on labour and in this lose-lose situation, he would soon become bankrupt and would have to close down his business sooner or later. Which entrepreneur would dare to undertake such a suicidal enterprise?

Secondly, it is evident that non local labourers do a better job when it comes to every kind of work, masonry, tiles and marble laying and woodwork as well. There is a lot of professionalism in what they do. Local labourers tend to underperform in any work

fectionism? I strongly condemn this act of barbarism and I hope that such incidents will not take place again.

Just because of this incident, the College has to be shut down indefinitely and who then is at the losing end? Our own students are the ones who suffer. After the educational loss caused by the pandemic lockdown, they now have to suffer another loss. This misfortune could have been avoided if our people had had the right mind to take the correct step to solve the problem. Let me end with a beautiful quote by E. F. Schumacher who says: "any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex and more violent. It takes a touch of genius and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction." History has vindicated that positive changes are brought about by men and women of peace and not by barbarism.
Email: barnesmawrie@gmail.com

"Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights."
— Hillary Clinton

The Shillong Times

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Covid scene in India

LATEST government surveys peg the actual Covid cases in India at around 300 million since many, especially the young were asymptomatic. Reported Covid cases stand at 11 million which makes India the second highest in the world, with the US having the highest number of reported cases. Covid deaths in India stand at 157,248. Experts now say that the relatively low hospitalisation and fatality rates in India suggest that the coronavirus pandemic is approaching the next phase which is that it would become localized and manageable. At the moment a few states are reporting a spurt in infections but for a country of 1.35 billion people with limited health facilities and where the practice of wearing masks and social distancing is largely ignored, if the emerging trends prevail then India will indeed have a respite from the pandemic. This is crucial to the economy which had been in the doldrums due to the lockdown. If this trend holds then India can keep its economy open without any national lockdown.

Recent infections are being reported from five states, mainly Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Kerala. Overall the fatality rate in India has fallen from 0.856 percent to 0.683 percent as of March 1. The overall Covid rate for India is 1.4 per cent and 2.2 per cent for the world.

Rajib Dasgupta, epidemiologist and professor of community health, JNU said India was witnessing a phase of multiple epidemics within the country where the entire population is not equally susceptible. He believes that at this phase in the pandemic, the emphasis has to be managed locally. Hence building local capacities is imperative as these will be needed to tackle the disease. On the positive side, Dasgupta cites the example of Europe where subsequent surges are better managed due to improved public healthcare and clinical care and also better learning experiences which have brought down the death rates. He says the aim at this juncture should be to contain the virus in local clusters instead of inter-state curbs on travelers.

However, the vigilance on Covid-related protocols such as masking, hand washing, social distancing etc., cannot be ignored. This is what is problematic in India where people seem to have let their guards down especially in public spaces. Meanwhile officials of the Union Health Ministry have stated that India was nowhere close to attaining herd immunity through natural infection or vaccination. Hence states have to continue their surveillance. India has so far inoculated more than 12 million people but still has a long way to go in terms of coverage. Vigilance at this juncture is imperative. Letting our guards down now could damage whatever has been achieved so far and give another shock to the economy.

Women's rights are human rights

Dr Rekha M Shangliang

Twenty six years have passed since Hillary Rodham Clinton, the First Lady of the United States of America made usage of these famous lines as she gave her speech on September 5th 1995, at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Consequently, numerous international and regional instruments have drawn attention to gender-related dimensions of human rights issues, the most important one being the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979. That 'Women's rights are human rights' has since then been proclaimed without doubt by the UN World Conference held in Vienna in 1993.

When one looks back to history, one finds that women's rights as human rights have always been a common phrase profusely used by the feminist movement that has a long history of oppression. One of the earliest was the remarkable essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, written by the 18th century British proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, which still resonates the type of human rights issues of women today. She called for a worldwide radical reform of national educational systems which would empower women and make them useful contributors to the society at large. In her own words "If women are left out of the intellectual arena, the progress of society would stop." Today we see girls' education having a more promising future worldwide, assuming that with the newly launched 'Beti bachao, Beti padhao' campaign, gross enrolment ratio for girls is improving. However it says little about the empowerment of young girls their drop-out rates and the overall statistics are not very satisfying. What's more when one examines the New Education Policy through a gender lens despite some progressive provisions in the policy which promises an overhaul of the education system, such as the Gender Inclusion Fund towards equitable education for girls etc., there are growing concerns about one aspect of the Policy

which talks about many schools going to be privatized soon and will no longer be freely accessible to all. This may have a serious impact on girls from marginalized communities.

The latest UNESCO report says that there is an estimated 132 million girls out of school including 34.3 million of primary school age, 30 million of lower-secondary school age and 67.4 million of upper-secondary school age who have not had the privilege to continue their schooling due to a number of factors such as poverty, cultural norms and practices, poor infrastructure, violence and fragility to name a few. The picture is not as good in our own NorthEast, where against the national drop-out average of 6.35% in primary level the percentage of drop-out rate in Arunachal Pradesh is the highest in the country at 23.25% followed by Nagaland at 20.95% and Meghalaya at 17.69%.

But what does it mean to educate girls? Girls' education goes beyond getting girls into school. It is also about ensuring that girls learn and feel safe while at school; have the opportunity to complete all levels of education acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and adapt to a changing world and ability to build up healthy families, make decisions about their own lives and contribute to their communities and the world at large. Gender disparity in the sphere of education is thus a key issue of human rights which needs to be seriously addressed.

Maternal Health has also been identified as another basic human right of every woman. Following the fifth Millennium Development Goal (MDG) strategy of applying a Human Rights - based approach to the reduction of Maternal Deaths across the world, it still remains a big challenge to developing countries. Maternal Health refers to the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the post-natal period. Each stage should be a positive experience, ensuring women and their babies reach their full potential for health and

well-being. The World Health Organization has neatly summed up some of the challenges that face Maternal and Child Health (MCH) such as malnutrition, infection, anaemia, unregulated fertility low birth weight in babies etc. India still accounts for one-fifth of global maternal deaths annually (WHO-2015). A high maternal mortality rate along with persistent inequality in maternal healthcare service utilization is today one of the most serious concerns in India.

It is indeed sad that even after a decade of implementation of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) launched in 2005 which is aimed at eradicating persistent inequalities in maternal healthcare by providing good quality and affordable services to all especially to the economically weaker sections of the community, the health outcomes of both mother and child are yet to reach the targets set by international conventions. Meghalaya is one of the high-focus states amongst 18 others entitled to receive financial support to women from rural areas undergoing hospital deliveries. However, the recent Covid-Pandemic situation unveiled a number of discrepancies in utilizing such services. A news item that appeared in the August 30th 2020 issue of The Shillong Times states that at least 61 pregnant women and 877 newborns have died in Meghalaya from April to July 2020 for want of admission to hospitals and also due to lack of medical attention because of diversion of the health machinery to concentrate on Covid cases. There is therefore an urgent need to apply a human rights - based approach to reduce maternal mortality and it is the duty of health agencies and fore-runners of health departments to ensure that transparency and accountability is maintained in such a crucial issue as health.

As a particularly vulnerable group, women have become victims of various forms of violence and discrimination. There are innumerable forms of sexual violence that are reported every day in the news, not

to speak of those that remain untold. In addition to all this, new barriers have emerged with the Covid-19 pandemic. Across the world women are facing increased domestic violence, unpaid care duties, unemployment and poverty. Women make up a majority of front-line workers, but there is inadequate representation of women in national and global Covid-19 policy spaces.

Indeed, the famous speech by Hillary Clinton certainly strikes an alarm to humanity that "It is time we wake up!" In her own words, "It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned or suffocated or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls. It is violation of human rights when women and girls are sold in the slavery of prostitution. It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries seem too small. It is a violation of human rights when women are victims of rape. It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families and enjoy their reproductive rights. It is a violation of human rights when women in rural areas are denied access to sustainable livelihoods in poor economies."

Women's Rights around the world are an important indicator to understand global well-being. Impossible as it may sound, it is indeed a challenge to achieve a gender-just world, but the task is laid out for us to firmly make concerted efforts at local and national levels to bring women to parity with men. An attitudinal shift is also essential to break the ceiling where the woman can connect her home to the broader society. As the theme for this year's International Women's Day goes - Let us "Choose to Challenge" - for with challenge comes a change to break the barriers of gender discrimination.

(The writer teaches Sociology at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Email: socionehu@gmail.com)

Are the new it rules the next sedition law?

Government seeks to expand its big control on digital media

By Siddharth Ganguly

On Thursday, February 25th, the government notified new rules under the Information Technology (IT) Act dubbed the 'Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code'. These rules introduced a number of guidelines for social media and Over The Top (OTT) platforms which make such companies more accountable to the government and law enforcement authorities.

The measures include the appointment of a 'Chief Compliance Officer' by the company to ensure rules under the IT Act are being followed, the appointment of a 'Nodal Contact Person' to ensure constant coordination with law enforcement agencies as well as monthly reports detailing complaints from users and the measures taken to remove problematic content, and so on.

All of these rules expand the control of the authorities over digital media in one way or another. However, there are two points detailed in the so-called, 'salient features' of these rules which stand out from the list in their potential for misuse.

The first, aimed at social media intermediaries that deal primarily with messaging, requires them to "enable identification of the first originator of the information" to allow authorities to apprehend individuals and prosecute offences related to the "sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, or public order" and so on.

The second deals with the responsibility of these intermediaries in the "Removal of Unlawful Information". The rule states that, upon being notified by court order, a government agency, or an appointed officer, the social media platform would be required to remove any information, "prohibited under any law in relation to the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, public order, friendly relations with foreign countries," and the like.

Making a social media company responsible for identifying where a 'problematic' message originated from is particularly dangerous from the standpoint of individual privacy. The point pre-empts this criticism and goes on to mention, "Intermediary shall not be required to disclose the contents of any message." However, how a message can be judged to be damaging to the sovereignty and integrity of India without the contents of the message itself being disclosed makes the proposition appear quite dubious.

What's more, the specific phrases used in categorising content under these rules; 'sovereignty and integrity of India' and 'public order', bear an eerie resemblance to two notorious laws in the country; the Sedition law as detailed under Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Both the UAPA and the Sedition law have been increasingly employed to book dissenting voices from all over the country. In April 2020, Former JNU scholar Umar Khalid, along with several other protesters, were booked under the UAPA for their participation in the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act. In January of this year, several of the country's most prominent journalists were slapped with sedition charges for their Tweets relating to the farmer's protests, and, most recently, 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi was arrested on February 14th and charged with sedition for her participation in the farmer's protest 'toolkit' case.

These repressive laws have garnered criticism from various, disparate sources ranging from the opposition to the judiciary.

In the Delhi High Court Women Lawyers Forum's Virtual Canteen held earlier in February on the topic of, 'Our Right to Dissent', senior advocate Rebecca John singled out the UAPA for its impact on dissenting voices that seek to hold the centre accountable for its actions.

Chitranshu Sinha, lawyer and author present at the same event, said, "It's high time that (Section) 124 (of the Indian Penal Code) should be challenged yet again. We need that space to express our opinion." In his book, *The Great Repression*, Sinha goes into further detail, describing the sedition law as a "colonial relic" that should be read-only as an emergency measure.

India's use of the sedition law also garnered international criticism. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachalet on February 27th criticised India for its readiness to cast allegations of sedition on journalists and other dissenting voices.

Charges filed under the sedition law as well as the UAPA have been becoming more and more common over the past few years. As per National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) data, 2019 saw 93 cases of sedition filed. This was up from 70 in 2018, 51 in 2017 and 35 in 2016, representing a 165% increase in the three-year period.

Similarly, cases filed under the UAPA in 2019 were 1,226, increasing from 1,182 in 2018 and 901 in 2017. This upward trend is especially worrying considering the law is branded as anti-terror legislation and allows for authorities to take extraordinary action, such as detention without charge for a period of 180 days.

A 2019 amendment to the Act also allows for police custody of the accused to be extended by 30 days and gives the Centre the power to notify an accused individual as a 'terrorist' even without a trial. Such a law being enforced routinely represents a strong suppression of one of the central tenets of democracy; dissent.

What's more, the rates of conviction in cases where either sedition or the UAPA are invoked are conspicuously low. As reported by The Print, charge sheets were only filed in 17% of sedition cases in 2019 and the conviction rate stood at only 3.3%. Similarly, only 9% of UAPA cases saw charge sheets filed with a conviction rate of 29.2%.

The cases filed under these two laws do not hold up in court; they are not meant to convict anyone. Rather, they seek to discourage the voices that speak out against authority with the harassment and trauma that come with arrest, detention, and having to defend yourself in court.

Despite the widespread criticism, cases continue to be filed under these laws and usually invoke the same key phrases mentioned above to justify their use; 'public order' and 'the integrity and sovereignty of India'.

This accusation against these specific terms was most eloquently articulated by former Supreme Court Justice MadanLokur in an article for The Wire. Drawing a comparison to the repressive regime under Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977, he said, "We are gradually witnessing a somewhat similar situation, the only difference being that during the Emergency days the alleged threat was to the internal security of the country and today the alleged threat is to the sovereignty and integrity of the country." *(IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet*

TO THE EDITOR

India needs to better understand Tibet

Editor,
I refer to your report captioned, "To Understand China, First Understand Tibet", published on Monday, March 1, 2021 and attributed to Lobsang Sangay, Sikyong, CTA. The report is trenchant and educative and a timely reminder of the strategic importance of Tibet to India and Southeast Asia as a whole. That Mr Sangay was able to push through the Tibetan Policy and Support Act 2020 (TPSA 2020) is a landmark achievement and a significant milestone for Tibetans worldwide in many areas, but most importantly for the Dalai Lama succession issue and the environment.

The TPSA 2020 ensures, once and for all, that the succession of Tibetan Buddhist leaders including the succession of the Dalai Lama rests solely in the hands of Tibetan Buddhists and forbids interference from the occupying Chinese government.

Mr Sangay is also spot on when he says: "to understand China, first understand Tibet." This lack of knowledge about Tibet, is an Achilles Heel for Indian policy makers. There is very poor or non-existent understanding of Tibet among the Indian ruling class, not to speak of the chattering classes. This extends to the media at large too. All the Indian think tanks and research seem to be focused

only on Han China and the CCP, totally ignoring the largest area of what now constitutes the map of China-occupied Tibet. This is a dangerous loophole that stands out starkly against the multiple and serious clashes that the Indian and Chinese armies have had on the highly volatile India-Tibet borders recently. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to rectify this as soon as possible.

The Indian disinterest in Tibet as a nation distinct from Han China is a far cry from those early days of the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the 1940s and even earlier. The British who ruled India then seemed to understand far better than now the importance of building a "Tibet Wing" or a fifth column if you will.

They knew India needed a strong cohort of officers with a deep understanding of Tibet, its culture, language and people, to counter the Chinese threat of territorial expansion AND CULTURAL GENOCIDE." To achieve this, they made the effort of recruiting Tibet experts in the frontier administrative service and intelligence services - officers like my father and uncle.

They were both Tibet experts who began their careers very young fresh out of college and junior college as official Tibetan Interpreters as they were fluent in Tibetan and English and proficient in Hindi, Nepali and Bengali. But it was the Tibetan aspect that was most important. Based on this expertise, among other

things, they rose up the career ladder. Another uncle, a Mandarin and Tibetan expert who was in the Indo-Tibet Border Police (ITBP), joined RAW.

These are just some examples of the great importance the British placed on "Domain Knowledge", something that seems to have disappeared over the decades with officers with scant knowledge of or interest in Tibet and its culture and people, or even the border areas, being parachuted to these highly sensitive and strategic areas to administer them. Many see them merely as "hardship postings" that look good on their CVs.

Today, with the exception of the Ladakh Scouts and Ladakhi ITBP officers, almost none of the others know a word of Tibetan. In contrast, China's CCP has many experts on Tibet and even on India's border areas. After all, the CCP are the world's experts in infiltration and stealth warfare.

I hope your report on Mr Sangay's advice will be headed by India's leaders. To ignore it is to imperil the nation.

Yours etc.,
Shobha Tsering Bhalla
Singapore,
Via email

Congress Party should have its new President

Editor,
Recently there was a news in The Shillong Times

that the Congress Party wants a new President in Meghalaya. There was also an offer to Mr. Charles Pyngrope to head the Congress Party in Meghalaya. The party functionaries and workers were of the view that Charles Pyngrope would be the best choice to be the President of the Party in place of out-going President Celestine Lyngdoh. Charles Pyngrope has the qualities as a man of action and in words, who has helped all irrespective of party affiliations especially the poor not only in his Nongthymmai Constituency but in the whole State of Meghalaya.

Insofar as the Indian National Congress (INC) in India is concerned, I wonder why the Party has not thought of leaders with sterling qualities such as A.K. Anthony, Anand Sharma, Sachin Pilot, Kapil Sibal, Shashi Tharoor, etc. to head the Party. As we all know, Sonia Gandhi, the present President is not capable of leading the Party now. So too Rahul Gandhi because the people at large don't accept him as a leader. Moreover, majority of Indians, especially the thinkers are averse to dynastic rule. Others with greater merit should be given a chance to take up the post of President. The Congress High Command and the Congress Working Committee should think over this suggestion and focus on the right man to lead the Party. If the INC gets the right person as President the states too will

choose a person with qualities. Only then will the Congress come back to power. As a Party, the Congress has always promoted secularism, free speech and all round development, especially of the tribal people.

As a Party the Congress is not bad but it is the workers and representatives who made it bad due to their corruption and non-delivery for many years. Hence the people discarded the party due to their wrongdoings. Meghalaya Assembly will be electing its MLAs within a period of two and half years from now. Therefore it is time for the Congress Party to unanimously agree on the person to lead the Party. Charles Pyngrope is the right person and has all the qualities to be the Congress President of Meghalaya. He was the ex-Speaker of Meghalaya Assembly and the people know him very well. If the Party elects him unanimously it will once again return to power in Meghalaya. Will the Congress Party take this suggestion and wake up?

Yours etc.
Isaias R. Dkhar
Shillong-6

KHADC a fisherman's pond

Editor,
The KHADC is supposed to take up a number of critical subjects listed in its mandate. These are supposed to serve the larger interests of the local com-

munities that voted the MDCs. The role of the Councils is to frame and enact laws related to culture and tradition and the conservation of natural resources and also to implement them. Unfortunately, with the passage of time the KHADC has become toothless because of the leadership vacuum. Now the issue of fishes becoming smaller and 'thinner' in the KHADC run fish ponds as reported in the news in spite of spending close to Rs 18 lakhs and receiving a meagre income of Rs 9500 shows complete failure of the scheme. Even after further expansion of the programme and enhancing the financing to tune of Rs 25 lakh and putting in about 80 kilos of fingerlings, we still don't see any outcomes.

Either those manning the fish ponds have sold the good fish or the public representatives have themselves eaten up all the fattened ones and left the shriveled ones to swim in the ponds. The KHADC has no technical expertise in pisci-culture except for an MDC who is a fish merchant himself. So when there is conflict of interests the results will accrue to the individual; not to the community.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

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"Greed is the inventor of injustice as well as the current enforcer."
— Julian Casablancas

The Shillong Times

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Jobs, parochialism

PAROCHIALISM is the anti-thesis of nationalism. The state government in Haryana run jointly by the BJP and the Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) has won the governor's nod to implement a law that will reserve 75 per cent jobs in the private sector to local candidates. Jobs up to a salary of Rs 50,000 come within the ambit of the law. This looks strange.

It is well-understood that jobs are fewer than the demand and every state has large armies of educated unemployed youth. Private enterprise is not every youth's cup of tea and it requires patience and perseverance to get things going. The past practice was to reserve jobs in the government sector based on considerations like caste. It was done with a view to giving a share of the governmental goodies to marginalized sections.

Reservations as a rule are frowned upon as merit is not the sole criteria therein. Yet, even in both government and private sector, merit is not necessarily the only criteria to give jobs. Influence matters. An ideal scenario of all appointments being done on merit is a mirage. Still, private institutions cannot ignore merit as they are in hard competition with other entities in the field and good performance by every member of the workforce is a pre-requisite to the success of a firm.

The BJP ally in government, the JJP, had promised 75 per cent reservation for local youths, district-wise. After the last polls threw up an unclear verdict and the BJP did not get the majority, it tied up with the JJP in government and made this a part of the common minimum programme. The BJP still claims to promote nationalism.

It is no secret that the massive growth of the private sector in Haryana came about in the past three decades due to its proximity with the national capital. A major part of Haryana is informally a part of New Delhi metropolis. Haryana and Punjab have their capital in Chandigarh, a Union Territory. Job opportunities are one too many for youths from Haryana in the state, the UT as well as the national capital too.

All these strengthen the view that Haryana should not be seen as being parochial. More so a government led by the BJP. The Manohar Lal Khattar government in the state is in its second term. It failed to win people's confidence in the last polls, which brought the JJP too upfront. Parochialism cannot be a substitute to good governance. It's only an excuse for leadership failures on other fronts.

Giving a rapist the chance to make a clean breast of it

Supreme Court offer is a case of gross injustice

By Sushil Kutty

Question: What to make of the Supreme Court when it asked a rapist 'are you ready to marry the girl you raped, then possibly you can walk free with the trophy bride?' Of course, the top court did not ask in so many words, but that's about the gist of the astonishing offer. And, mind you, the criminal on escape row, if he couldn't believe his ears, replied rather regretfully, 'Yes, your lordships, I would marry her except that I am now regretfully a married man!'

Hell, talk about an offer going waste! The Mr. Justices who sat on that bench couldn't have made a more scintillating demand of a confirmed rapist. And, to think that so many other rapists who went before this one did not get the get-away offered on a platter to this blasted f*#@k#r from Hell. Really, what were the justices thinking of?

None of them even thought of the girl, the unfortunate victim of the rapping lust of a man in heat, the hound of raperville! And this was no run of the mill wayward criminal. This fellow had rape in his mind before he even got down to stalking the minor he had set his eyes and much more on. He was raping, sexually assaulting her, with every glance he had of her.

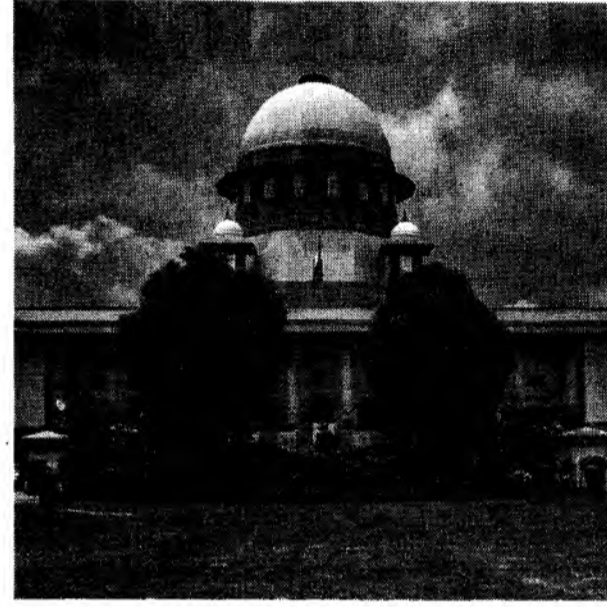
And then he had his hands on her. The list of accusations against him is a mile long. This chap's perversity knew no bounds. And it didn't bother him that she was minor, a schoolgirl. He just went about it, just another day in office. The trial court understood the gravity and perversity of the horrible crime; ditto the high court.

But not the Supreme Court! King Solomon would have hung his head in shame, and court jesters in a thousand and one medieval courts of kings and sultans would have jested and gestured lewdly. It's not very often that such low-hanging blunders of justice are handed out by seemingly sane, just and intelligent judges of men and matters.

So, what's the fallout gonna be? Simple. Rapists will go about their business

in gay abandon now that the Supreme Court has gone and shone the light on the escape route. Tie the knot with the godforsaken and the Supreme Court-forsaken victim, at least offer to tie. And then if the case comes up in court, the judicial officers know what to say and do.

The precedent has been set. Wonder if the justices were having some fun or was it really a serious offer



made to the "perp", as the Americans would categorise it. The perpetrator in this case was twice-favoured. Not only was he given the chance to slip away with the crime under his belt, the top court also told the establishment he cannot be arrested till so and so date!

Hell, what was so special about this guy that he merited such generosity, something that's so sorely lacking in him, the generosity, that is. By all means this gopher is probably the meanest person in the realm. The gall of him. He rapes a minor and then goes and marries another of marriageable age! If this pervert doesn't get his just deserts, it's probably because he already got it when he consummated the marriage!

More than him, it's the 'Your Lordships' who should be held to scrutiny. More important, what's coming to our justice system? Why are we being subjected to weird judgements,

that make no sense and those which go against the grain of justice? Earlier, not too long ago, there was the ruling that said if there's no skin contact, it is not rape or sexual molestation by a long shot!

And, now, this one! Women folk are busting blouse buttons; they are so pissed off at the gross injustice of it all. Women from all walks of life, from actors to politicians and students -

2014. Bull! But that's how the wind's blowing. The farmers, for instance. The rustic belief is the courts are in an unholy alliance with the Modi Government.

And then there are the climate activists like Disha Ravi and the anti-CAA crowd, the Safoora Zargars, who all believe the court-system is loaded against them. Actually, to an extent, they are even right to look down on the judiciary. True, even today, the judiciary is the one pillar that holds the edifice and the superstructure up and intact, but some of the rulings of the courts are so confounding that it breaks the public mojo!

So, over 3,500 concerned citizens, representatives of women's movements and feminists have in an open letter to Chief Justice of India S.A. Bobde demanded that he step down and issue an apology for giving a rapist a way out, asking him if he was willing to marry her! The rapist had stalked, tied up, gagged and repeatedly raped the minor school-going girl, threatened to douse her in petrol and set her on fire. The minor school-going victim attempted suicide.

"From the towering heights of the post of CJI of the Supreme Court, it sends the message to other courts, judges, police and all other law enforcing agencies that justice is not a constitutional right of women in India. This will only lead to the further silencing of girls and women. To the rapists, it sends the message that marriage is a licence to rape; and that by obtaining such a licence, the rapist can post facto decriminalise or legalise his act," read the letter.

So, there it is, the tit for tat. The CJI is getting the same getaway offer that he generously gave to the rapist, a face-saving formula. The CJI is being told that given the chance to make amends, will he submit his papers and quit the post, resign? It mimics the offer made to the rapist, and if that offer was just and fair, according to natural justice, this one too should be. Cannot be otherwise. (IPA Service)

Children's future COVID-19 impact

By Dr S Saraswathi

Child Rights Manifesto has suddenly appeared when elections for Legislative Assembly in four States and one Union Territory are due to take place in April. Prepared and released by a group of civil society organisations working in the field of child welfare and addressed to parties contesting Tamil Nadu Assembly election, its demands and the contents are relevant for children across the country. It mentions a number of persisting problems known and repeated on several occasions like female infanticide, declining sex ratio, malnutrition, school drop-out, child marriage, child labour, and so on.

But, the manifesto has not dealt with the universal problems of children living under epidemic threat-control measures that are in force. Universal because they are faced and debated in many countries. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic and of the various mandatory measures imposed for fighting it will doubtless affect the future of children unless remedial measures are simultaneously taken.

When the entire world has had been gripped by a panic mood caused by the pandemic, nobody can be blamed for over-application or under-estimation of the effects of the instruments used to stem the tide of the disease. The effects are becoming visible forcing us to think of ways of mitigating social-economic-psychological consequences of the global war against COVID-19.

Both short-term and long-term consequences will be felt by children and adolescents that may make life different for the next generation. Remember – the pandemic war is being fought in the field of normal daily life from which no individual, not even a newborn infant, can escape.

According to the Children's Rights Division of the Human Rights Watch, around 1.5 billion students are affected by school closure, child labour, hunger, recruitment to army, child abuse, child marriage, etc., which are all increasing under direct and indirect impact. In places already in need of special child-centred policies, these maladies have escalated. School closure is the main reason for spread of social problems.

Of course, COVID-19 has no power to physically destroy schools and colleges like natural disasters such as earthquake and flood or emergencies like war and armed conflicts. But, it can and has been effectively spoiling school education and all educational activities. It has posed a big challenge to teachers and students engaged in the task of learning and to educational managers to conduct institutions without physical presence of givers and takers of education.

School closure means that most children lose social contacts necessary for learning. Digital learning is a challenge for both children and parents. Digital teaching is a challenge for teachers and becomes a major stress factor for all. Lockdown restrictions effectively cut the space for children of all social-economic groups. There is a growing concern in many States in India about children in deprived groups who suffer more and most likely to lose interest in schooling. It will be difficult to re-awaken their interest in school education.

For a country with a huge population of first generation students in schools, for educational administration trying different means to reach 100% enrolment of school-age population, for the governments under pressure to offer several incentives to arrest drop-out, COVID-19 is the

worst enemy confronted so far in their mission. The disease is literally killing education – particularly school education. The lower the grade, the greater is the adverse impact. Cases of kids forgetting whatever they have learnt and beginning once again with alphabets and numerals are common.

In short, education today is confronted with a new danger of "exclusion" resulting from COVID-19 restrictions. It implies growth of new inequalities. These are aggravated by poverty and lack of opportunities. The pandemic fight has exposed the intensity of structural imbalances between rural and urban areas, male and female, and rich and poor in the digital world.

To be specific, on-line education unleashed today does not reach all students in equal measure. Many States and many governments do not have the resources and infrastructure needed to provide on-line education to all students. Digital divide has to be bridged at the earliest before irreparable damage is done. All governments have to frame policies and programmes for a realistic on-line education.

The report of the NSSO (2017-18), reveals that only 8% of households with children in the age-group 5-24 years have both computer and internet facilities. Households with access to computer vary between 4.6% in Bihar to 23.5% in Kerala and 35% in Delhi. In Delhi, Haryana, HP, Kerala, Punjab, and Uttarakhand, more than 40% households have access to internet. As a contrast, less than 20% households have this facility in Odisha, AP, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, MP, and West Bengal.

In Madhya Pradesh, hardly 30% had access to on-line education when it was introduced. In tribal belts, reaching the students in many blocks was extremely difficult. No wonder, on-line education encourages drop-out in such areas. In many States like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, schools and colleges were totally unprepared to provide on-line education and had to start making special preparations and will naturally lag behind in inter-State comparison.

There is also the risk of exposure to inappropriate on-line content and on-line predators. Needless to mention the plight of children of migrant workers, street children, children in refugee camps, and displaced children whose access to adequate standard of living is already poor.

Cancelling examinations and granting promotions without testing are necessary to keep students and teachers within the educational system, but not for promoting genuine education. Governments have to understand this without being swayed by emotional considerations and desire to remain popular.

The UN Commission on Human Rights Commission has noted that the pandemic can have grave physical, emotional, and psychological effects on children, especially in countries which have enforced mandatory stay-at-home and limited travel permits, and for children in situations of vulnerability. Across the world, children are affected by physical distancing, quarantines, isolation, mask-wearing and other prescriptions and undergo severe anxiety, boredom, and uncertainty.

Several immediate social-economic impact on children directly and child protection risks that are emerging daily due to measures taken to prevent and contain the virus have been experienced. ---INFA (Director, ICSSR, New Delhi)

TO THE EDITOR

Question of conflict of interest

Editor,
On the March 1, 2021 a workshop was organised by the Government of Meghalaya at the Convention Centre Shillong. The theme of the workshop was Urban Mobility for Shillong city. Taking into consideration the increasing difficulty in commuting in our city; the traffic snarls that seem to multiply with each passing day and the road accidents that seem to occur with such frequency, the subject under discussion was of immense interest to everyone concerned. No wonder reports indicate that the workshop was well attended by people who really matter in Shillong society. It was also to be noted that presentations on proposals for improving Shillong mobility was made by Dalberg, a reputed consultancy firm and obviously the firm must have been paid by the Departments that contracted its services. The workshop was inaugurated by the Dy CM, Prestone Tynsong.

Rao is a senior adviser of Dalberg, North East chapter, Shillong. Dalberg consultancy was engaged for the job by two departments of the state Government, namely by the Meghalaya Infrastructure Development & Finance Corporation Ltd (MIDFC) and Meghalaya Integrated Transport Project (MITP). An IAS officer, Vijay Kumar, is both the CEO of MIDFC and Project Director for MITP. Of interest to note is Vijay Kumar is the husband of Ms Priti Rao the senior adviser to Dalberg. It will be too much of a coincidence to expect that the husband did not know that his wife's consultancy firm had been contracted by departments under him for this multi-crore World Bank Project.

But this exactly is what the public of Shillong was expected to believe. This public is mainly composed of gullible tribals who would never connect the dots and grasp the blatant conflict of interest that the Workshop exposed. The gullible Dy CM was one such tribal who became the sacrificial goat and bovine like he innocently gave his blessings to this scam-infested workshop. The invited participants enthusiastically participated in the workshop programme little realising that their participation was totally averse to the ethics and code of conduct sworn by All India Service officers on their induction to the services. Needless to mention the askance with which the World Bank will view

this whole episode and one should not be surprised if it will result in withdrawal of the sanctioned fund as it is against World Bank code of ethics. A serious conflict of interest happened and a scam has occurred. In conclusion it would be advisable for all sane and upright persons to disassociate themselves from this rip-off of World Bank funds.

Yours etc.,
Banteinam Nongrum,
Via email

Income tax reimbursement

Editor,
I was shocked beyond belief to read the news item appearing in Shillong Times dated February 27, 2021 regarding the decision of the Meghalaya Cabinet to reimburse 95 per cent income tax paid by non-tribal officials of All India Services (AIS) working in the state and 25 per cent of tribal officials working outside the state. This is sheer madness and such decision can only be taken by persons who have lost all sense of sanity. While demands are mounting from various quarters of the State Government to clear their outstanding dues and one demonstration after another is the order of the day and Ministers and officials rush to Delhi with begging bowl at the drop of a hat, yet the cabinet finds it fit and amongst its priorities to appease a select group for god

knows what reasons. And to top it all, the spokesperson says, "We are the first state to do it." He calls it an incentive! I ask, isn't salary incentive enough.

The AIS officers are amongst the highest paid officials of the country enjoying the best salary and perks and on top of that, State Government is providing some of the best facilities to these officers, forget the free housing plots in New Shillong. With the salary and perks they are getting, these officers should be putting in 12 hours a day instead of the 7-8 hours put in now and that too for 6 days of the week. No other incentives are called for. In fact if the AIS officers in Meghalaya had been so hard working and efficient, Meghalaya wouldn't be one of the least performing States which is reflected in every report of Government of India. In such a scenario the decision of Meghalaya Government to reimburse their income tax is nothing short of ludicrous. In fact, in this time of worldwide calamity and economic distress, the AIS officials should have by themselves come forward to contribute to the corpus of the nation to meet the exigency. Instead they have maneuvered the gullible members of the Meghalaya Cabinet to reward them more. While payment of income tax is a mandatory requirement of every earning Indian and all Indians are proud to pay tax for the development of the nation, it

seems the All AIS officers of Meghalaya do not belong to that category of Indians.

Alternatively, why should Government of Meghalaya not reimburse the income tax paid by all other category of employees working in the State Government? All in all it seems that this decision of Meghalaya Cabinet is a crude joke on the citizens of this poor State.

Yours etc.,
B Dutta,
Shillong-1

Controversy on MCS examination

Editor,
The controversy surrounding the MCS examination has raised serious questions about the functioning of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission. The aggrieved candidates have valid reasons to feel hard done by how the preliminary examination was conducted. I applied for the MCS but I chose not to appear for the examination since I felt at that time that my preparation for the general studies paper was not up to the mark. Had I known that the marks of paper 2 would be counted, I would have sat the examination since I had cleared the prelims of the Civil Service Examination in 2011 when both the marks of paper 1 and paper 2 were counted. My prior experiences would have put me in

good stead and there was a good chance of me clearing the examination.

The Hon'ble High Court has given a decision in favour of the Commission. What if I decided to go to Court as an aggrieved candidate who chose not to appear for the examination since in the notification it was clearly mentioned that only the marks of paper 1 would be counted and what if the High Court gave a ruling in my favour? There are more reasons for me to feel aggrieved since when the last notification for the examination came out I was still in college and I could not apply. Whatever the reasons might be that prompted the Commission to violate the examination rules it set in the notification, it does raise serious doubts about the transparency of the Commission especially when it comes to the Meghalaya Civil Service Examination. The examination has always been shrouded in controversy. It's high time that the State Government fixes everything that is wrong with the Commission. It also needs to redress the lacunae that is hindering the smooth functioning of the Commission. Our state will turn 50 next year and transforming the Commission will show the youth that our leaders are serious about taking the State forward.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

“Women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition.”
— Timothy Leary

The Shillong Times

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Saga of cities

INDIAN cities are what cities should not be. There have been fewer initiatives at the governmental level ever since Independence to have planned urban growth. Having a ministry for housing and urban development itself meant little. Cities were mostly left to themselves in matters of housing and private entities played havoc with development. Unplanned growth created chaotic conditions. The phenomenal growth of vehicle population further messed up city life. In this context, a ranking list released by the Union Housing and Urban Development Ministry this week looks odd and laughable.

Bengaluru tops in the ease-of-living among the 49 cities with a million-plus population. Anyone who lives in or has visited Bengaluru would vouch for the fact that when it comes to transportation, it is a living hell. Most of its residential areas are unhygienic and see unplanned growth. It is often that reaching a 5-km distance would take more than two hours. The city was slow in bringing in the Metro Rail network. A mega city like Mumbai was still slower. Both cities struggled due to lack of political will to change things for the better. Even New Delhi, one of the few planned cities, could not make movement from place to place easy by road though the Delhi Metro largely helped. Kolkata and Chennai have tackled traffic problems in their own ways, and yet the scenarios are not satisfactory.

The reason for the chaotic state of Indian cities is that governments failed to set things right. Governments would step in only after situations turn worse and beyond repair. The negligence and prevarication of the political leadership are legion. Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his innings seven years ago being mindful of the sad state of urban India. He started the Smart City project for urban renewal and retrofitting with a fund component of Rs 1,000 crore each for 100 select cities. The combined completion of these projects is of the order of just 1.1 per cent. No significant change has come about even to these cities, also as the allocated funds meant too little. It was just a drop in an ocean, also considering the leaks via political and bureaucratic corruption. The ranking has put Shimla and Bhubaneswar on top of the less-than-million population cities in terms of ease of living. Shimla was the winter capital for the British Raj and it maintains its aura and dignity. Central Bhubaneswar is a planned city but lacks life and urge for growth. No big Indian city today can be said to be worth living; such is the chaos around.

Women: Get your voices out!

By Patricia Mukhim

International Women's Day is approaching and as usual pious eulogies will fall from the skies about the role that women can and should play or have played and what is being done to promote their causes. We have heard this and more bunkum for the past several years in our State; in the country and the world. But while great strides have been made globally to create spaces for empowering women, in India we see a patriarchal, muscular state trying to put women in their place by levelling charges of sedition et al merely because they support a cause they believe in. Disha Ravi and others like her are paying the price for speaking out or tweeting on issues they feel strongly about. And this is what's expected from young, educated, articulate women who own an issue and fight for it with all the resources at their command. An empowered woman does not have to be told what to do. She knows there are several issues afflicting not just women but society as a whole. She takes ownership of the issue and gets out to become visible and to create solidarity around the cause. She does not cover before 'insolent might.' But it takes a very long time for women to reach that inflexion point. And having reached there they cannot go back no matter how agonising and painful the journey ahead is.

Let's come closer home to Meghalaya. The other day I was at a place called Mustoh very close to Shella. A group of women who do some of the most exquisite embroidery work that's indigenous to the place, came together to ostensibly share their thoughts. The women were all quite frail looking and had an unhealthy pallor. I enquired if they suffered from any endemic ailments such as malaria. They said they suffered more from dysentery and diarrhoea. I asked if they boiled their water. They said they did. A couple of male friends were present with me that day and I realised that our women are not used to baring their thoughts especially about their health concerns before men. When it came to speaking

about the embroidery though, they were more interactive. But that does not solve our problems.

Later that day I was at another meeting where some village elders of Shella were present. I asked them why every meeting had only men speaking and attending. "Where are the women?" I asked them. Their response was classic. They said women were all tending to their homes or looking after their shops in the market. I asked if they didn't have a

touted matrilineal society, as one who lives it, I can say with certainty that the age old adage that women who speak up and engage with the world around them are equivalent to hens that crow and hence a bad omen, still holds true. The quintessential Khasi matriarch must fit a certain mould in order to be respected. She has to be a domesticated woman without strong opinions or better still no opinion on any issue and if she does have an opinion then it must only be aired within the four walls or among friends. Thankfully, social media has opened up vistas for women that they never had in the past. Now we see young and not so young women airing their views on a range of issues. That's called empowerment. But they are still so few. The large majority of Khasi women are silenced by poverty and poor self esteem. The only time they will find voice is when they speak to each other in a non-threatening space. True there are NGOs that have trained women leaders to speak up with poise and calm but we still have a long way to go.



women's organisation to speak out on the concerns of women before a listening group. The elders said, "We 'allow' our women also to take part in meetings but what can we do if they don't come?" And that is precisely the problem with the matrilineal society in Meghalaya! Women are good for the home but not for the public space. Women cannot be trusted to speak sense at the best of times because they have never been allowed to speak in public forums. Speaking is not easy. But it is also the first step towards empowerment; towards claiming one's rights and creating a space for oneself in the high tables reserved for men; as if men have natural leadership attributes and own all the wisdom in the world. Just imagine how enlightened governance would be if the voices of women were integrated into policy making.

The present MDA cabinet is poorer because there

speaks poorly of the Government. Most of those teachers happen to be women. I wonder how they keep body and soul together considering that Meghalaya is infamous for its indecently high numbers of women-headed households - perhaps the highest in the country.

Meghalaya is also very poor in terms of data availability. One does not get quick data especially on maternal and infant mortality or of women's health indicators and must rely on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data. If this is the attention paid to women's health and her vulnerabilities such as cancers of the breast, endometrial (uterus), cervix, ovaries etc., which are women-specific then women's empowerment is a word we have not even imbibed, much less integrated and mainstreamed into our policy-making.

And yes, coming to Meghalaya and its much

lived by a publisher in relation to the code of ethics, could put his complaint on grievance mechanism established by the publisher. Thus the digital platform cannot itself be used for the purpose.

In fact digital platform has been kept open for all to take up any issue. The new rules mechanism make it clear that any proceeding can be initiated only after submitting it to the digital platform's grievance officer. If it does not satisfy the complainant, it can be taken further to a "self-regulating" body of publishers. The next stage

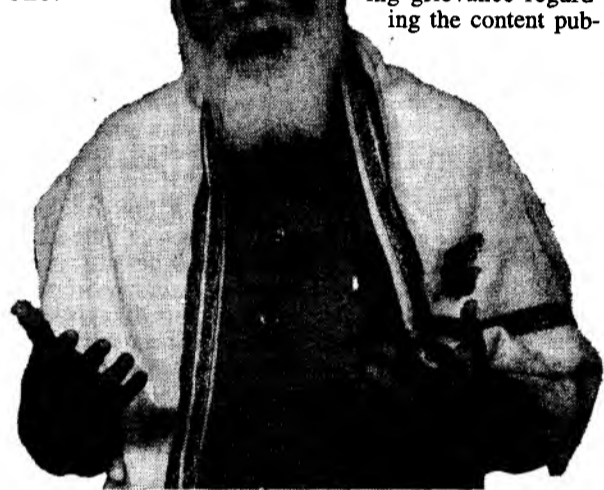
Digital media guidelines pose a clear threat to freedom of expression

Modi government is spreading its control to stifle any voice of dissent

By Krishna Jha

When the cup of poison was offered to Socrates, he was given the options too and those were either death or exile. His reply was critics should be always kept alive with their freedom to speak, because it is for them that the system keeps evolving. Without that freedom, he had only one option, and that was not to live, he said and took the cup.

The preamble of our Constitution promises us a country that is democratic, with a secular character and socialist aims. We have the right to elect the regime that will shape the country, but there are always possibilities of our losing the right to shape its character. We do take part in nation-building, but the goals are varied for each one.



And hence definition for each one too varies. It is also a fact that whenever democracy is in crisis, intolerance against any criticism grows stronger. One such example is The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, brought in recently with three tier rule structure and a government committee to lead it. These rules would be applicable to digital news publishers and video streaming services in regulating them. In essence, it will encroach within the lim-

ics to adhere to a cumbersome three-tier structure of regulation, with a government committee at its apex.

There is another serious concern that the purview of the IT Act, 2000, that has been expanded to bring digital news media under its regulatory ambit, has done so for which legislation is yet to come.

The three tier regulatory mechanism also has its own pitfalls. It is supposed to take up the complaints that are against digital platforms, with the help of code of ethics. It is in reality stretched over to norms of journalistic conduct, the programme code of the cable TV networks (regulation) Act.

So far as code of ethics is concerned if this regulatory mechanism is brought against any one, it could be vicious. According to rules, "Any person having grievance regarding the content pub-

TO THE EDITOR

Election drama unfolding: we are no fools

Editor, All governments irrespective of their parties always repair roads before elections. They've been repairing roads at every election that by now the thickness of the road should have been as high as a hill-lock. But the truth is the first rain is always made of steel and it leaves potholes and damages the roads so much that within a month of monsoons, vehicles have to move like tortoises over potholes and stony ways. If a heavy shower comes then one have to search if there was once a pucca road. What sort of materials are used by contractors to repair roads? Why can't ministers inspect the roads when they are being repaired and punish people responsible for making roads as thin as POTATO chips? It's 2021 and we've been voting for decades to go back to the stone age? We aren't moving forward. Has anyone noticed how we're growing old and nothing has changed?

Except for the highways, all roads leading to major towns and villages in Garo Hills are in a dilapidated condition. So far no holistic developmental work has taken place during these 3/4 decades. Tura for me looks like the dumbest city with no good roads, no pavements, no flyovers no street

lights, no drainage system, no traffic lights, and no proper waste management system. There has been no upgradation of the health care system and only one Government hospital is catering to thousands of patients. Basic amenities like water and electricity are now a problem of every household. We have to arrange these for ourselves.

Now what is the use of having leaders who don't care for the people?? Let them repair any road before elections; we are really not amused.

Yours etc.,
LA Sangma,
Via email

Load-shedding shock

Editor, It's the 21st century. I believe darkness should not overwhelm us. The government must put earnest efforts to address this power crisis in the state. Nothing could more disgraceful than the fact that we have been experiencing load-shedding every year in Meghalaya. I think we ourselves are to blame for this. We have not at all learned from the hardships and the deep "economic slowdown" resulting from power poverty for over a decade. It only goes to expose our poverty of responsibility. We totally lack far-sightedness and therefore darkness always stares us right in our face. Unlike others, the entire student community is suffering.

However, it is good that the government is now taking both criticism and suggestions on board. Of course, it's a worthwhile decision on the part of the power minister, James Sangma to approach the center, ("After load-shedding shock, James to call on Delhi" ST, dated Feb 3, 2021)/I hope, the Centre will take the matter seriously. In view of the non-productive bulky MeECL, the government of Meghalaya, with the help of Delhi, must now come up with an ambitious plan and policy to restructure the power sector in the state. The digital age that we are blessed with cannot run on candles and lanterns. Even phone calls are not going through during the long spell of load-shedding. Hope this fact is enough to give a "shock" to our authorities concerned.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gawali,
Shillong

Public taken for a royal ride

Editor, The Shillong Times of March 3, 2021 carried the story relating to the demand of the HYC for keeping the Smart Meter scheme under the Meghalaya Power Distribution Sector Improvement Project in abeyance. At first glance one thought it was simply just another stunt of this pressure group but on reading the news report it turned out that the

HYC this instance has really hit pay dirt and has unearthed a diabolic plot of the MDA Govt to further plunder the public. The story is all about the power department's /MeECL decision to install 2,07,015 smart meters in and around Shillong city through the ADB loan of Rs. 232 crores. Through an apical tender the cost would come to an approximate Rs 10,000 per meter. What is shocking is that in the rest of India the cost for similar meters is only Rs. 3000 each, meaning that the consumers in Meghalaya are expected to pay an extra Rs 7000/- per meter as compared to what other citizens of this country are paying. This means an additional unexplained payment of Rs 144 crores from the consumers' pockets. No explanation as to why this extra cost for Meghalaya and we are therefore left to draw our own conclusions.

Let us not forget that ADB has already sanctioned a loan of more than Rs 232 crores for the project. The cost for implementing the project will be met from this loan, meaning that we the people will again be taxed towards repayment of this loan to ADB. Now there is no indication whatsoever that the extra Rs 144 crores is aimed at loan repayment. So where will this 144 crores go? At Rs 3000 per meter the supplier would already have taken into account his profit margin. So the extra Rs 7000 per meter is simply to facilitate a kickback to bosses of the Power department in the state. There is no other ex-

planation. It is learnt that the NPP is setting up candidates for the West Bengal Assembly polls. This will require massive funding. It is obvious now that this funding is designed to come out of our pockets but without our consent and permission. We will be robbed to facilitate infantile NPP's political ambitions in West Bengal.

We are sick and tired of the scams that this MDA Government is generating with each passing day. The illegal coal mining and transport scam is ongoing. There are rumours of a Covid 19 scam yet to be uncovered. Now this multi-crore power scam uncovered thanks to the HYC. Everything this Government touches stinks of corruption and underhand deals and the stench emanates from the very top. Top NPP honchos try to brazen it out and to listen to the NPP President trying to defend his party is like listening to the childish prattling of a juvenile delinquent. The HYC needs public support on this particular issue of smart meters. The public must rise up to put a halt to this daylight looting that through the Power sector. This is corruption of the highest order! We need to raise hell! We need to raise public consciousness! We need to go to court! We need a CBI inquiry into this sordid mess! We need to stop this scam in its tracks!

Yours etc.,
DS Khongjee,
Via email

Solve the traffic mess!

Editor, Shillong as we all know is bursting at the seams and the number of vehicles has exploded. In fact vehicles are increasing at almost the same pace as our population while the roads have remained the same. This is causing traffic congestion comparable to that of Mumbai or Kolkata. Cars stuck for hours together, is now normal. A journey of 15 minutes now takes an hour to traverse. The annoying traffic congestion is affecting people from all walks of life. Students reach their classes late while daily wage earners bear the brunt. Though there is a proposal of a 4-lane road towards Upper Shillong, it seems like the project will take another decade or so. Now this is something the common man should not put up with.

The Government needs to tackle this matter at the earliest and in the best way possible. The proposed cable car seems like another joke from the Government and will probably take 5 years or more to be completed. We the public need an assurance that the traffic problem will be solved at the earliest. This is the only way that people will trust the current Government.

Yours etc.,
Reakor Shisha Kharkrang
Shillong-9

With a government authority breathing down our backs, freedom would be only cosmetic, without spontaneity. It is also a fact that whenever democracy is in crisis, intolerance against any criticism grows stronger.

its of privacy, it will destroy the multiplicity that we have been proud of and then it is one of those last things that could happen to our freedom of expression. With a government authority breathing down our backs, freedom would be only cosmetic, without spontaneity. As the country today stands at the threshold of scientific technological revolution, the digital media has acquired a character of its own, with its fast delivery, of both news and views, with options of free speech and uninterrupted exchange of ideas. Reining them in is never done in our country. Faith in the maturity of media in maintaining objectivity and thereby self regulating in catering of information, and also giving space to them for any alternative stand has been in our tradition since independence. The new rules are presented as "soft touch oversight mechanism" and its character is 'progressive' and 'liberal', wrote the government press. It also claimed the rules seek to "address people's varied concerns while removing any misapprehension about "curbing creativity and freedom of speech and expression". In contrast to these tall claims, these rules force the digital news publishers and video streaming serv-

could be the highest level, the government's Oversight Mechanism, according to which an inter-departmental committee will be set up to address the grievance. Thus the responsibility in the beginning itself is on the digital publishers which opens up to interventions from many sides, facilitating the misuse too.

Social media is also not spared by the new rules that increases the compliance burden here too. Then the major ones among them will have to appoint chief compliance officers, to ensure the rules and the laws are adhered to, and a nodal officer, with whom the law enforcement agencies will be coordinating, apart from a grievance officer. Such platforms in the messaging space will have to "enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource" based on a judicial order. The messaging apps like such as WhatsApp and Signal are to find out those sources of the problematic messages like fake news. Such laws are already there, what is required is judicious use of them, and taking measures to stop misuse of them. Freedom of expression has been brought to the docks and there is no denial that casualties may lead to weakening of democracy. (IPA Service)

"The reality is regulation often lags behind innovation."

— Bill Maris

The Shillong Times

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ADCs a funding predicament

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma has expressed an anxiety that has plagued the state government and the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) themselves for decades. His public disclosure that the monthly income of the Garo Hills District Council (GHDC) is less than Rs 2 crore while its expenditure – mostly salaries - runs to Rs 10-12 crore monthly is troubling. Sangma is of the view that the Councils should be funded along the same lines as the Panchayati Raj Institutions vide Article 280 of Constitution whereby funds are distributed by the Finance Commission. The Finance Commission as we are aware is constituted by the President under article 280 of the Constitution, mainly to give its recommendations on distribution of tax revenues between the Union and the States and amongst the States themselves. Two distinctive features of the Commission's work involve redressing the vertical imbalances between the taxation powers and expenditure responsibilities of the Centre and the States respectively and equalization of all public services across the States. For a state like Meghalaya with scant revenue, having to finance the Councils through its share of internal revenues is proving to be a huge strain at this juncture. Meghalaya's internal revenues accrue from sales tax and royalty on coal and limestone. The revenue generated by the coal trade has stopped since April 2014 after the ban on rat hole mining by the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

However, what needs to be stated upfront is that the ADCs themselves have not been judicious with their spending. The GHDC is a classic example of an institution that has been extravagant with meagre public funds by paying for projects that hardly have long term impact on the people. RTI disclosures don't lie and the BJP has called out the corruption in the manner in which public funds have been spent at the cost of the employees' salaries. The problem with each of these institutions is that they quickly become employment agencies and are stuffed with political acolytes pushed in by politicians in power. There is no thought applied on whether the Council can bear the salary burden of these appointees. Hence you have the GHDC with 1700 odd employees. Are they needed? What are their terms of reference vis a vis their employment in the Council?

But over and above that, the District Councils cannot be compared to the PRI institutions which have grass-roots connect. The Councils are stand-alone institutions and are neither connected to the Government nor in any effective manner to the local tribal institutions. The Chief Minister also said that as far as protecting tribal cultures and tradition is concerned, the Councils have achieved their targets and that by the way was their prime mandate when they were created. The problem with this country is that it is well nigh impossible to disband an institution once created. So the Councils although they have outlived their utility will continue to be nurtured and financed. It's time therefore to recast their mandates.

Digital divide: Big brother to control booming internet space

Censorship imposed in the guise of regulations

By Md Tasnimul Hassan

Recently, the government notified the Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 through which it seeks to control rather than regulate publishers of news/current affairs content and online curated content (including over-the-top platforms). The Rules also provide for due diligence mechanisms for social media intermediaries, failing which they would be penalised. Both OTTs and digital news media will have to inform the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting about the details of their entity and publish periodic compliance reports every month.

Earlier, the government through a notification dated November 9, 2020, amended the Government of India (Allocation of Business) Rules, 1961, and brought specific categories of internet content (films and audio-visual programmes/news and current affairs) within the control of the Ministry.

There have been a number of controversies where the creators either pre-emptively removed the entire episode or deleted a few scenes, based on political malice ("The John Oliver Show", "Patriot Act", "Madam Secretary") or invited confrontations because of religious backfiring ("Tanishq", "A Suitable Boy").

Supporters of the regulatory regime argue that it would level the playing field between OTTs and theatrical productions, whereas critics expressed concerns over the regulations as they may lead to potential censorship. Several requirements under the Rules are arguably unconstitutional as they undermine the freedom of expression as well as the right to privacy. The Rules have excessively delegated powers to the executive, even though the government is not legally empowered to do so. Moreover, there already are several provisions to that effect and these Rules essentially fulfil the government's aim to control the booming internet space, which was otherwise partially free.

Digital content available on the web is subjected to several provisions under the Information Technology Act, 2000. The government owns the "internet kill switch" to remove any content that is objectionable and/or harms India's interests under Section 69A of the IT Act. Further, as per Rule

3(2)(b), (c) and (e) of Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2011, due diligence is to be observed by intermediaries in respect of the information being hosted or published on any computer resource; which may also be applied to OTTs as they qualify as intermediaries.

The censorship of films is undertaken by the Central Board of Film Certification set up under the Cinematograph Act, 1952, which assigns various certifications to films before their release. This Act along with the Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 1983 and the ministry's Guidelines dated December 6, 1991, form the censorship laws for films.

Further, the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act, 1995 enables the government to take certain channels off the air, as was seen in the case of NDTV India and others. The programme code prescribed under this Act prohibits the broadcast of news that violates decency or attacks community or religious sentiments, and any violation of the code is investigated by an inter-ministerial committee. Moreover, the government controls the country's telecommunication via the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, and the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933, which often causes internet shutdown.

There is a linear difference between regulation and state-sponsored censorship, though regulation might often lead to censorship. Unlike censorship, where abuse, nudity or politically sensitive content is bleeped out by the platform either voluntarily or under some external pressure, OTTs are committed to ensuring there is no such content that disrespects the national emblem and flag or "promotes and encourages disrespect to the sovereignty and integrity of India". IT Parliamentary Committee chairperson Shashi Tharoor in January 2019 had argued that the CBFC "should not have pre-censorship powers".

In February 2020, a group of OTTs launched the Digital Curated Content Complaint Council, which required its members to censor content that promoted violence, contained child sexual abuse material or which was banned by a court, while providing for a consumer grievance redressal mechanism. In

September 2020, OTTs, including Disney+Hotstar, Amazon Prime Video and Netflix, released a self-regulatory code titled, "Universal Self-Regulation Code for Online Curated Content Providers," though it could not garner government support. The ministry had maintained that consensus on "a self-regulatory model without the government's intervention" is good enough for them to function.

The strong rights argument against censorship, which often comes in the guise of regulation, is that the content is on-demand, where viewers have the choice to pay and subsequently choose what they want to watch. Conversely, the arguments against self-regulation are that the platforms lack clarity when it comes to detailing all manners of regulation and that no one should be a judge in their own cause (there being a conflict of interest of OTTs with the complainants).

Nevertheless, there is no concrete argument that after censorship or possible certification or even regulation, there would not be opposition to it. For instance, films such as Padmaavat and Uda Punjab had attracted considerable controversies even after they were certified by the CBFC. Tandav, a series aired over Amazon Prime Video, was another one which ran into controversy. The I&B ministry summoned Amazon Prime officials and the makers thanked the ministry for "guidance and support" while deleting the controversial scenes. This arguably set a dangerous precedent for the OTT industry. Despite not being legally bound to, OTTs have been self-censoring their content. Imagine what would unfold when they would be legally bound to do so, with the government sitting in their backyard.

In Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015), the Supreme Court ruled that online user-generated content cannot be censored until there is a direct incitement to violence, but delegated the question of on-demand content, like that provided by OTTs, to the IT Act. In Life Insurance Corporation of India v. Prof. Manubhai D. Shah (1992), as Doodarshan refused to broadcast "Beyond Genocide", a documentary on the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Supreme Court agreed with the High Court's ruling that halting the documentary broadcast would curtail free-

dom of speech and expression.

Yet again, in Bobby Art International & Ors. v. Om Pal Singh Hoon & Ors. (1996), the Supreme Court held that the producers' right to freedom of expression could not be restricted. Reiterating K.A. Abbas v. Union of India (1970), wherein M. Hidayatullah, C.J., held that, "[t]he standards that we set for our censors must make a substantial allowance in favour of freedom thus leaving a vast area for creative art to interpret life and society with some of its foibles along with what is good," the Supreme Court in Bobby Art held that films dealing with socially relevant themes must be subjected to the least censorship.

Indian courts, more often than not, have taken a stance in favour of free speech, which is the second greatest constitutional right after that to life and personal liberty. The Karnataka High Court in Padmanabh Shankar v. Union Of India (2019) rightly pointed out that content aired over OTT platforms are not public exhibitions and should not be censored on the reasoning as absurd as "social interests matter over individual freedom" (See K.A. Abbas case).

Censorship in the guise of regulation, which is what the Rules are set to do, will discourage political opinions and creativity. This may lead to the production of one-track-mind content that we usually see on TV or in theatres. The regulation will also have a chilling effect on free speech as creators would now refrain from depicting scenes attracting controversies even in a parallel world.

A self-regulatory body would do the greater good to a greater number as the audience will have the option to watch diverse forms of artistic presentation instead of being fed propaganda through conservative portrayals and narrow sceneries. Nonetheless, OTTs should provide appropriate disclaimers and age verification mechanisms for any particular content. (IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet (Md. Tasnimul Hassan is a law undergraduate at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi. He is a part of the first cohort of South Asia Students For Liberty's Fellowship For Freedom in India. The views expressed are personal.)

SC & Sedition Law

Abrogate colonial law?

By Insaf

The Supreme Court ushers a glimmer of hope, not just in Jammu & Kashmir but across the nation. On Wednesday last, it dismissed a petition seeking sedition charges against former J&K Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah over his alleged remarks after abrogation of Article 370. "The expression of a view which is a dissent from a decision taken by the Central government itself cannot be said to be seditious", it said.

judge bench, adding "there is nothing in the statement which we find so offensive as to give a cause of action for a court to initiate proceedings." A fresh of breath air indeed, in this turbulent season of sedition cases under IPC's 124A section being merrily slapped against political opponents, activists and journalists, by both the Centre and State governments. The judgement must be seen in the larger context and welcomed. But will the government join in? At least it must rethink whether this colonial legacy should continue in 2021 in the world's largest democracy. More so, as the apex court's verdict comes on the heels of observations of a trial court in Delhi. Granting bail to 22-year-old activist Disha Ravi arrested in connection with the Toolkit FIR, it said: "offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of governments". Need more be said.

TN Poll Intrigues
It's utter confusion for the voter in Tamil Nadu. Political equations for the ensuing Assembly elections are like a jigsaw puzzle—three or four or more fronts will the voter have to deal with? While political parties are thrashing out seat-sharing formulas to keep their alliance intact, in the backdrop of new entrants in the field, the exit of former AIADMK leader and close aide of Late Jayalalitha (Amma), V K Sasikala from the big fight has sprung the biggest surprise. On Wednesday last, in a two-page letter she told her followers that she was stepping aside from politics, will pray for Amma's 'golden rule' and they all must defeat 'evil force DMK'. The move is bound to help AIADMK-BJP partnership as it will avoid a split in their votes. However, it has unnerved her nephew Dhinakaran, who said he is determined that his party, AMMK form an alliance (third front) -- with whom is yet to be ascertained. Meanwhile, AIADMK-DMDK alliance is off as the seat-sharing formula failed. On the other side, DMK-Congress partnership is under threat as the two are so far unable to agree on an amicable seat-sharing formula. The question is will Kamal Haasan's MNM, which is the first to release its manifesto, focussing on women and youth, step in. The actor has kept the suspense going of whom he shall partner with. Await the climax in this southern thriller.

Farmers' Anti-BJP Campaign
The farmers' agitation, which marks 100 days today, is far from losing steam. Instead, elections in five States and UT appear to have given it good reason to go beyond Delhi's doorstep. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), umbrella body of protesting farmers, has decided to up the ante against the Centre and chalked out a plan to reach out to the voters in the interiors of West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry and campaign against the BJP's 'black farm laws'. Its series of conventions will begin in Kolkata on Friday, where its Kisan Doots (farmers' emissaries) will ask farmers there to teach 'Kisan Virodhi' (anti-farmer) party a lesson. The next stop will be Kerala, with others to follow. Besides, the Morcha has decided to launch an 'MSP Dilao Abhiyan' (Give MSP campaign) across the country, to highlight 'shallowness of Modi's government'. This begins in southern States of Andhra, Karnataka and Telangana, on International Women's Day (March 8) the Morcha will observe 'Mahila Kisan Diwas' (Women farmers' Day). Have the Modi government taken a lot on its plate?
Karnataka Scandal
Karnataka is not in election mode, but it can ill-afford to have a scandal impacting BJP's prospects elsewhere this season. On Wednesday last, a senior, influential and defiant minister Ramesh Jarkiholi handed his resignation to Chief Minister Yediyurappa following a video CD allegedly involving him and a young unidentified woman, a 'sexual harassment' case, went on local TV channels. Though Ramesh initially refused to as he claimed he did nothing wrong, he put in his papers on 'moral grounds'. Not the real reason. It's the BJP headquarters which tightened the screws fearing the charge would embarrass the party in States going to polls. While it may breathe a sigh of relief, the same cannot be said for Yediyurappa. Rumours of similar CDs involving several other top leaders existing are doing the rounds and worse, Ramesh and the other 3 Jarkiholi brothers are known to enjoy political clout across their constituencies and could extract their pound of flesh-- a ministerial post, which one of them was denied in 2019-20. Recall, Ramesh had played a key role in 13 Congress MLAs defecting to help BJP topple the Congress-JDS coalition. Will Yediyurappa give in? He can't afford the boot to be on the other foot!
Bengal & ECI Wrangle
West Bengal has tasted a small victory already but with Nirvachan Sadan. Putting sharp focus on violation of Model Code of Conduct, ruling-TMC has got the Election Commission to direct all petrol pump dealers and other agencies on Wednesday last, to remove hoardings advertising Centre's schemes carrying Prime Minister Modi's photographs from the premises within 72 hours. It agreed it violated the code, which has come into force after poll dates' announcement on February 26. However, the ECI is not showing the same urgency on TMC's other complaint that Modi's photos on Covid vaccination certificates are a blatant misuse of official machinery and must be removed. Instead, it asked Health Ministry for "factual position" -- whether certificates were being distributed on its instructions. On the other side, the counters saying the demand is baseless as the vaccination drive started much before dates were announced. While the verdict is awaited, the TMC continues to put the heat on the ECI. On Thursday last, it demanded removal of Dy Election Commissioner in-charge of the State, accusing him of being biased against it (in Lok Sabha polls) and breaking norms of federal structure. It fears he will 'take steps which will either directly or indirectly help the BJP'. Building excuses for a setback, is it? --INFA

Round The States

TO THE EDITOR

Meghalaya a non-starter

Editor,
We were all eagerly awaiting the arrival of 2021 to herald in some good news after the debacle of 2020 but even though the Covid scenario improved in our state, everything else took a downward turn. First it was the aftermath of the pandemic which led to the opening up of the economy to begin on a slow note. However, when it started picking up, the agitation for the imposition of ILP started. Tourism in the state which had already taken a hit because of the pandemic was slowly recovering but because of the clarion call for the ILP, mischief mongers had a field day beating up unsuspecting non-locals and even resorting to violence and killing. From there on started the path of mayhem. With the skyrocketing fuel prices, the commercial vehicles took to agitation putting the public in a spot. After that came the plying of trucks through the city because of the damage to their normal route which till date hasn't yet been repaired thus adding to the already existing congestion and also leading to the cata-

strophic accident which happened recently leading to a standstill of traffic for one whole day.

Many of our residents are also suffering from water woes and owing to the dry weather conditions, this'll only worsen. The latest addition to this list is the load shedding which has affected the citizens the most be it students, the online community and households in general.

My question to those in power is - are we really going to celebrate 50 years of statehood and have something to show for it or is Meghalaya being known as the Scotland of the East in some distant memory.
Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh
Shillong-14

Why the resistance for a crematorium

Editor,
It was very disturbing to read the news item "Address resistance to space: Indigenous faith groups to Govt" (ST Feb 27, 2021) as the requirement of space is for the construction of an environment friendly crematorium for the mortal remains of the dead belonging to the indig-

enous faith. As a reminder to all and the traditional bodies like the village dorbar or dorbar shngon in particular, we wish to share our beliefs with regards to the last rites of the dead that is through cremation. If space for a crematorium is denied, isn't this a denial of one of our beliefs?

Today, with the advent of a new environment-friendly crematorium, environmental hazards like pollution, stench, etc are taken care of. Anyone can bear witness to and verify the above claim by visiting the crematorium at Lum Thangbriew, Jaiaw. In fact the crematorium has been appreciated by many people from different parts of the country for its concept, design and effectiveness. On the contrary, here in our state, a stark resistance has cropped up studying its viability.

One of the reasons trotted out for the non-issuance of NOC is that the crematorium is too close to the residential areas. I am hereby compelled to draw the attention of those who refuse to issue the NOC to turn their eyes to the numerous burial grounds of people belonging to other faiths that are located in the

heart of the city. One wonders if these pose no hazards to the eco-system of the land especially during monsoons. It is also a fact that in the case of the crematorium, acres of land are not required to fulfill the last rites of the dead. As a believer of the indigenous faith one feels that we are subjected to unwarranted harassment in our very own land.

I hereby put forward a plea before the Principal Secretary, Community and Rural Development (C&RD) Department to kindly use his wisdom and present a true and unbiased report on this crucial matter. On the same note, I hope that the Government reopens the funding of the project that was brought to a halt in 2016. This will be a blessing on us lesser mortals. Can we dare hope for concrete results?
Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

MPSC: Points to ponder

Editor,
As a young person I have a few questions to the MPSC.
Why is the functioning of the MPSC so slow?

The Recruitment process: It takes about 3-4 years to complete the recruitment process. Some even 5 years. There are some vacancies that we have applied for since 2017 and till date we haven't even been called for the written test. Why the inordinate delay?

Declaration of results: It takes more than 3 months to release the results of the written test and around a month or more to release the results of the interview. I don't understand why it takes so much time especially with today's technology such as OMR machines and computers. Are the employees there that incompetent? Do they lack the skills to operate such machines? If there was an award for the slowest recruitment process, MPSC will surely get it.

Why is there no transparency? Right from when we were in school, we would be given report cards after every exam; ranks were even displayed so that we can see our performance and even improve later on if we have not performed well. But now when it comes to jobs (where the sole purpose of studying was to get a job) we cannot see our marks, or our ranks. Why?

In many states or in central exams, even answer keys would be uploaded so that we can evaluate ourselves. But why is there so much secrecy in MPSC?

In other states of India they have abolished interviews for Group-B (non-gazetted) and Group-C posts from 2016. But why is this not the case in Meghalaya?

As an unemployed youth, I just want to say that it is so frustrating to see the system this way because there is no guarantee that we will get a job no matter how hard we work. It's so disheartening to see that there is no longer a fair way and also the elders that we were supposed to look up to are the same ones who teach us these unfair and corrupt ways. Many youths nowadays are suffering from anxiety or depression only because of this, and the worst part is that there is literally nothing we can do.

I just hope the people in power, or the so called "elected representatives" or the so called "student unions" or any NGOs will stand up for us and do something about this.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Clear and Present Danger

Land-use changes in the western Himalayan forests, a global biodiversity hotspot with huge numbers of endemic species, have resulted in a massive decline in forest birds in the region, new research shows.

Scientists from the Centre for Ecology, Development and Research (CEDAR), Dehra Dun and Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, studied the effects of land-use change on forest bird species and 'guilds' (any group of species that exploit the same resources, or that exploit different resources in related ways) in areas in the western Himalayas.

They surveyed the birds systematically during their breeding season, in six land-use types. These include natural, protected oak forests; degraded, lightly used oak forests; lopped, heavily used oak forests; pine forest areas which are now steadily encroaching into natural oak forests; cultivated land; and built-up sites, in two adjoining landscapes, over two consecutive years.

The study shows "moderate to drastic species loss in all modified land-use types in comparison to natural oak forest."

The scientists report changes in the types of birds, especially a 50 per cent or more loss of forest specialists, pollinators, and insect-eating birds in degraded forests, urbanised sites, and areas with monoculture plantations.

The forest specialists have been partially replaced with commensals and open country species. Species richness was lowest in pine and built-up sites, compared to natural oak, and forest specialists and insect-eating birds declined by 60-80 per cent in modified forests.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTIVATION SITES

Cultivation sites were found similar to built-up sites, and provide breeding habitats for open country species such as grey bushchat, black francolin, russet sparrow, streaked laughing thrush (*Trochalopteron lineatus*), and Himalayan bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucogenis*), which are not seen in any forest land use.

Cultivation sites also have a large number of forest generalists such as blue whistling thrush and red-billed blue magpie, as well as commensals and open country birds, but are not able to support forest specialists. The new findings suggest that forest species are largely not able to survive in cultivation areas.

At the same time, cultivation sites show higher species richness, and have abundant pollinators and insectivores in comparison to the modified oak forests and pine, "indicating that cultivation may help sus-

Scientists have recorded a drastic loss in forest birds due to land-use changes in the western Himalayas. TV Padma of Mongabay India reports



(L) *Rufous sibia*, a forest specialist species, is under threat due to oak forest degradation. (R) Forest specialists like wedge tailed green pigeon, provide important ecosystem services like seed dispersal. (Photos by Jagdish Negi & Ghazala Shahabuddin)

tain significant ecosystem providers." Built-up sites due to urbanisation had the least number of birds in all three categories, and the birds that were found were commensals or open country birds, with very few forest species.

BIRD GUILDS IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

The scientists also studied the abundance of bird guilds. They report a "steep decline" in the functional guilds in areas with modified land uses compared to natural oak forests. "Our results have important implications for conservation in biodiverse mountain landscapes with significant human imprint," the report says. The findings "can be globally applied to land use and conservation planning in human-dominated landscapes."

The findings have several implications. While it is well-known that forest conversion and modification result in species losses, "what is of interest in this study is the degree of 'defaunation' or impoverishment of fauna, which is of the order of 25-75 per cent in both species richness and abundance." Ghazala Shahabuddin, a senior fellow at CEDAR and one of the authors of the study, told Mongabay India. "This was not known earlier."

The drastic loss, of 50-60 per cent, of insectivores and pollinator birds "implies that these crucial ecosystem services will be affected sooner or later, in the larger landscape, in-

cluding pollination of agricultural crops and pest control in the fields," she adds. The study has found tremendous loss of oak forest specialists, ranging from 67 per cent to 93 per cent loss in terms of abundance in various modified forests, as these birds require dense forests to meet their needs.

"This means that birds adapted to live, feed, and breed in the natural oak forest may disappear from this landscape if the land-use change process continues in the future," warns Shahabuddin.

Also, there is an ongoing expansion of chir pine areas, which has extremely low bird diversity, into oak forests. Chir pine forests have extremely low bird diversity, almost half of that of protected oak forests and very different birds. This is likely to result in landscapes with low bird diversity, without several forest specialists and endemic species in future. The middle Himalayas with the oak-pine zone is where the maximum land-use change is expected during the next few decades, due to hydro-electric projects, tourism, urban expansion, and road widening.

The natural oak forests of this region are, hence, especially threatened and further loss of oak forests can result in loss of natural resource-based livelihoods and local employment such as in agriculture, says Shahabuddin.

The study is comprehensive as it surveys a wide range of disturbances in the landscape, compared to

most previous studies that looked at one or two types of land-use change, says Umesh Srinivasan, assistant professor, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Sciences, Bangalore.

"The decline in some guilds like pollinators and insectivores (insect-eaters), which provide critical ecosystem services, is massive and worrisome, he says. Insectivores worldwide are especially vulnerable to any kind of forest loss in the tropics," he adds.

"In the western Himalayas, the oak biome is critical in supporting species. Potentially, climate-related replacements of oak by, for example, pine will be detrimental to one of the richest areas of biodiversity in the Himalayas and the world," says Srinivasan.

In general, the middle Himalayan region, with altitude ranging between 250-6,524 metres above sea level, have the highest number of bird species, compared to the foothills and very high elevations. So the loss of forest birds in this zone is worrying, says Srinivasan.

LOSSES IN EASTERN HIMALAYAS TOO

Recent studies in the Eastern Himalayas too show similar disturbing trends. Srinivasan and David Wilcove from the department of ecology and evolutionary biology at Princeton University have studied the survival of birds in forests of Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern

Himalayas.

As temperatures warm, forest birds are steadily moving upwards to find cooler habitats conducive to their survival. But their survival is imperilled if they end up in disturbed habitats such as logged forests or agricultural land, they report in Ecology.

The study in Arunachal is the first demonstration of how "two of the most disruptive" influences due to human activity - climate change and land use - interact to threaten the survival of biodiversity in natural populations, the report says. "Ignoring interactions between climate change and land-use change can potentially undermine accurate forecasting of the future of species in an increasingly warm and degraded world," it cautions.

And large tracts of well-protected primary forests across various heights in tropical mountains may be essential to enable tropical montane species to persist in the face of climate change.

Similarly, researchers from the Nature Conservation Foundation, Bangalore, who studied hornbills in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayas, have reported considerable forest loss around nesting trees for hornbills, including the Great Hornbill, Weathered Hornbill and Oriental Pied Hornbill. From 2011 to 2019, forest cover in the study area, Papum reserve forest, declined from 38.55 square km to 21.94 square km around these hornbill nest trees,

mainly due to illegal logging.

"Forest monitoring, protection and honest governance are required to effectively protect forests in the Eastern Himalaya biodiversity hotspot," their report in *Silva Fennica* says.

"Our results highlight the ongoing threats to biologically-rich forests and the need for urgent measures to halt this loss," says Aparajita Datta, NCF scientist and one of the authors of the study.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are several policy implications of Western Himalayas research findings. "The government has to undertake measures to stem the loss of hardwood forest in the middle Himalayas," says Shahabuddin. These include the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries and protected areas which are currently few in the middle Himalayas compared to the alpine and subalpine zones.

Another measure is to create and operationalise community reserves and biodiversity heritage sites in which local communities who depend on these forests can take part.

"Only through community involvement can the government hope to stem forest fires, which are a major cause of the oak-to-pine transition; and to reduce logging and timber removal from oak forests to sustainable levels," Datta says.

For example, the government of Uttarakhand can consider direct cash transfer schemes, incentives related to development funds and other compensatory schemes to revitalise forest protection, which has always been a part of the tradition of the hill people, but which has weakened over the years, she adds.

Biodiversity, climate change mitigation and hydrological services are very closely connected, points out Shahabuddin. "So the government needs to emphasise nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation, which primarily would consist of forest restoration and organic agriculture."

The bird loss is part of an overall loss of biodiversity in the tropical mountains due to land-use changes and global warming. For the past 15 years, scientists have been warning of massive forest loss in the Himalayas.

"With the current level of deforestation, by 2100 only about 10% of the land area of the Indian Himalaya will be covered by dense forest (>40 percent canopy cover)—a scenario in which almost a quarter of the endemic species could be wiped out, including 366 endemic vascular plant taxa and 35 endemic vertebrate taxa," a report in *Biodiversity and Conservation* warned.

(Mongabay India/TWF)

Spot these rare & exotic animals only in India

With over millions of species breathing on earth, the world celebrates Wildlife Day today, March 3, to raise awareness of global flora and fauna. There are many rare and exotic animals that can be found only in India.

Wildlife plays an important role for the earth, as it scientifically balances the environment and ensures harmonious co-existence among beings. Indian wildlife sanctuaries are home to rare, beautiful and elusive species of animals that can be found only in our country. From lion-tailed macaque in the Western Ghats of India to Sangai, subspecies of brow-antlered deer that holds cultural significance in Manipur, here are some wildlife sanctuaries worth visiting, curated by [Booking.com](#) to bring you a little closer to the beautiful species.

LION-TAILED MACAQUE

Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary (Kerala)

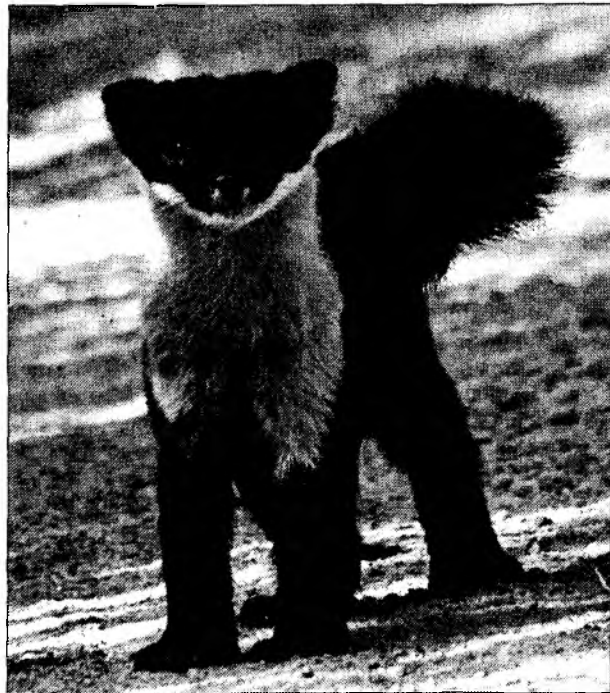


As an Old World monkey native to the Western Ghats of South India, they rank among the rarest of the 250-species (approx.) of primates around the world. The Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary, a protected area in the Kollam district of Kerala houses and protects the highly endangered species. Spread over 172,403 sq.km, India's

first eco-tourism project, Thenmala Eco-tourism Project has been formulated in and around Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary. During your visit to the sanctuary, you can stay inside the forests in specially built camping houses and experience the majesty of the jungle by trekking, going on jeep safaris or bird watching, while getting a chance to spot the rare lion-tailed macaque.

NILGIRI MARTEN

Anamalai Tiger Reserve (Tamil Nadu)



The Nilgiri marten, a small carnivorous mammal, is the only marten species native to India. They are found in moist and wet evergreen forests of the Western Ghats, living at altitudes of 150-2200 m. The animal that usually appears of dark brown colour with a yellow-coloured patch at its forefeet. Their name has been derived from the Nilgiri Hills, however sightings have been reported as far north as Charamadi Ghat and as far south as the Neyyar. You can spot the Nilgiri marten at Anamalai Tiger Reserve, a pristine 958.59 sq. km reserve of tropical jungle, shola forest and grassland rising to 2400m and spilling over the Western Ghats into Kerala between Kodaikanal and Coimbatore

THE KASHMIR STAG

Dachigam National Park (Jammu & Kashmir)

The Kashmir Stag, also known as Hangul, is a subspecies of elk and is native to Kashmir. Only found in the dense riverine forests of Dachigam National Park located at 22 km from Srinagar, the Kashmir Stag is listed as one of the critically endangered and rare species. With their magnificent antlers, the stag is the state animal of Jammu and Kashmir. In the 1900s, there were about 3,000-5,000 of these species found in Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, but today, about 150 remain in the state. You can locate these majestic animals in the wild at the Dachigam National Park, where you can also spot leopard, hill fox and Himalayan serow, among others.

SANGAI

Keibul Lamjao National Park (Manipur)



The endangered subspecies of brow-antlered deer, called sangai, is only found in Manipur. They reside in about 15-20 km area across the Keibul Lamjao National Park in Manipur, the only floating park in the world. As the state animal of Manipur, its significance is seen in the cultural folklore where sangai is the binding factor between humans and nature and killing it was a sin. Today where a lot of conservation efforts are made to save and protect the species, one should not miss a chance to visit the park situated at the Loktak Lake and be in the company of these rare animals.

PYGMY HOG

Manas National Park (Assam)

As a critically endangered species, pygmy hog is now only found in Assam. These are the smallest wild pigs and piglets, and they are one of the very few mammals that build its own home and complete it with a roof. The species is the sole representative of Porcula, a native to alluvial grasslands in the foothills of the Himalayas, and their extinction may result in the extinction of the species. Of the 150 pygmy hogs left, Manas National Park in Assam hosts some of the rare species. The park is known for its endemic wildlife such as the Assam roofed turtle, hispid hare and wild water buffalo.

NILGIRI TAHR

Eravikulam National Park (Kerala)



As the only mountain ungulate in Southern India among just 12 species found in India, Nilgiri Tahr is found only in the tropical rainforest of the Western Ghats. With curved horns, coarse and short fur, the Nilgiri Tahr is extensively found in the Eravikulam National Park (Idukki district) where an estimated 700-800 Nilgiri Tahrs live. Nilgiri Tahr in Eravikulam National Park occurs in two types of groups: the mixed groups and an all-male group. At the Eravikulam National Park located at the backdrop of tea plantations, one can witness the mass flowering of Neelakurinji flowers that bloom once in 12 years and turn the carpet blue. (ANSI/ife)

'Book covers can make or break the deal'

By Siddhi Jain

A book cover is a reader's very first interaction with the book, and can make or break the deal, says well-known graphic designer Ahlawat Gunjan who was recently awarded the sixth Oxford Bookstore Book Cover Prize.

"Along with it being visually appealing to draw your attention, I believe it also needs to be contextually

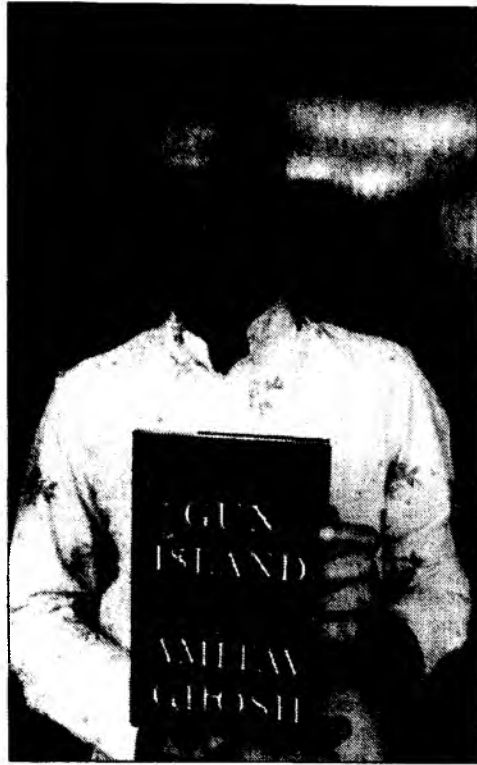
textual narrative finds resonance in the sensuous movement of the snake, slithering as it does across the spine to the back cover. The deep integration of the title and the author's name into the illustration is thoughtfully rendered. The selected visual appropriately and aesthetically represents the core and movement of the story. The typography aligns seamlessly with the coiled serpent offering a unique and emblematic visual identity to the book," said the Jury consisting Indian politician, writer and Member of Parliament, Shashi Tharoor, Author, Indian columnist and novelist, Shobhaa De, well known author, Kunal Basu, Author, Publisher and Festival Director, Namita Gokhale, Director, Apeejay Surrendra Group and the creative force behind the Oxford Bookstore chain, Priti Paul.

Winning cover design is a basic piece of the achievement of a book and artists assume a key part in helping a book wind up plainly significant and make review.

"I got the cover brief from my editor and we discussed the ideas in detail. I then went on to read the MS and discussed the ideas in further detail with the editor and the author. As I mentioned, the challenge here was my own phobia for reptiles, so a photographic approach was completely out and I decided to go with an illustrative one. I chose to work with Nirupa Roa for the cover art and she wonderfully translated the illustration brief into a spectacular visual. With the illustration, I designed the fill cover and presented it Sales and Marketing team and finally to the author. Everyone really enjoyed the approach and the final outcome. It was later adopted by several international publishers," said Ahlawat about the process of designing the cover for the bestselling book.

"I feel any appreciation in any form is good for the creator of that work. And in that light, these awards are a great source of recognition for the individuals behind the scenes," He says about the importance of awards.

The jury also made a special mention of Pinaki De's evocative cover design for *Moom* by Bani Basu, translated by Arunava Sinha and published by BEE Books. (*IANSLife*)



appropriate and should be able to communicate clearly and effectively," Ahlawat told *IANSLife* in an email.

The 2021 prize was awarded at Jaipur BookMark of Jaipur Literature Festival to Ahlawat for the cover of 'Gun Island' by Amitav Ghosh, which is published by Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

The award is given out for brilliance in book design, in an attempt to recognise and encourage the extraordinary work of illustrators, designers and publishers throughout India.

"We commend the dramatic graphics and meticulous attention to detail in the cover image. The genius of the



All in a smile

Portraits of women from across India

By Siddhi Jain

In what merges together her passion for art and travel, portraits of various smiling Indian women by Delhi-based artist and art curator Priyanka Banerjee — created over ten years — brings out the resilience and spirit of women of the country.

Hailing from the beautiful city of Bokaro in Jharkhand, and having quit a corporate career to pursue her long-held dream to create art, Banerjee says she created these smiling portraits as a departure from the silent struggle that often characterises women's lives.

"Women are the epitome of strength. Their smiling faces de-stress the viewers. Although the rural women enjoy less amenities compared to their urban counterparts, they know the art of staying happy with their limited resources available. Hence, the 'smiling women' form an important subject of my art," Banerjee told *IANSLife*.

The paintings are executed using different mediums like watercolor on paper, acrylic on canvas, charcoal on paper.

"These portraits have been created over a span of ten years. Though I had no plan to create such a series, I was fortunate to capture their smiles as an intrepid traveller. I captured their smiles through my lens and have eventually transformed them into my artworks," she adds.

As an avid traveller, Banerjee has also found inspiration in the hills and biodiversity of Nainital, Mukteshwar, and Ranikhet where everything from tall and sturdy coniferous trees like pines, oaks, cedar, deodars; the ancient and beautiful Mukteshwar temple situated atop amidst the scenic splendor; the occasional giggles of the children echoing in the woods; the serpentine roads of the hills; the majestic royal Bengal tiger basking in glory of its natural habitat in the Jim Corbett; the spotted deer and the Old British style bungalows - have become her muse.

"Women have made their presence felt in almost all spheres of life and the Indian culture attaches great importance to them. However, generally women all over the world (including India) speak the same language of 'silence' as they carry on with lives which are very often full of struggle. Hence, the portraits of smiling women symbolise positivity in times of despair. 'A smile' is synonymous with a happy and de-stressful life. As I make portraits of smiling women, I have tried to bring out the beauty in them," she concludes. (*IANSLife*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajal Bhambi

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Sun transit in Pisces on your solar return chart and it will give very good results for the whole year. Your confidence will get boosted and also your spirits will be high. You will meet lot of influential persons. And will be able to get your work done. You will also clear major administrative/departmental exams. Contacts with government officials will be fruitful. Your tax disputes will also get resolved. Those who are entrepreneurs and in business can enter into a new association or partnership. You will get good returns from investments you had made in the past. There will be warmth and cheer in family relations. You will remain devoted to your family. Your marriage might get finalized. Love birds will have a wonderful time. You will do noble deeds and your name and fame will rise. You could also get a reward/award.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The planetary configuration this week indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for projects at work. Your job environment is teeming with activity. You take small yet sure steps towards your financial goals. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. Children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and or structure. There are some contentious issues that are laid to rest as you tackle them and take a bold stand.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

Some of you may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make definitive choices; they could even be between career and family goals. Some of you may be promoted or your career will take a new direction. The challenge is to find a healthy balance—to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Romantic and personal relations would be more practical than fun. For some, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious as you look at it with a long term perspective. Some of you will meet a new romantic interest who is perhaps more younger and energetic as compared to you. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring of late, and you meet new and unusual people.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

New friendships are likely to emerge during this time: supportive and easygoing ones. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you are indicated. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. Do not allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains is on the cards but analyze data at hand before you invest. Energy is high and things happen swiftly and decisively.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You would be blessed with good health, love in relationships and harmony at the work place. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract opportunities which hitherto seemed out of reach. You desire to learn and improve on your practical skills. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you that enable you to quicken the pace at your workplace. Tension could run high and reach an emotional peak. Do not get carried away without first getting the facts. Yoga and walking would prove to be beneficial.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful people who could prove to be helpful as they extend a helping hand. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training or to further your education. Happiness and fulfillment through close friendships and relationships is indicated. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to aim for a sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

The planetary combination this week tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring and this brings about a new awareness. You are more determined to achieve your

personal goals, and are more strategic in the manner you go about doing so. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. New projects excite you but remember that bringing them to a completion is just as important. A little attention on fitness and health related programs would be helpful.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This phase brings money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a realistic approach to business and finance. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement and professional activities. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is more intense. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. You look to networking to leverage your contacts. You may be quick to anger and could antagonize some whom you want to win over.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

This phase is good for money, status and enhancing your standing this week. Your entire focus shifts in this direction. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges it presents. Your belief systems and personal philosophies are especially important to you, but do not often coincide with your methods. This dichotomy will inculcate new attitudes towards finances, and social relationships before you strike a balance. It is an excellent time for travel, higher education and communications. The family is supportive and helps you look at the larger picture.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach towards your life and you cultivate true friendships. 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. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, take action and start afresh during this week.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You would be able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility in personal and professional relations this week. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding and are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You have to maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit this week.

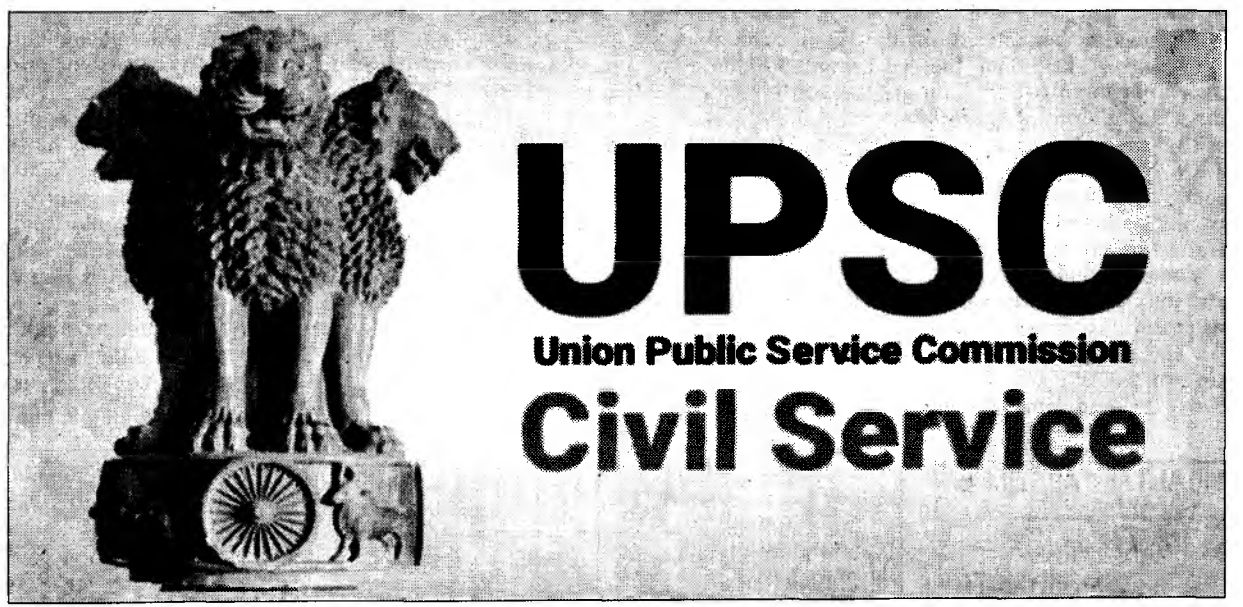
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You feel on top of things in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition from younger ones. It is time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your unselfishness and willingness to listen will help boost your magnetic appeal. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively this week. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well on your own rather than place trust upon others. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. A business venture could be gainful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You are involved in multiple tools of creativity that you possess. A gentle and softer approach can resolve an old conflict this week.

Civil Services Examination 2021



By Ranjan K Baruah

One of the popular career dreams is becoming a civil servant.

Many students dream to serve the nation by becoming civil servants. Though many students are aware of the process but there are many who are yet to explore the process of the exam pattern. Any graduates may appear in the preliminary exam to get into the mains and followed by a personnel interview.

This year the preliminary examination of the Civil Services Examination for recruitment to various services and posts will be held by the Union Public Service Commission on 27th June, 2021 in accordance with the Rules published by the Department of Personnel & Training in the Gazette of India Extraordinary dated 4th March, 2021. Various services and posts includes (i) Indian Administrative Service (ii) Indian Foreign Service (iii) Indian Police Service (iv) Indian Audit and Accounts Service, Group 'A' (v) Indian Civil Accounts Service, Group 'A' (vi) Indian Corporate Law Service, Group 'A' (vii) Indian Defence Accounts Service, Group 'A' (viii) Indian Defence Estates Service, Group 'A' (ix) Indian Information Service, Junior Grade Group 'A' (x) Indian Postal Service, Group 'A' (xi) Indian P&T Accounts and Finance Service, Group 'A' (xii)

Indian Railway Protection Force Service, Group 'A' (xiii) Indian Revenue Service (Customs & Indirect Taxes) Group 'A' (xiv) Indian Revenue Service (Income Tax) Group 'A' (xv) Indian Trade Service, Group 'A' (Grade III) (xvi) Armed Forces Headquarters Civil Service, Group 'B' (Section Officer's Grade) (xvii) Delhi, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli Civil Service (DANICS), Group 'B' (xviii) Delhi, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli Police Service (DANIPS), Group 'B' (xix) Pondicherry Civil Service (PONDICS), Group 'B'.

This year the number of vacancies to be filled through the examination is expected to be approximately 712 which include 22 vacancies reserved for Persons with Benchmark Disability Category. Reservation will be made for candidates belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, the Economically Weaker Sections and Persons with Benchmark Disability in respect of vacancies as may be fixed by the Government.

The Civil Services Examination will consist of two successive stages (i) Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination (Objective type) for the selection of candidates for the Main Examination;

and (ii) Civil Services (Main) Examination (Written and Interview) for the selection of candidates for various Services and posts noted above.

A candidate must have attained the age of 21 years and must not have attained the age of 32 years on the 1st of August, 2021 i.e., the candidate must have been born not earlier than 2nd August, 1989 and not later than 1st August, 2000. Candidates (excepting female/SC/ST/Persons with Benchmark Disability Candidates who are exempted from payment of fee) are required to pay a fee of Rs. 100.

Candidates are required to apply online using the website <http://www.upsconline.nic.in>. Detailed instructions for filling in online applications are available on the above mentioned website. Aspirants may apply before 24th March.

It is one of the tough competitive examinations being held in India. Though tough, it is not impossible to crack the exam. Proper planning, effective preparation is must. Aspirants might join coaching institutes for more confidence. Many government departments and agencies conduct free coaching for the students who are financially weak.

(The author is a career mentor and can be reached at 8473943734 or brkranjan@gmail.com for any career related queries)

"Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club."

— Jack London

The Shillong Times

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Economics at the heart of empowerment

TODAY is International Women's Day. It's a day when the word "women" will be the most used one after "empowerment." What does this day mean for the ordinary woman slogging to bring food to the kitchen after a hard day's struggle? It's not easy to be sitting by the roadside, ingesting the dust and bearing the heat and storm. For such women, their peers sitting under a makeshift 'dukan' covered with a plastic sheet is any day better. But come rains and the strong winds of March then even the plastic roof is blown asunder. That's the livelihood pursued by thousands of women in Meghalaya. And no, they are not complaining. All they want is a fair chance to trade their wares in a decent space for that is the only livelihood they know. In so many decades, not much economic space has been created for women to earn a decent living. Job creation both in the private and public sector has not found traction. Tourism as the only viable industry has created a few jobs and many women have self-started businesses in the sector opening up home-stays, restaurants, tea shops etc., which have all gone up in smoke owing to the pandemic. No assessment has as yet been made as to the cumulative losses incurred by such small businesses and whether they are in a position to pick up the pieces.

This is not to say that the pandemic has not hurt the other genders. Every entrepreneur has bled and is still bleeding but women have had it worse because most or all of them support a family. Not a few are women abandoned by their partners/husbands and bringing up their children. Maintenance is not something that women in a matrilineal society or any society can get without a legal battle. And when the man is himself a struggling daily labourer how does a woman wrest anything out of him without losing her self-respect! It is not easy for those in governance to understand the plight of a single mother unless they walk in her shoes. Gender sensitivity is a learned emotion. It comes with some training but it comes better from observing women who struggle to make an honest living. It is for such women living at the margins that policies need to be made so that they get the first nudge towards economic empowerment. Only then will the word 'empowerment' have meaning. Only then will women be able to take decisions that affect their health; only then will they claim their reproductive rights and stop becoming baby producing machines. Till such time, International Women's Day will only be a token observance. Women need to push the government to craft out enabling policies and come up with gendered budgets, because no one will do it for them. This is where women's solidarity groups come in. So far this has not happened in Meghalaya.

PGS and future of organic certification in the state

By H H Mohrmen & Dakapaya Bareh

In early 90s when the trend had just started, organic certification became essential when progressive farmers wanted to export their farm harvest for western consumers. Eventually certification agencies brought norms in farming practices with an expensive fee structure. Obviously it was not viable for small and tribal farmers. This paved a path for an alternate certification mechanism which then led to the formation of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

The PGS is fairly recent in its adoption and recognition all over the world. It is being used in different parts of the world and is now on the way to becoming a major certification mode for India's organic farmers. The introduction of PGS will finally help farmers be able to get rid of the entirely unnecessary burden of the expensive third party audits.

Under the PGS, organic farmers regain control over the certification process and are able to produce a far more credible and effective system of quality assurance compared to third party certification systems.

PGS procedures are simple. The documents are easy to follow and are available in the language of the farmers concerned, where even an uneducated person can be a farm inspector and the option of conducting the inspection can be on video, with oral recording of answers. The farm visits are conducted by people who have a day-to-day knowledge or acquaintance of the farm since it is within the village and the farm inspectors reside in the same area. The PGS is ideally suited for small and marginal farmers who would otherwise be out of the certification process.

PGS is the preferred system of organic farm certification emerging out of the experience of the organic farming movement worldwide. PGS is now recognized by International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and by the Government of India. With the introduction of PGS, organic farmers are relieved of the difficulties in certification of their farm produce.

Under Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)

organic farmers are vested with the responsibility to produce a credible and effective system of quality assurance. Each farmer pledges that his/her production process is free from manufactured chemicals. The "Local Group" (LG) of five or more organic farmers is the basis of the self-regulatory support system of the PGS. The quality assurance standards are harmonized by the PGS Organic Council of India, which permits the use of its PGS label on a product as a mark of quality.

To strengthen the practice of traditional and chemical free farming, the Society for Urban & Rural Empowerment (SURE) in collaboration with North East Slow Food Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) under the project, "No one shall be left behind: initiative funded by Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) embarked on the journey to help farmers with the certification process. In the process Field Coordinators of the NGO mobilized PGSOC initiatives within the project area of 28 villages in the case of SURE. Major steps taken include group formations, setting basic organic standards, farms appraisal form, farmer's pledge and meetings.

SURE now promotes 9 PGS groups consisting of 56 farmers. Iaplang of Mulum village, Iahuti Shaphrang & Lyngdoh Organic Mynso B village, Lamlynti Mukhphap village, Iatreilang Mutem village, Iakyntiewlang & Rynthlang Skenpyrsit village, Muphlang Wahshong & Dongnien Muphlang from Muphlang village.

Any farmer committing to practice organic farming can take the initiative to form a Local Group (LG). PGSOC permits existing groups like village level organization, farmer associations, and Self Help Groups to form LGs in their area. A group of 5 or more organic farmers (or willing to convert to organic farming) and having land holding nearby can form a LG and enrol into PGSOC certification system. A minimum of 5 farmers is mandatory to form a LG for PGSOC certification.

As in the case of SHGs, the LG too should have a name. Each LG will appoint a Convener who will keep and maintain all the group records. It is mandatory that members know each other and each other's farms well.

There is no limit to the numbers of LG that can be formed in one village; there can be many LGs in a single village.

The LG convener conducts regular meetings to discuss organic farming, marketing, knowledge sharing, sowing, and planning for peer review and other issues. The LG maintains the attendance and minutes of each meeting in the meeting register. Farmers who enrol for PGSOC take the organic farmer's pledge that his/her production process is free from manufactured chemicals. Farmers will sell their products as "organic" only when they are grown on certified land and uphold organic principles.

The next stage is individual Peer Appraisal or Review. It is a process by which some peer members of the same local group physically inspect and assess the production practices of their colleagues as peers. Peer appraisal has to be conducted for all the LG member's farms at least once in every season. It may also be mentioned that the Certification is on the land and not on the individual crop. The certificate is obviously issued to a group and not an individual and the validity of the certificate is 3 years from the date of issuance. The same can be withdrawn anytime if the farmers are found not adopting to the PGS principle.

The Iaplang PGS group of Mulum has also revived the Community Seed Bank a concept initiative by NESFAS under the name Iaplang Community Seed Bank. The objective of the Community Seed Bank is to promote, manage and encourage sustainable use of local varieties of seeds for food security and to improve livelihoods of farmers. Some individual farmers and Self Help Group (SHGs) contribute their seeds to the community seed bank. The community seed bank is doing very well now.

The PGS group in Jahtia Hills initially sold their produce in the Farmers Market organized regularly by SURE at Jowai and stopped because of lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic. During lockdown the PGS in collaboration with the local online platform Syllad online store has bridged the gap by linking the farmers

to the consumers in the town. This partnership also helped in delivering the goods to the homes of the community members in Jowai and its suburbs. Only during the lockdown period the total turnover through this medium is a little over six lakh rupees.

In another major development three PGS groups one from Mulum and two from Mynso B village under the Laskein C&RD Block of West Jaintia Hills started the "Farm on Wheels" (FOW) initiative. Farm on Wheels is a project in which with a little seed money, farmers hire a car to sell their produce at the doorstep of the consumer. People will not require to visit the crowded market anymore, as they can shop right where they live. The initiative is considered timely as the country is encouraging social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

Farm on Wheels run by the Iaplang PGS group, Mulum was launched in September 2020 and Iahuti Shaphrang & Lyngdoh Organic of Mynso B was launched in October 2020. The objective of this program is that farmers groups can directly sell fresh organic vegetables without a middleman and also to create a sustainable livelihood opportunity for the farmers.

PGS offers numerous benefits for small-scale producers which includes improved access to organic markets through a guaranteed system, increased education and awareness among consumers and farmer capacity building and empowerment.

As a Facilitation Council, NESFAS identified and formed 46 local PGS groups consisting of more than 230 farmers. These groups are from different areas under Khasi Hills, Ri-bhoi, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. On October 2, 2019, NESFAS received certificates for 20 PGS groups, who are also partner communities of NESFAS, from across Meghalaya. This system of organic certification is affordable and more importantly it is not burdensome for farmers as it can be easily understood and practiced. This can serve as a model if the State Government is interested in promoting organic farming via PGS certification and NESFAS is already a recognised Facilitation Council in the state.

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The Long Road Ahead for Women in Corporate India

By Valli Arunachalam

There was widespread celebration as Kamala Harris became the first female US Vice President. But beyond the borders of the US, other countries, especially "developing" nations, were long past this milestone. Well before 1966, when Indira Gandhi became India's Prime Minister, the country already had the first woman governing a State. Sarojini Naidu was Governor of Uttar Pradesh for two years from August 1947. Most of India's South Asian neighbours — Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar have been or are led by a woman. When India had a woman Chief Minister of a State in 1963, Supreme Court judge in 1989, President in 2007 and Defence Minister in 2017, there was much to cheer. Yet these milestones have not solved the problems of Indian women, bettered their situations or advanced their positions at every level of society. Corporate India is an example.

An increasing number of women are heading companies, banks, financial enterprises, and public sector undertakings. If you look carefully, a token few, may be found in corporate board rooms. However, it is largely still talk: talk about the improving gender diversity in corporate India, and talk about bringing more women into leadership positions. While there is some improvement, or ostensibly at least the feeling that there is some improvement, the data indicates otherwise. According to figures from the database management company, Prime Database, the percentage of women CEOs in March 2019 was about 3.9% vs. 3.2% in March 2014. This shows that the percentage of women CEOs has remained almost stagnant over a five-year period.

Let us take a step back and ask ourselves why the percentage of women on corporate boards not increased in proportion to the number of women entering the workforce? If I don't my scientist's hat, I would explain it as being "due to disproportionately high-altitude rarefaction effects". This means that as one progresses higher up the corporate ladder there is a disproportionate decrease in the density of women compared to men. While there are many reasons for this anomaly, the primary one is that the road from the lower levels of the organisation to the C-suite has significantly more barriers for women than for men. These barriers broadly fall into two categories — societal and organisational.

In India, many of the societal barriers that women face have roots in patriarchal oppression. In a patriarchal system, sons are groomed to run the business. The daughters are conditioned to think that a woman's place is at home. Such practices are hopelessly outdated in current times and have gradually eroded the confidence and enthusiasm of women. However, despite this thinking, women have shown that they are capable of taking care of the family and work, and being exceptional at both. Many of India's large businesses are family owned and operated. While some family businesses have kept pace with changing times, and have accepted daughters into the business, others remain steadfastly rooted in the past and have shut their doors to daughters. If gender bias is pervasive at the promoter level, it will obviously percolate down through all levels of the organisation.

Organisational barriers such as pre-conceived notions and stereotyping of women are products of social conditioning. Creativity, decisiveness, collaboration and transparency are among the qualities that define truly great leadership. But they aren't always recognised or appreciated in women. For example, research shows that when men and women display identical levels of creativity, men are evaluated as being more innovative and considered more deserving of praise and reward. Women's creativity just isn't seen for what it is or touted to the same extent as men's creativity. Although decisiveness is appreciated and lauded in men, projecting authoritarianism through decisive actions is often perceived as arrogance when women engage in it. There is little doubt that all of these qualities, which research shows can be critical for success, are embodied in today's female leaders. However, they are perceived through the lens of outdated social conditioning. Consequently, women face strong headwinds as they try to move up the career ladder. They are overlooked, for a variety of reasons, when it comes to promotions despite being competent and qualified. Some of the primary reasons are centered around life events such as marriage and childbearing and the responsibilities that come along with them. Managers often have unfounded concerns that such life events will negatively impact a woman's performance at work. The few women that are able to overcome these headwinds, soon find out that the headwinds only get stronger, and that they have to fight harder as they progress up the ladder to the boardroom. Only the strongest and the most resilient make it.

It is only when the road to the boardroom is cleared of these unfair barriers, and women have equal access as men to mentorship, training and development can true gender parity be achieved in corporate boardrooms. The onus lies squarely on the occupants of the boardroom. It is not enough to have women on the board as a token, or to check a box for regulatory compliance. It should be because the leadership recognises the unique benefits that qualified and competent women can bring to the business. Research shows that combining people of different backgrounds results in "cognitive diversity," which enhances collective problem-solving. McKinsey and Credit Suisse have each produced research showing that companies serious about gender diversity and inclusion achieve superior financial results. Gender diversity creates positive benefits when society believes in its intrinsic value, and not just as a mere obligation. Professor Letian Zhang of Harvard Business School in his research on 1,069 leading firms across 35 countries and 24 industries, found that gender diversity relates to more productive companies, as measured by market value and revenue, only in contexts where it is viewed as "normatively" accepted. Normative acceptance means a widespread cultural belief that gender diversity is important. There were positive effects of diversity in societies with normative acceptance of working women, but not in societies with only regulatory support. We all know that without biodiversity our planet will be in peril, similarly, without gender diversity global economies will be in peril. The time to act is now. On the occasion of International Women Day, let us be inspired by the words of the late astronaut Kalpana Chawla: "The path from dreams to success does exist. May you have the vision to find it, the courage to get on it and the perseverance to follow it."

(Dr. Valli Arunachalam has a doctorate in nuclear engineering and is a technology consultant with 23 years of work experience in Fortune 500 Companies. She is leading the fight against gender bias in the Murugappa group, her family's 37,000 crore industrial conglomerate) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Looking behind the Matrilineal veil

Editor,

Come March 8 and we all observe International Women's Day across the world. Functions galore get underway to mark the day. In our state too, this day is celebrated in a special way. The theme for this year is 'Women in Leadership - Achieving an equal future in this Covid 19 world.' In our State women occupy a special status as they follow the matrilineal system i.e. drawing lineage from the mother's clan line. While this is a sign of empowerment for the women here, it is often a camouflage for the many disadvantages which women silently suffer.

The many broken teenage pregnancies, absence of responsibility of men who begrudge the matrilineal system and a high rate of school dropouts have led to the realization that women's empowerment in our society is really just a facade for the many ills that plague it. As our state moves towards the 50th year of its statehood, we hope that those in governance would work to uplift our women. This can really help to put them on a platform where they can be

leaders in their own spheres especially in this present Covid scenario and not just be symbols of tokenism for their male counterparts to crow about.

While acknowledging the fact that we are slightly better off than women in other parts of our country, we must not ignore the fact that there are many silent prejudices happening in our state too. Though I'm not an expert on women's studies, I dare to point out that these prejudices are experienced by urban educated women more than those in the rural sphere.

Let us therefore take a stand today especially to uplift ourselves and our tribe for as the saying goes.. "We rise by raising others." Happy International Women's Day to all!

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong-14

Why this patronage to AIS officers?

Editor,

The recent recommendation by the MDA Govt to refund the amount of Income Tax dues paid by the AIS officers posted in Meghalaya is actually bereft of any logic and shows no mental application at all. The arguments being trotted out that the AIS bureaucrats are

heading many departments and are being overworked is sheer nonsense. If an AIS bureaucrat thinks that she/he is being made to operate like a slave then, she/he can seek to go on deputation to the Government of India provided she/ he gets empanelled.

This tax exemption is given to Meghalayan tribals. Every other non-tribal working or residing in Meghalaya is contributing to the Income tax kitty and that is how it is.

This outrageous recommendation doing the rounds echoes the view that Meghalaya cannot function efficiently and those who are posted here need to be cajoled to stay back.

The training and motivation given to the AIS officers are excellent for them to put their best foot forward at all times. And I believe any AIS officer worth his salt would definitely decline such a condescending offer being made by the MDA Govt. This Govt needs to conduct itself with a proper sense of dignity and motivate all stakeholders to give their best. This effort must emanate from the very top.

The recommendation itself is in poor light and it must be laid to rest immediately.

Yours etc.,
Tyrone D'Brass,
Tura

Why this partiality Mr CM?

Editor,

As a concerned parent, I ask the following questions to the Chief Minister. (a) Why is Govt reluctant to raise the age bar for government jobs? (b) What is hindering the Govt from taking this step? (c) Why this apathy towards genuine, conscientious job seekers of the state? (d) Why deprive thousands of an equal opportunity? (e) Why are other Northeastern States ahead of us in raising the maximum age limit? (f) Why does the Govt favour only its enablers - the rich, affluent and the privileged class? (most recent example - tax reimbursement for AIS officers). (g) Why is Govt silent on this major issue? Is it because the job seekers are viewed as vulnerable second class citizens, not worth this Govt's attention?

With last year's horrifying Covid19 experience, you'd think, the Government would now deem it appropriate to provide lost opportunities to educated job seekers, by increasing the maximum age limit. But no such thing happened. This regressive policy of Meghalaya has its tentacles deeply sunk into its faithful and blind followers.

Various Government departments/ organizations/institutions

follow the Govt's age policy strictly and also ask for 5 years + work experience at times when calling for contractual/adhoc posts. Even centrally sponsored schemes in Meghalaya are implemented keeping in mind the age bar kept by the Central Govt for the posts concerned, rendering those candidates who have crossed 32 years of age absolutely helpless!

Now coming to the infamous dictator called the MPSC; we saw what the CM said about the Commission and how it should become more transparent, more efficient etc. We nearly believed him for a moment. But even with the new Chairperson nothing has changed. MPSC has failed the youth of the state, in numerous ways; it's high-handed attitude has been left unmonitored for decades. Do you know that when MPSC delays examinations for several years, it comes up with contemptible excuses and is answerable to none? However, when it's ready to conduct an examination the poor candidates would not even get a month's notice.

Hence I implore upon the parents of all educated job seekers to kindly refrain from berating your children when they fail in State job exams (other than Meghalaya Police recruitment). They are already frustrated; they are dejected; their spirits

thwarted. Being hopeful is the only luxury they can afford while dreaming. They're up against a powerful EVIL, invisible yet deadly Enemy! They need your moral support to say the least.

Any reasonable requests made to the Government are met only after a series of hooliganism and violent protests displayed by the deprived, disadvantaged, poverty-stricken sections of the society. The message clearly is that the Government responds only to outbursts that turn violent or greatly disturb the daily lives of the common man!

The CM justified the Income Tax reimbursement for AIS officers by saying that a section of officers cannot be treated with a different yardstick. Then why is he treating a huge number of educated job seekers with that different yardstick? The age limit for Assistant Teachers is 37 years; Medical & Health officers is 46 years while for the rest it remains 32 years only! Where's the natural justice here? Where there's a will there's a way, right? Would we see the CM coming to the aid of the downtrodden affected by the unreasonable age bar, anytime soon?

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

"It is well that war is so terrible,
otherwise we should grow too fond of it."

—Robert E. Lee

The Shillong Times

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Progress of polls

PREDICTABLY, the assembly election scene is warming up, matching with the summer's rising heat. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi in West Bengal and Home Minister Amit Shah in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states campaigning for the BJP on Sunday, the next few weeks are bound to be filled with both suspense and surprises.

With the shift of a powerful regional entity, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) from the BJP side to the Congress bandwagon in Assam, the fight for the assembly seats in the state has acquired a higher degree of suspense. With BPF holding the upper hand in the Bodoland Territorial Council region that has 15 seats in the assembly, and the party claiming to be the king-maker in successive polls in the state in the past two decades, this came as a boost to the morale of the Congress-led alliance. The promise by the Congress to grant a 50 per cent reservation in jobs for women is another significant bait. Clearly, the BJP will now have to fight every inch to retain power in Assam.

West Bengal is still Mamata Banerjee's own fiefdom, also going by the confidence with which she has announced the list of her party candidates for over 290 seats in the assembly in one single go. There's a noticeable shift in the Trinamool Congress party's strategy to win the elections. The party has subtly reduced the importance it gave to minority Muslims – a major vote bank for the TMC till now – and the new attempt is to woo women in a more engaging manner.

In Tamil Nadu, despite the AIADMK announcing new welfare steps to woo the voters, the DMK remains in a pole position. The DMK and the Congress have finalized seat sharing and the Left too would be part of its alliance that had won the LS polls in 2019 in all but one constituency. The announcement of VK Sasikala, after her return from jail, that she would not enter politics and wished well for Amma's party meant the AIADMK will stand as one in the assembly polls.

While Puducherry might go the BJP's way if pre-poll surveys are any proof, Kerala will see a fight between equals. The leftist bastion might either see a return of the Congress-led United Democratic Front to power or more probably a retention of power by CPI-M strongman Pinarayi Vijayan heading the Left Democratic Front. Kerala had never re-elected a party to power in successive polls; the pendulum could swing either way.

Wasteful and fatal investment

By Barnes Mawrie

"I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity"

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

Of all living beings, only man is a self-destructive being. History of human civilization shows that humans invented weapons like knives, spears, bows and arrows etc, primarily for hunting. But gradually these weapons became instruments of aggression and massacre. Human beings have been most creative in the invention of weapons of mass destruction. More weapons mean more wars and greater destruction and more waste of public money.

In the last century humanity has witnessed two world wars one deadlier than the other. The use of destructive weapons was highest during World War II which culminated in the massive destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 with the use of the atom bombs by the Americans. The human casualty in World War II was a whopping number of 75 million, many of whom were innocent victims. In this present century wars have not ended but have only multiplied in various parts of the world.

The Middle East is a region of perpetual wars where guns and bombs rule the roost and thousands of innocent people die every day. Weaponizing a nation has become the priority of most countries in the world today. The constant fear of being invaded by hostile neighbours is the cause of arms race in many countries. The best example of this is countries like India, China and Pakistan. Looking at the defence budget of some countries it makes us realize how much national wealth goes down the drain in acquiring weapons. China's defence budget for 2020 was 178 billion dollars and in 2021 it stands at 209

billion dollars which is 6.8% of the national budget. India's defence budget for 2020-21 stands at Rs. 4,71,378 crores which is 7% of the national budget. On the other hand education budget for 2020-21 is Rs. 99,300 crores, that is 5% of the national budget. Pakistan which is a struggling economy has earmarked 11.9% of the national budget for defence. Had it not been for the Corona Pandemic most countries, even the US, would have invested less in health care. Looking at the staggering amount of national wealth

are indirectly responsible for armed conflicts in these continents. In the process they make money at the expense of peace and human lives.

It is said that after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the bulk of weapons manufactured during the cold war period which were lying in stock, was sold off by arms dealers to many third world countries. Man has become so vicious and yet so brainy as to create more and more sophisticated weapons from ballistic missiles to weaponized drones. As long as human beings remain greedy and ambi-

history, that violence begets violence and the cycle is endless. The prophetic song "Imagine" of John Lennon is an appropriate message for today. The singer says "imagine there's no countries...nothing to kill or die for. Imagine there's no possessions...no need for greed or hunger. A brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people sharing all the world." How beautiful is the message of this famous song. I hope leaders of nations like Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Bashar al-Assad, Imran Khan, Narendra Modi and others learn to listen to this song every day. Perhaps one day it may strike a note of assent and lead to a change of heart.

At the end of World War II, people said unanimously "no more war." But soon enough they have forgotten it and war mongering is on again. It is the prayer of every peace lover in the world that our leaders and governments



wasted in defence, we ask a question – What would India be if this 6.8% defence budget was to be spent in alleviating poverty? I am sure there would not be a hungry person anymore in India. So too it can be said of other countries who

learn to take the path of peace and start respecting every neighbouring country, learn sympathy towards each other, put an end to greed and ambition and live as one brotherhood of man. It is high time that powerful countries stop the arms race and instead invest more on human development. It is really sickening to see news reports on unending armed conflicts in different parts of the world. I dare to dream that one day we will have no more need of standing armies, no more proud display of weapons, no more fear of neighbours because every country would have learnt the futility of building weapons, the misery of wars and the wonderful power of love and peace. I hope someday the prophecy of Isaiah 2:4 would come true: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore."

"The singer says "imagine there's no countries...nothing to kill or die for. Imagine there's no possessions...no need for greed or hunger. A brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people sharing all the world." How beautiful is the message of this famous song."

spend so much on defence. The irony of all this is that wealthy and advanced countries like, the US, Russia, France, UK and now China, are manufacturing modern weapons and are selling these to other countries. We all know that rebel groups in the Middle East, in Africa or in Asia get their supply of arms either from the US, Russia or China. In this manner these countries

ing its military might and by building arms. Yet it does not realize that its aggression will ultimately lead to its own destruction. Experience has shown that arms race is a vicious cycle because it turns back on the perpetrators.

As long as human beings are not willing to abide by the law of love, wars will continue. Unfortunately, humans have not learnt from

A message for women—we are the change that we seek

In India, it is a long haul and the path is never a linear one

By Mahalakshmi Pavani

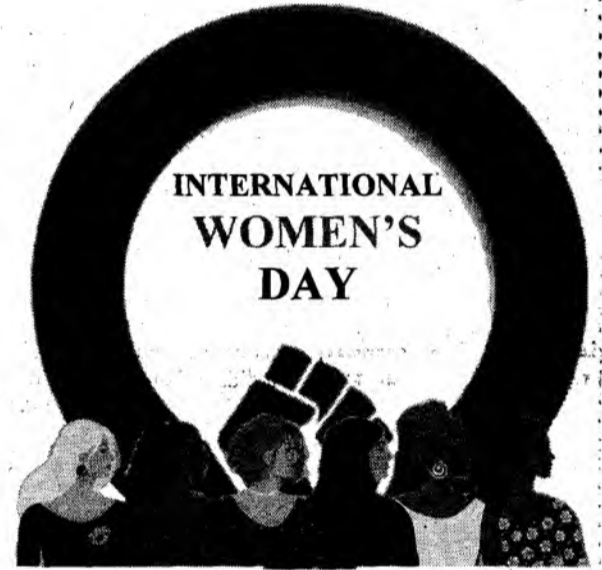
The theme for this year is "Choose To Challenge". A rather provocative and thought-provoking theme. A world that is consumed in turmoil and seen the resurgence of fundamentalist tendencies is rather instinctive, unlearning the struggles of women. It has seen the emergence of more nuanced and amplified forms of discrimination. The crimes against women remain ever-pervasive. Celebrated feminist writer Geena Dunne Anderson remarked: "Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong, it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."

Women have been biologically programmed to be tenacious, thereby putting the notion of being the weaker gender to test. History bears testimony to their grit as mothers, nurturers, warriors and writers. The list goes on. But women also have the power, the integrity to look beyond these roles and carve their own path. I wish to see women grabbing the world by its lapels to achieve their true potential and hence be brave enough to #ChooseToChallenge.

women and children and says: "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children."

A rather contentious issue here is the phrase "special provision". This takes us to the AnujGarg and Ors. v. Hotel Association of India, where judicial interpretation adopted to the changing circumstances of society vis-a-vis gender equality in the workplace. The idea of romantic paternalism was gauged by the apex court, which, in this case, centred on the prohibition on women working as bartenders. This was sought to be justified under Article 15(3) as being a special provision for their benefit. The embodiment of romantic paternalism as elucidated in Anuj Garg made it clear that classifications, through "protective legislation" basis cannot be sustained even when the State makes a claim that the law actually benefits women, and, was thereby saved by Article 15(3).

This brings us to the much-debated issue of gender justice in India. This deals with the relationship among men and women. The Constitution advoc-



The path to change is never a linear one, it is rather coarse and bruising, but these are scars that one needs to adorn like a badge of honour.

One can see change being brought about by Indian women, be it Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Bhikaji Cama, Lakshmi Sahgal, Sucheta Kripalani, Tara Rani Srivastava, Dakshayini or countless unspoken heroes. However, their contribution remains unfettered and this speaks volumes of their patriotic fervency towards the nation.

Perhaps, this is the fervency that we need to replicate to embrace the change that social mores need. Former US President Barack Obama in one of his speeches had remarked: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

Though the onus falls on us as individuals to bring this about, the judiciary too has been instrumental in steering change and reinforcing the principles of equality vouchsafed by the Constitution of India. Law, justice and society form the golden triumvirate when it comes to social change. India prides itself on an independent judiciary while balancing the legitimate expectations of the Constitution.

Despite having scaled new heights in many male-dominated fields, women continue to face social and economic oppression. Perhaps the founders of the Constitution could perceive the deep-rooted and entrenched bigotry in society and hence were motivated to carve out a special provision that manifested itself in Article 15 (3). This Article empowers the State to make laws for the benefit of

cates fair treatment of women and men. Equal participation by both in economic and social development, and benefitting equally from societies' resources is crucial for achieving gender justice.

Right to equality and right to life is guaranteed as fundamental rights under the Constitution through Articles 14 and 21 respectively. Unfortunately, gender justice looks foggy when evaluating the ground realities and crime against women in India. More often than not, there are horrific incidents that shake the very foundation of society such as the Nirbhaya rape case. Though there have been efforts to mitigate the situation, much remains to be done.

The Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law under the Chairman-ship of Justice (Retd.) J.S. Verma, which was constituted in the aftermath of the 2012 Nirbhaya case, proposed radical reforms to the legal and penal framework with respect to offences against women. The report emphasised the foriori of State responsibility for providing a safe environment while recognising the prevention of crimes against women. It even highlighted the egregious nature of the incident and how it struck at the very nature of basic human rights guaranteed to women in India: It indicated a stricter punishment to induce deterrence. While the report was comprehensive, the investigation of such crimes remains influenced by bureaucratic red-tapism. The legislative framework for the protection of the rights of women, in turn, amplifies the very principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution, covering various facets of a woman's life, where she faces discrimination and subjugatory behaviour. (IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet

TO THE EDITOR

Hunting down of migrant labourers

Editor,
Apropos the news report, "Majority of non-local labourers have left State" (ST 3rd March, 2021), I would like to point out that in the past or in the present context, many construction projects, including mega buildings and roads in Meghalaya still need the help of migrant labourers or non-local workers to ensure completion and for developmental projects as a whole. But, I was shocked to learn from media reports of the sudden murderous group attack on the eight non-tribal migrant workers from South Mankachar, Assam, by some misguided miscreants which took place at night on February 24, last at Umoid St Xavier's College in which one Raju Mondal was killed, while seven others were seriously injured. The construction workers were sleeping in the class rooms of St Xavier's College, when they were attacked. They were on the first day of the construction project for building a four-storeyed girls' hostel building there. Moreover, it is learned that a host of other Jesuit mega projects would be coming up in the vast campus at Umoid.

I wish to point out here that swooping down on non-tribal migrant workers who are soft targets is a

regular feature in many construction sites of Meghalaya, especially in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. I suspect that the main reason for these kinds of attacks are fear of influx by illegal non-tribal migrants; fear of loss of employment opportunities which are taken over by illegal migrant labourers and migrant workers; fear of mixed marriages which is assumed will lead to influx and Islamization. In short it is socio-economic insecurity, fear of socio-cultural and socio-political upheavals and religious jealousy. These fears, whether true or false, are still lingering deep in the minds of the tribals here.

I, therefore, appeal to my fellow tribals of our state, especially the youth, to think far ahead of the times, use their God-given wisdom, exercise prudence and arrest and control our communal passions.

Yours etc.,
Philip Marwein,
Shillong

Myanmar's hour of gloom

Editor,
Continuing anti-coup protests and subsequent violence and killings of protesters in Myanmar have put pressure on the world community to act to restrain the junta which seized power by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The strikes have badly damaged the country's economy. The military is relentless

and determined to crush the protests. Notwithstanding the death of many protesters, the military remains resolutely opposed to the demonstrations and protests. It is feared that the army will not tolerate the continuing civil disobedience campaign and it may deploy its full military strength against the protesters.

As attempts to crush the protests on the streets are continuing, the coup leaders are devising plans for political reforms. The military has been developing plans over the last three years for future course of action. For them, pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is the major stumbling block to their plan of action. Hence, they are making every effort to tarnish her reputation and end her political career. She is facing several trumped up charges. As she appears in court, more charges are read out. If she is convicted, she would not be able to contest elections in future. Other prominent NLD leaders are also facing many charges.

The military wants to correct some of the insufficiencies that have emerged. The army wants to get rid of the NLD. The military commanders are bent on banning NLD from politics. The military envisages a political future where the army is an important part. In order to

strengthen this vision, the coup leaders are planning to change the voting system. The new system would not allow big parties to dominate elections. It would allow the military 25% of parliamentary seats to control the legislature and the selection of the executive.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

Popularising car pooling

Editor,
The concept of car pool is quite old. Car pooling is a good practice used quite extensively outside our country and in many places in India, especially in the metropolitan cities, like Mumbai. Simply put, it is sharing of a resource by more than one person; the resource here is the vehicle, most importantly a four wheeler passenger car. Time and space is a serious challenge, especially in cities and towns, as also the costs and scarcity of these elements. Sharing of a vehicle, or simply put car pooling helps immensely. Car pooling helps us to reduce costs, as well de-congest the roads, parking spaces, etc. It also brings discipline and solidarity among citizens.

Above all, car pooling helps in reducing the number of cars on the roads, and this in itself contributes towards de-congesting traffic. Normally, even a normal four wheeler passenger car

can carry four persons at a time. So, instead of four cars on the road, owned by four different persons, one car can be on the road. Normally, people living nearby or moving towards the same direction, with similar working hours of office, business, etc., can easily share and form a car pool group. All they need to do is to maintain certain decorum and self-imposed discipline. This includes timings to go and return from work, point of pick-up, rotation of vehicles to be used on different days of work. If members of the group are having vehicles of their own then communication amongst each other, etc. The group cohesiveness, mutual respect of time and sharing of resources, camaraderie, etc., are important elements. Many car pools use the time to travel for better use by sharing issues (knowledge, hobbies, etc) together. Besides, car pooling, besides de-congesting traffic, helps in reducing pollution. This needs no further elaboration.

It also immensely contributes in reduction of parking spaces in work, or business. In cities, especially, parking is a big hassle. In many places of this part of the country, people who own cars, tend to bring their individual vehicles to work. This leads to serious issues of parking of vehicles at the work place. Many times there are arguments and fights between vehicle-owners over parking space,

which can be minimized by car pooling. Many office buildings built earlier and some built today still have limited parking provisions. Car pooling can help in reducing congestion. Reduction in costs to individuals for using car pools is a big plus. The costs can be reduced by as much as 75 to 80%, if judiciously done.

Other than travel to work, car pooling can also be used for shopping, leisure, entertainment, etc, among friends and families. This would not only help in reduction in costs for using cars, but also contribute to decongestion of market places, shopping complexes, etc. Car pool members can also think of having a common professional driver, which would be light on their pockets, and have multiple usages.

Offices and work places can promote and encourage car pooling by incentivising by way of marked parking place, etc. The Administration and Police can also contribute to this concept as part of community and social policing by earmarking priority parking, reduction in parking charges, etc.

Car pooling has multiple benefits for the society, and for individual citizens and also the civil administration more so in a place like Shillong or Guwahati where traffic snarls today take up a huge chunk of our time.

Yours etc.,
Ashim Bhuyan,
Via email

"Some things cannot be taught; they must be experienced. You never learn the most valuable lessons in life until you go through your own journey."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 22 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2021

Democracy pulverized in Myanmar

THE picture of a nun, Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng kneeling before the military junta in the northern Myanmar city of Myitkyina, begging the armed police officers to spare the children and take her life instead has gone viral. But even as the nun pleaded with the military regime (Tatmadaw) the police started firing at the protestors behind her. This nun's action should move the rest of the world to intervene in the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. Australia and New Zealand have taken drastic steps to cut off diplomatic ties with Myanmar. The US has announced sanctions but whether that is good enough to deter the Tatmadaw is questionable. They have been unrelenting in killing even young protestors with the intent of curbing such protests. Since the new military regime seized power on February 1, it has arrested hundreds of opposition activists, abolished the democratically elected parliament, and enacted a slew of new repressive laws. People in Myanmar have responded by organizing a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that has brought the country to a halt. Everyone from civil servants to doctors and train drivers have stopped work as a mark of protest against the Tatmadaw. But even as protests demanding the return of democracy have gained momentum the military regime too has escalated the use of force against citizens.

Political analysts observe that the recent coup and the violence of the past few weeks is the direct result of the world's failure to act forcefully against the military in the past, and when it unleashed its fury on the Rohingyas in 2017. Many of the commanders responsible for the attack on the Rohingyas then are now in direct control of the country. The international community has to take a forceful stance against the coup and push for an immediate return to democracy. It is imperative that countries impose targeted sanctions on the military leadership and their associated businesses, along with a global arms embargo. The Tatmadaw should be held to account for past abuses. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice need to step in and the UN Security Council (UNSC) too should carry out its mandated task of bringing justice to the people of Myanmar. This is also the litmus test for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and an opportunity for it to play a more decisive role in restoring democracy to Myanmar. The Tatmadaw has said it would hold new elections within a year. But should this be allowed by the world community when the November elections were free and fair? Such an election would only legitimize the military coup. The ASEAN should take a stand against the Tatmadaw and facilitate the return of democracy to allow the democratically elected government to function in Myanmar.

Cleaning Shillong's rivers

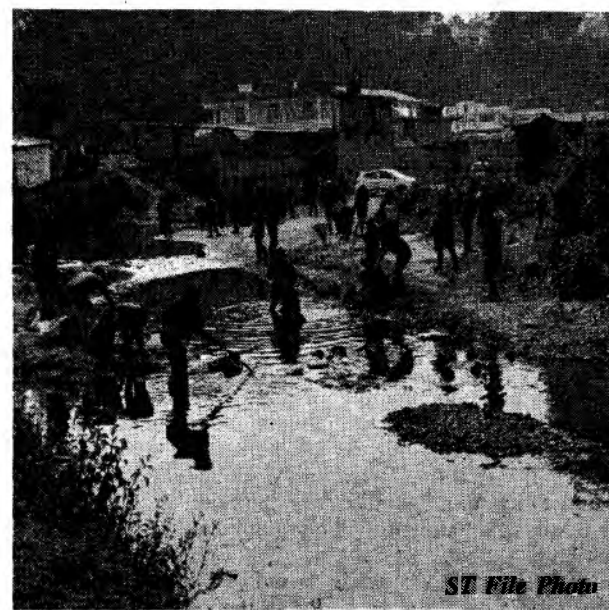
By Toki Blah

The anchor column of this newspaper for March 8, 2021 ran with, "DC lends her weight to humongous task of cleaning Umkialiar". The above apparently refers to the Operation Clean Up Drive initiated by the Shillong Times and which invites volunteers to come together as a citizen group to clean the Wahumkhrar river at Umkialiar with the whole intention of creating public awareness to the state of the two streams flowing through Shillong city. The condition of the Wah Umkhrar and the Umshyri especially in the dry season is pathetic to say the least. For some of us who have seen the pristine state of the two rivers in the past, their condition now is heartrending. Worse, the two streams with all the filth they carry finally empty themselves into the Umiam. In its turn, the Umiam from Rawraw downwards till Jingkieng Kalong, a stretch of river approximately 5 km in length, has turned into a stinking sewer covered with the slimy scales of discarded plastic bottles and bags. The only redeeming feature is that this stretch is not visible to the general public, but all the same it poses a direct threat to the life span of Umiam lake and its ability to continue generating power. Something has to be done.

Three questions need to be answered if one is serious about cleaning up the Umkhrar and the Umshyri. First, we have to ask who dirties the rivers and how? The answer is very simple. That rivers don't dirty themselves is obvious. The state of the rivers is however determined by their catchment areas and Shillong and Greater Shillong form the catchment area for both the Umshyri and the Umkhrar. This catchment area in turn is crisscrossed by streams, rivulets, gullies and drains that empty themselves into the two rivers. Plastic bags, plastic bottles, thermacol packages, paper, clothes even mattresses and all sorts of rubbish is dumped into drains that empty into the Umkhrar and the Umshyri. Direct dumping is not required. Due to the hilly and sloping nature of the terrain anything dumped anywhere will eventually end in the nearest stream. Our septic tanks, either directly or indirectly, all discharge into drains that

feed into the rivers. So as we piously ask ourselves who has dirtied our rivers, the damning answer is that it is we ourselves are to blame. Once we accept the veracity of the above, the answer to the question below becomes self explanatory.

The second question we ask ourselves is - Who should then clean our dirty rivers and how? The answer again to this one is obvious. We can't have one set of sloppy citizens dumping their waste into the river and another group of concerned citizens cleaning up the mess made by the former. This won't work and it is not



ST File Photo

sustainable. It is also obvious from the state of the two rivers that the number of sloppy uncivic minded citizens far outnumber those with any civic sense. It is clearly noticeable that this dumping of both solid and liquid waste into our river systems is done knowingly, deliberately and with the full knowledge that it is wrong. To stop it will need more than just public awareness programmes. What is really needed is a local authority, to supervise a vigorous civic campaign within its own area of jurisdiction. The role of such an authority, with the backing of the district administration, is to enforce civic sensibility.

The third and final question we need to ask ourselves is - What is the most sustainable way to clean the rivers? The best way and actually the only sustainable way is to manage waste disposal at its source - i.e. the household. As mentioned above waste management should be

enforced at the household level. Waste management at the household level should in turn be supported by (a) constant and unflagging enforcement (b) through an economically driven approach. If we are to manage both solid and liquid waste then three main players need to be identified. First the Government that has to identify and implement a sewage system for all the liquid waste that flows from the households. The septic tanks in use will have to be linked to such a sewage system. Second will be MUDA that shall identify and link all collected solid waste to viable markets for

they supervise. The Dorbars will charge a service fee from each household and this fee will help meet the respective maintenance expenditure for each Dorbar. Seed money to help the Dorbars meet initial expenses can be provided by the District Administration who will budget the Govt for the same.

The segregated organic and inorganic waste will then be collected by MUDA garbage trucks. MUDA will budget the Govt for the same. The collected waste will be then transported to pre-designated markets. For example, plastic waste can be transported to cement plants that will use such waste as fuel. Other sorts of inorganic waste already have existing markets and employment can be generated for those interested in the marketing of such waste. An all women SHG is already dealing with organic waste at Marten and they will welcome any additional raw material to their enterprise. This is an economically based waste disposal system. It's a win-win situation for all concerned. Employment will be generated; the city and our rivers will be kept clean; the problem of Marten solved; and most important civic awareness and consciousness will have been created in the minds of the general public.

As far as liquid waste is concerned, we need to come up with a system wherein the habit of emptying our septic tanks into the nearest drain will come to a stop. Please don't ever think you are immune from this habit. Everyone in Shillong indulges in it knowing or unknowingly. Ask yourself - How do you clean your overflowing septic tank and where does the waste go? The answer is for a sewage system or a number of mini sewage systems for the city. The technology for this is available even if funds are lacking. However ADB, World Bank and other international funding agencies can be tapped for necessary funds. In conclusion it needs to be said that Government can no longer turn a blind eye to our dying urban rivers. It shall have to take a call and support a cleaning up strategy that is sustainable and people oriented. We have the institutions and the people to do it. Please let's not waste any more time on the issue.

The author is President of ICARE

An Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

By TP Sreenivasan

President Joe Biden's "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" released on March 3, 2021 sounds soft and gentle, but its direction is unambiguous, its action plan is specific, its tone is uncompromising and its determination is steadfast. No harsh words have been used even against the named "competitors," nor have the allies been praised for past loyalty or support. The highest priority has been given to the pandemic, climate crisis, nuclear proliferation and fourth industrial revolution. Protection and promotion of democracy, strengthening the economic foundations to maintain the leadership of the world and promoting values abroad are also listed as priorities. America is back, diplomacy is back and alliances are back.

Given the general tone and tenor of the guidance, the only reference to India should not disappoint us. But the context and wording may surprise some. "We will deepen our partnership with India and work alongside New Zealand, as well as Singapore, Vietnam, and other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, to advance shared objectives." Afghanistan is mentioned in the context of having to end "forever wars," reaffirming that the US will maintain a robust presence in the Indo-Pacific. Then he goes on to the other regions without any particular order, speaking first about Pacific Island states and then about the European Union and the UK. "We will recommit ourselves to our Transatlantic partnerships, forging a strong, common agenda with the European Union and the United Kingdom on the defining issues of our time."

China and Russia are mentioned as posing unprecedented challenges. China's assertiveness and its challenge to a stable international system takes precedence over Russia, which is trying to enhance its power. "The distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats. China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system. Russia remains determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage. Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world."

Cooperation with China and Russia is not ruled out when it suits the national interests of the US. But America, not China, will set the international agenda. The US will engage with China from a position of confidence and strength. Specifically, climate change, global health, arms control and non-proliferation have been mentioned as possible areas of collaboration.

The Guidance is eloquent in many places on alliances. "We will reaffirm, invest in, and modernize the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and our alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea - which, along with our other global alliances and partnerships, are America's greatest strategic asset. We will work with allies to share responsibilities equitably, while encouraging them to invest in their own comparative advantages against shared current and future threats". It says. Then comes the recognition that "our vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. And we will be mindful of both our values and our interests as we

engage partner nations". The Quad has not been mentioned in this context.

Against the backdrop of Trump's alienation of Canada and Mexico, importance is placed on the closest neighbours in America. "Because the vital national interests of the United States are inextricably bound to the fortunes of our closest neighbours in the Americas, we will expand our engagement and partnerships throughout the Western Hemisphere—and especially with Canada and Mexico—based on principles of mutual respect and equality and a commitment to economic prosperity, security, human rights, and dignity."

As for the Middle East, the special position of Israel has been reiterated with a reference to "a viable two state solution" with an adverse reference to Iran and the need to end the Yemen war. The United Nations has been brought back to the centre stage as "imperfect, but essential" and a pledge has been made to meet America's financial obligations in full and on time. Apart from encouraging arms control measures, old and new, Obama's idea of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in national security, whatever it is worth. There has not been any tangible progress in this area and even the NGOs do not speak of the "Global Zero," for championing of which one of them won a Nobel Prize.

Diplomacy has been mentioned as the first resort even in the context of, addressing Iran's nuclear programme and North Korea's nuclear capability. At the same time, the US will not hesitate to use force, if necessary, to defend its interests.

"We are a nation of immigrants", the Guidance says unequivocally and promises to continue to be a place of refuge for those who seek prosperity and security. It mentions the measures taken already to remove family separation and discriminatory travel bans. Biden's trademark theory of a middle class foreign policy is restated in the words, "Our trade and international economic policies must serve all Americans, not just the privileged few. Trade policy, must grow the American middle class, create new and better jobs, raise wages, and strengthen communities."

The conclusion of the Guidance summarises the situation comprehensively. "This moment is an inflection point. We are in the midst of a fundamental debate about the future direction of our world. To prevail, we must demonstrate that democracies can still deliver for our people. It will not happen by accident - we have to defend our democracy, strengthen it and renew it... Revitalizing America's network of alliances, and the partnerships that have made the world safer for all of our peoples."

President Joe Biden, appears to believe in Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy: "speak softly, and carry a big stick; you will go far." Roosevelt described his style of foreign policy as "the exercise of intelligent forethought and of decisive action sufficiently far in advance of any likely crisis." What we see in Biden is all velvet, but behind it is an iron fist, as he has shown in his early actions and clear guidance for the future.

(T.P.Sreenivasan is a former Ambassador of India and a member of the National Security Advisory Board and presently the Director General of the Kerala International Centre. He has nearly 20 years of experience in multilateral diplomacy and has represented India at a number of international conferences organised by the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the Nonaligned Movement. He has chaired several UN Committees and Conferences).

TO THE EDITOR

Load shedding saga

Editor, The citizens of Meghalaya are madly enraged by the current load shedding. And justifiably so! The moot point however, is that both the Governmental authorities as well as the public are at fault. The Government is at fault because it gives no priority of going into the root causes and deeper malaise of the problems which have been afflicting the organization perennially. The public is at fault because it merrily forgets about the load shedding when things are normal. Also, Government's position on the load shedding subject, only on the basis of management of financial loans and power purchase, is like treating only the symptoms and not the disease. Cancer needs a treatment for cancer not for cough and cold. Or the public can let out its visceral from time to time till kingdom come!

Just before Christmas last year I had contributed to this newspaper a two part op-ed captioned, "What ails MeECL and its subsidiaries - an in-depth analysis". Hope the following summary will help.

building, school buildings, inspections bungalows, residential bungalows etc., are valued in multiples of crores of rupees. Not to speak of dams, power house, power stations, sub stations and human capital itself. This signifies that the organization is not poor.

On the liability front, financial liabilities top the list and made worse by the disproportionate size of regular employees, contractual employees and pensioners which all erode the financial capacity of the organization. The lack of professionalism in preparation of timely DPRs (detailed project reports) which led to cancellation of work orders is another malaise. Then there's political interference in personnel management, procurement, award of contracts etc. Toxic nexus of vested interest and personal aggrandisement; politicization; unrest and agitations and what have you have only quered the pitch further.

Upgradation and maintenance of infrastructure to make them viable has remained amiss. For example the Myntdu - Leshka project's inability to generate the projected units of power. The Unit 1 of Umiam - Umtru Stage IV had led to loss of crores of rupees in revenue. (Reference - Malcolm Roy report and

recommendations on the issue).

There are losses which are both financial and technical such as power thefts, inadequate billing and inadequate realization of dues. Non compliance with the Electricity Supply code and non-separation of accounts between MeECL and its subsidiaries since the unbundling have added to the mess. Lack of expertise in vetting of contracts is another major problem.

The public should also know that there is a super body sitting on top of MeECL and its subsidiaries. It is called the Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC). Whether this super body is doing its job as per the Electricity Act of 2003 or just determining tariffs is a question that needs answering. And then some of its employees don't even retire.

My humble submission is that Government should appoint an independent committee with a mandate to comprehensively look into the functioning of MeECL and its subsidiaries and come out with concrete recommendations. Also to examine the entire gamut of the power sector industry in Meghalaya. Generating thermal power from the abundant coal available in Meghalaya under legal

mining and using clean energy technology is an option. Also there is need to harness the enormous potential of renewable energy like solar and wind energy.

The primary aim and objective of all these exercises is to provide smooth power supply. Only then we can talk about long term dreams (not just rhetoric) of Meghalaya becoming an IT and Digital hub, thereby optimising the potential in multiple-types of tourism and hospitality sector and the smooth functioning of MSMEs etc.

Yours etc., Rudi Warjri, Ex - Independent Director, MeECL etc Via email

Women not the weaker sex

Editor, International Women's Day observed on March 8, saw a celebration and recognition of women who have carved a niche for themselves in the society, driving home the message for the need to empower women. I, for one look forward to the day when all women from any background, community, religion, caste and class would be appreciated and celebrated in this world. As of today, though we are in the 21st

century, girls and women are still subjected to discriminations and prejudices at home, at school, at work, in the streets, etc. Yet, what provides one with a ray of hope was a pooling of thoughts with young minds, especially boys who were of the opinion that the stereotypical statement of women as the weaker sex stands corrected. They believe that women are weaker than men is a wrong stereotype as many women have touched the pinnacle of success in almost all spheres that are usually dominated by men, be it sports, education, statesmanship, politics, judiciary, etc. Even in the para military, women are not left behind. They walk hand in hand with their male counterparts. These boys also realise that in their homes it is their mother who gets up first and again it is their mother who is the last to sleep in the house as she has to complete her household chores.

Interestingly, they are aware and are conscious that the role of a mother is not the only role that she plays. Besides being their mother, she is also a wife, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a grandmother, a daughter-in-law. From dusk to dawn her life revolves around her hearth her home, her family, her duties and responsi-

bilities at home and even at work. If she goes to work, she makes sure that her other engagements at home are completed. She comes back from work and immediately steps into the role of a care taker. She does her duty diligently so that her family members should not experience any discomfort. As a working woman and a home maker she balances the two perfectly well.

I believe that if young people both boys and girls are sensitive to the efforts of their mothers it is definitely a good start. After all, as the saying goes; charity begins at home. If respect and appreciation begins at every home, women would find this world more beautiful and comforting. For a wife, there can be no bigger support than the love, and adoration of her husband, for a mother her children means the world to her, for a daughter, an equal display of love from her parents boosts her morale and confidence, for a daughter-in-law, the respect of her in-laws wipes away feelings of strangeness and alienation. Can each one of us open up our hearts and mind and appreciate the being called "woman"?

Yours etc., Jennieffer Dkhar, Via email

“Propaganda is to a democracy what violence is to a dictatorship.”

— William Blum

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 203 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 2021

Assembly in darkness

THE electricity failure in the Meghalaya State Assembly on March 10, might have been due to the heavy thunderstorm lashing the city but it also portends the darker side of democracy in these unsettling times. The Assembly is a place where issues that plague the state are discussed with the objective of improving the delivery mechanisms of the Government. It is unfortunate that Government read 'executive' spends more time defending its actions or rather inaction instead of spelling out what it has achieved in its three year tenure. The big mess that the MeECL is in today has been attributed to the Congress-led MUA Government which is accused of signing a bad deal with the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) which has put Meghalaya under a Rs 3225 crore debt burden. This is something that the Congress has not cared to clarify to the public of Meghalaya which is bearing the brunt of regular load shedding. If the MDA is being held to account and regularly scrutinised, why is the Congress silent on its own acts of omission and commission? One thing is clear – no government is without blemish. The public awaits a statement from the present Leader of the Opposition who was also the Chief Minister of the State for the longest time as to why an otherwise astute politician should sign such a flawed deal with a Corporation that would put the state in such a mess – the cumulative impacts of which are being felt today.

Interestingly the Congress MLAs today blame the present Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma for standing up to answer pointed questions directed at his ministers, particularly the Minister for Agriculture & Sports and Youth Affairs, Banteidor Lyngdoh and the Commerce & Industries Minister, Sniawbhalang Dhar. It is a fact that these two ministers are not the most articulate and could perhaps reply better in the local language than in English. But the Chief Minister would not take chances because if they are asked supplementary questions the Government could find itself in the docks. But those who have covered Assembly proceedings will recall that even in the previous MUA regime, Dr Mukul Sangma had to stand up and answer queries directed at his ministers. The same Sniawbhalang Dhar was part of the MUA government. So too his brother Ngaitlang Dhar and between the two of them they did not have the forte to stand up and answer for their respective departments. This is a practice peculiar to Meghalaya. In no other state will the chief minister have to bail out his/her ministers as is happening here. Either the ministers are totally incompetent or it is the CM then and the CM now that also takes decisions on behalf of their departments. This is clearly an ailing democracy!

Stand up for democracy

By Albert Thyrniang

Watching the viral video on the 19-Year-Old Girl Kyal Sin, alias Angel who was killed in an anti-coup protest in Mandalay, Myanmar on 3 March was heart-rending to say the least. Angel, a taekwondo expert is now a martyr and symbol of resistance against the military junta's coup and the violent suppression of protest movement. Wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with the now iconic phrase "Everything will be OK," when she was shot on the head, the first time proud voter in the last general election, drew more than 100,000 people for her funeral. Mourners signalled the "three-finger salute" against authoritarianism in the South East Asian country. The hero, who had earlier posted on Facebook informing her blood group while requesting that her organs be donated in the event of her death, was one among the 38 people killed on the 'bloodiest' day taking the total to more than 60 over all in the post-coup turmoil.

Another image cited by the editorial of this newspaper the other day that has gone viral on social media is that of a nun kneeling with outstretched arms urging soldiers to kill her instead of young protesters. The bravery of the nun could move the world into action.

The sad end of the life of the promising young girl and many like her who have to sacrifice their lives for the future of their country should make us reflect on the freedom we 'enjoy' in our country. The nun could not remain silent and stepped out of her convent to confront security forces on duty who were clamping down on dissenters. People in Myanmar and other parts of the world have to risk their lives to fight for democracy. They have to resort to civil disobedience to gain, preserve and restore democracy. In Many countries like North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia and elsewhere citizens can't even raise their voices. We on the other hand take democracy for granted. It should also make us ponder whether we do stand up when democratic rights are threatened to be stifled.

Constitutionally India is one of the world's most democratic countries granting all the rights to its citizens. But democracy does not proceed automatically from the 'Rule Book' into reality. Its expression is viewed differently by different rulers. The present government is viewed as a regime that dislikes critiques and dissent. Therefore, the elements of democracy need

to be reiterated so that the government fulfils its constitutional obligations.

When protesting farmers at the Delhi border were denied electricity, water and internet service, the central government had to be reminded that it was muffling the constitutional guaranteed right of protest. It needed young international celebrities like singer Rihanna and climate change activist Greta Thunberg to ruffle the entire Union government set up.

Individuals who choose to speak up are not taken kindly to. The Delhi Police hunted down Disha Ravi and named her a "key conspirator" in the toolkit case. She was also a victim of detestable hate on social media by the Hindutva brigade. One cannot speak for the Bangalore based climate activist but probably it was worth it as the court while granting bail to her pronounced that her case was not sedition but a legitimate dissent questioning the police whether Ravi and others were being targeted for voicing their opposition to the farm laws. Six journalists were also charged with sedition 'for doing their job' (reporting) on the alleged police violence at farmers' protests. This is seen as a jolt on free press prompting many to term the current situation an 'undeclared emergency'. But does it mean we stop criticising the government? If we don't want to get anywhere close to Myanmar then sacrifices are worth making.

We are not Myanmar but press freedom is on the downside in our beloved country. The press is subjected to 'crackdowns'. Journalists have been beaten, arrested and forced to resign for reporting on contentious issues. Based on press freedom to news organisations, journalists, and netizens in the country the World Press Freedom Index 2020 ranked India 142 out of 180 countries. India is ranked just above Pakistan (145th), and Bangladesh (151). The opening line of this paragraph is mistaken because Myanmar ranked above us (139) in the World Press Freedom Index last year. It's quite a humiliating perspective. Press freedom is mentioned here because when there is no press freedom there is no democracy. The press is the fourth pillar of democracy. If the pillar collapses democracy follows suit. Anti-democracy believers know this very well. They target the media to weaken and rescind democracy.

India's reaction so far is limited to the External Affairs Ministry's statement that India believes in the rule of law and the democratic process. There has been no strongly worded condemnation on the violence that has led to many deaths. It is suspected that India has no authority to speak against the Myanmar 'coupers' because of its own non-envious records. Protesters against CAB/CAA were crushed with an iron hand. The citizens of Jammu and Kashmir have been treated unfairly by the country. Allegations of human rights violations continue to emerge from the troubled UTs. However, dissent should not be given up

if we care for democracy. In Meghalaya, the MDA government has been criticised for alleged corruption (in the ADCs), illegal mining and transport of coal, the under performance of the government and the prolonged MeECL 'ICU hospitalisation'. Journalists do reports on these issues. Opinion makers do make their voices heard. Citizens do vent their frustrations in letters to newspapers. The opposition and a political party have tried to corner the state government. But the government is unresponsive. It has even dared to mislead the public by feeding the wrong information to parliament denying any instance of illegal mining in the state. Leaders of an NGO had to face a near fatal attack in the fight against illegality. There is a feeling that speaking up is meaningless. It leads to nowhere. But it's up to us to take a stand.

The BJP's state president was till recently vocal against corruption and illegal coal mining. But now he has been silenced. The BJP's state unit might even remove this 'corruption crusader'. It is astonishing that the Chief Minister himself, who is from another party, was the first to make public the 'whistle blower'. The message to Meghalayans is loud and clear: Corruption is here to stay. Even the BJP that makes tall claims of 'zero' tolerance to corruption comes nowhere close to touching the fringes of this curse. It is despondent to see that corruption is normalised. Will everybody go into their shells now?

The effects may not be forthright. But giving up is not the option. Nothing worthwhile that is done is worthless. Watching Myanmar on Youtube and Television, viewing the disturbing images and scenes and reading about the suffering of the people of the South Asian country in the print and visual media we can only value our rights and freedom that much more. Citizens have gone to jail, charged with the draconian sedition law, thrown with FIRs by law agencies and groups. Unfortunately there is a price to be paid. Nothing comes for free, democracy included. The young of Myanmar are an inspiration. The soul of India has to survive. The soul of Meghalaya has to thrive. But we need to stand up and be counted. Email: albert.thyrniang74@gmail.com

India witnessing active intervention of farmers in political system

By Arun Srivastava

Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), spearheading the farmers' movement has made two significant moves, first, to give a call to the people of Haryana to force their legislators to vote against the M.L. Khattar government in the March 10 vote of no confidence and second, has appealed to farmers in all election-bound states to vote against the BJP and its allies to ensure their defeat.

These twin moves of the SKM ought to be not presumed as politicisation of the farmers' movement but as the first significant step towards intervention in the political system of the country. For the second move it has chosen Kolkata as the first rally pit stop. West Bengal has been the most politically conscious state in the country and SKM's intervention in the state would have wider ramifications across the country.

The political importance of Bengal for BJP could be made out from the simple fact that the party has put the prestige of the prime minister and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat at stake. The BJP and the prime minister have been designing their strategy in consultation with Bhagwat. This is also for the first time that the RSS has drafted senior functionaries in the state to guide the state unit. Apparently the BJP and Modi are being accused of poaching of the TMC leaders and legislators. The fact is it is the integral part of the RSS strategy to ensure the victory of the BJP.

It is amazing to watch that the entire saffron brigade from RSS, BJP to all the 24 frontal organisations of saffron brigade have launched a menacing fight against single lady Mamata Banerjee. Worst nature of vilification campaign has been launched. Even the prime minister of India has been flinging jibes at her.

A hawker selling children's wear on the pavement rightly sought to know whether the Bengali farmers would be able to understand the language of the farmer leaders from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. But he was quick to reply, it is body language, the thrust of the message, the concern of the millions of toiling farmers that would have impact on the psyche of the farmers of Bengal which any political party cannot do.

The call of the SKM to citizens of Haryana to approach their legislators, especially from BJP and JJP, and ensure that the anti-farmer state government of BJP and its allies is defeated in this no-confidence motion, reminds the call of the JP during the Bihar movement to the armed forces to protest. Victory of BJP in Bengal elections will witness emergence of a new kind of aggressive form of politics. With the fall of the last bastion of opposition resistance, the BJP would not maintain the façade of morality and probity in public life and accountability. The BJP and the Modi government would turn more ruthless.

The farmers are not only fighting for themselves but for the entire poor and middle class who will suffer the dangerous consequences of these laws. India is already witnessing the dark phase of democracy. The country has already entered a dangerous arena. People are not aware how this regime will behave in future. The SKM is preparing to try and inflict what farmers' leader Yogendra Yadav described as "vote ki chot" (hurt with votes) on the BJP and its allies in the five poll-set states of Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry.

Veteran farmer leader Balbir Singh Rajewal said: "We will appeal to all farmers not to vote for the BJP and its allies. We will not support any party or campaign for any party, nor will we tell farmers who they should vote for. All we will do is appeal to them not to vote for those who brought the farm laws and have unleashed repression on

farmers, and try best to vote in a manner that will ensure the defeat of the BJP and its allies."

Farm leaders will be sent to all the five states to address at least one rally organised by their local partners to mobilise opinion. The first such rally will be held in Calcutta on March 12. The farmers have also decided to firm up the solidarity with workers by joining the trade union call for protest action on March 15 against corporatisation and privatisation. Many of the central trade unions have been backing the farmers' protests.

Dr Darshan Pal, president of the Punjab chapter of the Krantikari Kisan Union and a member of SKM said, "We will take part at a convention in Kolkata on March 12 where we'll apprise local food growers on the anti-farmer face of the BJP and ask them to teach this 'Kisan Virodhi' party a lesson in the upcoming polls." Avik Saha, secretary, All India Kisan Sangrath Coordination Committee (AIK-SCC), said, "We'll appoint 'Kisan Doots' (emissaries) at the March 12 convention and they will take turns to reaching Bengal's villages and distributing pamphlets highlighting the sore points in the farm laws and their consequences for the agricultural community in layman's language."

The primary task before the SKM is to blunt the politics of communal divide. Farmers are farmers, irrespective of whether they belong to Muslim or Hindu community. The SKM will ask the voters to be cautious of the divisive policy of the BJP. The upsurge of farmers' power has been unprecedented. The farmers are rising as never before in India. They were meant to be encircled by the government, but they are encircling the government rapidly.

It is now up to the political parties to show whether they are capable of rising to the occasion and going beyond petty electoral seat calculations to teach their makers with the help of this farmers' uprising. Significantly, Rakesh Tikait has stressed on farmers' unity, which "is the only weapon to vanquish a stubborn BJP government at the Centre for repealing the three black agriculture laws." He even expressed apprehension that Union government may resort to coercive mechanism. He said "Its 'silence' for the past few days indicates that it is planning some steps against the farmers' agitation over newly enacted agriculture laws."

Apart from resorting to direct intervention in the political system through giving the call not to vote for BJP, the SKM is also planning to gherao the Parliament. Tikait said: "Farmers will gherao Parliament if govt doesn't repeal the farm laws. This time, 40 lakh tractors will be there, instead of four lakh tractors." The protesting farmers would plough the parks near India Gate and grow crops there. Leaders of the United Front will decide the date to gherao the Parliament. Tikait said farmers are openly challenging the government that if it does not repeal all three contentious agricultural laws and does not implement the MSP, then the farmers of the country will also demolish the godowns of big companies. Narendra Modi and the BJP, does not take kindly to criticism, whether from the citizens or from global celebrities. Already his lieutenants and supporters like Yogi Adityanath have launched a crusade to malign and denigrate the basic ethos of the Constitution. While Modi has made the media subservient, he has also made the opposition a passive spectator to his repressive mode of governance. In this backdrop the emergence of farmers resistance to the ruling party and the RSS is a sign of hope. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Mental harassment at workplace

Editor
The Administrative Head in our office (name withheld) has been organising a daily small lunch party in the office during the COVID 19 lockdown till date. In one way this has already broken (at least we can all agree that it has broken) a protocol of gathering people during lunch time at the workplace. There is a mixed reaction to this decision. A handful of people are happy and overwhelmed with the idea of cooking, eating and gossiping everyday in the office while a handful are against the idea of wasting time on something unproductive but are too timid to voice out their opinions. Most of them are forced to join in and have lunch with the whole group which is against their will. It is chaotic to see that the staff have gone astray from their duties. Their prime duty now is to plan for tomorrow's lunch, shopping for groceries, chopping vegetables, cooking, washing utensils (No wonder they have to return a huge sum of money

during the financial year because they are not performing their duties and denying help to beneficiaries because they don't have time for the beneficiaries). Not that I am against socialising and having office lunch parties. A lunch party occasionally is always great and healthy but a lunch party everyday is way out of hand.

Now this little lunch party is turning from a fun gathering to a form of harassment, where the head of the office is verbally calling out offensive names (names based on the origin of the race of the employees) to employees who bring their own lunch and refuse to eat the prepared lunch and it had gone to the extent of withholding the employees' salary until they agreed to have the prepared lunch in the office (which is against Payment of Wages Act, 1936: unjustified delay in payment of wages). This is very sad because just recently we had our Women's Day celebration and now the women in our office are under threat of losing their jobs just because they choose to pack and eat their own lunch.

The intent of this letter is to make the public aware that a situation as horrifying as this is happening in a Gov-

ernment Department in the state capital of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Vodafone services collapsing

Editor,
I wish to draw the attention of the office of the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills to the serious deterioration of the network services provided by Vodafone (Vi India) in many parts of Shillong city, particularly in the Mawlai area. Over the past few days, we the customers of this telecom company have seen that Vodafone's network has not been working at all. 4G services are either non-existent or extremely slow, and incoming or outgoing calls are non-responsive. The problem began ever since the start of the load shedding in Meghalaya a few days ago. Does the company not have a backup mechanism in place to power their towers during such foreseeable situations? It is amusing to note that these telecom companies do not delay by even a second to end a customer's services

when the monthly payment for an ensuing month is not paid, however, the quality of services they are offering currently to the residents of Shillong city are not up to the mark. We appeal to the concerned authorities to look into this matter urgently as it affects our work and education.

Yours etc.,
K Nongsteng
Via email

Post office woes

Editor,
I went to the Jowai Post Office on March 5, 2021 for sending a registered letter and was surprised to see that there was no electricity since it was during the load shedding hours. Hence the clerk could not register my letter. In fact I went to the Post Office knowing it was load-shedding hours with the belief that they would be using their own power generator. Surprisingly, I was told that the generator has been out of order for several months. I was also told that they have repeatedly written to their higher authorities to repair the generator but there was no response. So this is how the people of Jowai Town and Jaintia Hills are serviced by the postal authori-

ties! We cannot even expect the power generator of Jowai Post Office to be repaired. In the absence of power supply, the Post Office staff is forced to sit idle because none of the computers and machines can function without power supply. Just think of the huge loss to the Post Office when its employees have to idle away their time for hours together during the power cuts and all for want of a generator.

Yours etc.,
K. Kyndaid
Jowai

Stop the midnight load shedding!

Editor,
The news of murder of a chowkidar at the PWD Roads (Mechanical division) office at Tura during load shedding hours is a clear message to the Government that it needs to reschedule the load shedding hours which is currently from midnight to 6 am. The six hour long power cut gives ample time to the miscreants to carry out their planned crimes and escape without any hassle. On the other hand, many notorious

criminals also come out in the dark like drug users, vehicle lifters, thieves and dacoits. In the previous years too we have experienced that many Catholic parishes were robbed across Garo Hills. These are planned crimes which are best executed during load shedding hours. In the villages, cattle were taken away in pick-up trucks and the areca nuts were stolen from the trees. One such incident happened in our area where the pigs were stolen. When the villagers chased the thieves, they ran away in their pick-up trucks and left the pigs half way because they were squeaking non-stop.

Hence load shedding during midnight hours should be discontinued. Only then can there be an end to many of the crimes both in towns and villages. If this load-shedding continues we will be forced to believe that this Government is also a partner in crime.

Yours etc.,
L.A Sangma,
Tura

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"To say nothing, especially when speaking, is half the art of diplomacy."

— Will Durant

The Shillong Times

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Change in Uttarakhand

UTTARAKHAND saw a change of chief minister at the eleventh hour. BJP is changing Trivendra Singh Rawat at a time when he has completed four years in power and the state is set for assembly polls in February 2022. Admittedly, the performance of Rawat was not extra-ordinary by any definition. He has also faced criticism over his government's failure, among other things, to handle a serious flood situation. Internal fights within the BJP state unit has evidently led to the present situation.

Changing a chief minister at the fag end of a government's term is to court more trouble for whichever party runs that state. The BJP's problem is that most of its chief ministers are faceless wonders, drawing their sustenance from the Modi-Shah duo in Delhi. Lack of strong leadership at the state levels is generally sought to be made up with behind-the-scenes support from the RSS network. The result is that every time an assembly election comes, the BJP is at a disadvantage. This was evident in Maharashtra where Devendra Fadnavis held the reins and yet failed to create a mark for himself. So too with Haryana where Manohar Lal Khattar failed to muster a majority for the party in the last assembly polls and managed to retain power with a newly formed regional entity. Madhya Pradesh has a strong CM face for the BJP. For the entire south, except for Karnataka where strongman Yeddyurappa is in command, the BJP does not have strong leadership. The messages from both Modi and Shah fail to reach the masses due also to language constraints in the south. The result is that the saffron party fails to grow in the South as also Odisha.

In West Bengal too, despite hard work, the BJP is still not reaching anywhere. In Assam, the coming assembly polls will show whether the BJP manages to stay in power.

It is here that the Congress has an advantage. It has strong leaders in most states, though the effect is nullified by the weak leadership at the helm in the post-Sonia Gandhi period. Still, the Congress can look for a revival of its fortunes in state after state for the simple reason that the BJP failed to build strong leaderships at regional levels. In the present round of assembly polls too, the Congress is likely to share power in Tamil Nadu. Kerala also might see a return of the Congress-led UDF. In Assam too, with the new-found association with a regional party, the Congress has some hope.

Sex workers figure in Assembly debates...but

By Patricia Mukhim

I am quite sure that our honourable MLAs and other respectable citizens don't consider sex work to be appropriate for a society guided by rigid tenets of right and wrong and which unequivocally expects women/girls to be the epitome of respectfulness (ba don burum). In fact to qualify to belong to that hallowed space of "thei don burum" (woman of virtue) one has to follow a strict code of conduct such as (a) not laughing out loud (b) not wearing certain kinds of clothes (c) not arguing or debating when men are speaking (d) not meddling in politics which is 'traditionally' a male domain as men are believed to be the khat-ar bor (endowed with the 12 times the strength of a woman).

Like in any other patriarchal society, women in a matrilineal society too are expected to nurture the family; the hearth and home and be the primary care giver. Am not so sure that this gender construct can be dismantled any time soon, because women themselves act out these socially and mentally embedded roles in order to be accepted as part of society. To break the norm is to suffer ignominy and even be called a traitor to the tribal value systems. Not that men follow those tribal values, but then we have to remember they are judged by different sets of yardsticks. After all they are men! And in a society where the moral compass used for men is different from that used to track women, sex work is taboo. But no one cares to find out why a woman is forced into this trade.

It would have been a more productive debate if the MLA who raised the question about Khyndailad (Police Bazar) being a pick up point for sex workers had also consulted some of the leading women NGOs such as North East Network or the Meghalaya State Commission for Women since these institutions would have facts and figures about the probable numbers of women engaged in sex work; their socio-economic profiles; their marital statuses et al. That would have turned the debate into a more compassionate and non-judgmental one. But the tone and tenor of the question itself betrayed the mindset of the questioner - MLA. He does not like the fact that any woman, more

so a Khasi woman should be reduced to a sex worker.

With poverty growing in Meghalaya and the number of women-headed households on the rise sex work is inevitable and if the state cannot offer an alternative livelihood then it also has no right to judge and penalise a sex worker. Men should use the lenses of compassion and ask themselves which woman would be happy to be involved in sex work. No woman can possibly want to be sexually assaulted (for that is what it is) by some stranger night after wretched night. If she does it, it's because she has no options left. Hence you have a Sonargachi in West Bengal and 8 other red light areas in the metros of this country.

Sadly the point of the Assembly debate was more about stigmatising sex work and proposing a set of legislations that would end the sex trade without considering what alternative livelihoods these women will take up

are illegal. If the concerned MLA is pointing towards a full-fledged prostitution racket where the police are not taking action then he has a point. But this machinery is so well-oiled that it is unlikely that the racket will be exposed and the perpetrators arrested.

The UNAIDS a United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS a joint venture of the United Nations family which brings together the efforts and resources of 11 UN system organizations to unite the world against AIDS estimates that there were 657,829 prostitutes in the country in 2016. In an article published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) titled, "Invisible and Unaccounted: Sex Workers in India," one sex worker rues that there is no room for respect or acceptance towards the profession as sex workers. When she approaches schools with sufficient income and all the required documents,

Bangkok the hospital for sexually transmitted diseases is the most visible one and women have no shame about going there to get themselves tested. It will take us eons to accept that sex work is also work and those engaged in that work are vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

In international circles and the United Nations, the term 'sex worker' is used to refer to all adults of 18 years and above who sell or exchange sex for money, goods or services. If the woman is an adult and engages in sex work according to her own volition she cannot be criminalised. Its only when a minor girl is sold for sex that it amounts to the crime of trafficking in humans and a violation of the POCSO Act. If there are circumstances where a person has been coerced into selling sex and is doing so against her wishes, that transaction is not sex work and the person is not a sex worker.

Trafficking or sexual exploitation of minors and women against their wishes cannot be conflated with sex work. Sex work is usually classified as 'direct' (open, formal) or 'indirect' (hidden, clandestine, informal). Direct sex workers identify themselves as sex workers and earn their living by selling sex. Indirect sex workers usually don't rely on selling sex as their first source of income. Some of them camouflage their sex work by working as waitresses, hairdressers, massage girls, street vendors, or girls such as in Thailand who are used to promote a liquor brand in the red light areas. Such women do not want to be identified as sex workers.

These days, the advocates of sex workers say that the word prostitution because of its negative connotations should be replaced by the words 'sex work'. Leaving the semantics aside, it is time for the Government to actually conduct a study and find out the number of women dependent on sex work and having done that to try and to rehabilitate these women in some livelihoods. The last thing that anyone should do is to point fingers at sex workers. Let's not be holier than thou while discussing sex workers. And as I said earlier, no woman would opt for sex work if she had another option.



when that source of income is snatched away from them. Besides, as long as men solicit sexual services from women, sex work will continue. Pious Christians who pooch pooh the idea of sex work should know this trade was mentioned in the Bible and hence is as old as human-kind. It didn't start yesterday. And if the idea of discussing this in the Assembly is to criminalise sex work then the MLA has to think again!

Sex work or prostitution is legal in India. However, the act of soliciting customers in a public place or owning or managing a brothel or running a prostitution racket in a hotel as is happening in some seedy hotels of Shillong

her 5-year-old child is still denied admission. Although there is no legal requirement to provide the father's name or documents, one school used it as an excuse to deny her child's right to education. And when a pregnant sex worker needs to have her delivery, the hospital gives her the lowest priority, even in an emergency.

In Meghalaya we have very little work done in surveying how many women actually earn their livelihood through sex work. Also because we are a society that is not open about a lot of issues related to sex, it is difficult to track how many sex workers could be suffering from HIV/AIDS. In the Thai capital,

Upsurge in new Covid-19 cases in India a serious concern

Containment and vaccination strategy needs fresh relook

By Gyan Pathak

With a record 22,854 new COVID-19 cases on March 10, India is back to the level of July 3, 2020. Just a month ago in February 2021, the number of new cases was around 9000, which was just at the level of June 3, 2020, and which many believed as a signal of success of the containment and prevention strategy being implemented by the government. However, the present upsurge up to 2.5 times of the lowest level in February proves our strategy has utterly failed after initial success. The concern is greater than ever before, since the continuous upsurge in the last month remained unbridled despite our vaccination drive being implemented. No doubt, the present containment of COVID-19 and vaccination strategies need a fresh relook.

Where have we gone wrong? It is a pertinent question the answer to which may help both the planners and the people. Covering up mistakes and failures would further aggravate the situation, though the ruling establishment may find it politically expedient and most tempting in electoral politics. Once we know the answer, it must be made public because their life is at stake, and the answer may enable them to reconsider their

"The concern is greater than ever before, since the continuous upsurge in the last month remained unbridled despite our vaccination drive being implemented. No doubt, the present containment of COVID-19 and vaccination strategies need a fresh relook."

steps, both preventive and curative. It may also help the administrative and healthcare professionals to avoid further mistakes that are obvious in the new trend of upsurge.

The very first thing we must reconsider is our present strategy of vaccination. It was already warned that hundreds of new COVID-19 variants are spreading fast, and many of the persons already vaccinated may be re-infected. Our healthcare system has therefore no time to relax. It needs to be always alert. Until now, we don't know such cases happening, but that is not a matter of complacency. Since the upsurge is being recorded despite vaccination drive in place, it needs to be suitably changed to cater to the needs of the areas where the upsurge is noticed. While quarantining the infected areas, the government may reconsider the eligibility criteria of vaccination for that particular region and the surrounding to accommodate all the persons to be vaccinated. It may immediately stop further spread of infection.

The next thing for consideration is covid-appropriate behaviour to be strictly implemented. We have been noticing that despite warning by experts, it is being flouted everywhere. Election rallies are being organized, marketplaces are full of people, public transports are running without precautions, and even working place are seen with people, most of the time without masks. Public celebrations are found to be without restrictions or covid-appropriate behaviour. It is a sure recipe for faster spread of infection. Everyone, from common people to the officials responsible for implementing covid-appropriate behaviour have gravely faltered. We see only a blame game, especially resorted to by politicians who are flouting it themselves but blaming their rivals day in and day out.

The matter is of serious and cannot be ignored especially in the six states - Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu - that account for 83.76 per cent of fresh COVID-19 cases of the country. Political gatherings have become common everywhere in the

first week of January when the first wave of Covid cases was receding. It is in this context, testing, tracking, and quarantining need to be vigorously implemented and followed up. Healthcare facilities also need to be upgraded.

The tests conducted in India so far have crossed 22 crore-mark and the daily positivity rate stood at 2.43 per cent. The positivity rate is still high which should be a matter of concern. Since India has a population of 138 crore, the number of tests must be sufficiently increased. Vaccine drive was launched on January 16, and only 2.52 crore doses have been administered till date. We are able to administer only a little above 9.20 lakh doses daily. The progress is obviously very slow despite the vaccine strategy being changed and shifted from public sector to private sector.

Of the 2,52,89,693 vaccine doses administered, 71,70,519 healthcare and 70,31,147 frontline workers were given the first dose, while 39,77,407 healthcare and 5,82,118 frontline workers the second dose, according to the provisional report. Thus vaccination obviously needs speed, since India needs to vaccinate at least 700 million people before the country can dream of any herd immunity, according to a sero-surveillance report, though AIIMS director Dr. Randeep Guleria has recently warned that "herd immunity is very difficult to achieve and one should not think of it in practical terms in India, especially in the time of variant strains of COVID-19 and waning immunity." Lockdown and other containment measures are being resorted to by the state governments to stop the new upsurge, but these are the easiest measures. We actually need to strengthen the healthcare system, suitably change the present strategies with speed, and enforce Covid-appropriate behaviour. Awareness drive must continue with renewed vigour. Our faults are more responsible for recent upsurge than the new variants of COVID-19. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

MDA suffering from past blunders?

Editor,
Much has been said about the load shedding in the State. In fact, it has now become the 'talk of the town'. But has anyone ever thought or put forward a question as to how did it all begin? Why is Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited so much in debt? Why does it owe certain amounts of money to different discoms?

It is our tendency as humans to make our own judgements. More so, we tend to blame or hold people accountable for mistakes or errors gone wrong in the past - either committed by somebody or 'something'. Similar is the case with the MeCL.

We have heard a great deal of negative criticism in the last few days of the Budget Session in the Assembly where several questions were raised in particular with regards to the load shedding. Indeed, load shedding is a pain and it causes difficulties in our daily lives. Much of our work depends on electricity. They range from a variety of daily tasks whether at home or in the office. But, have we ever wondered why this happens? We blame the current functioning of the MeCL, both authorities as well as the Power Minister. But is that right? Have we forgotten the realities of what went down with the previous

governments especially the Congress government? As far as my memory goes, we faced hours of load shedding in the past decade when the Congress-led government was in power. The signing of the NTPC agreement which now has to be paid for the next 23 years amounting to Rs 3036 crore (11 crore per month), crores of rupees owed to the discoms and power generating companies etc., were all executed under the Congress-led government. This predicament is now being handled by the present MDA government which is doing nothing but cleaning up the mess created by the then Power Minister, Mukul Sangma and his government when it was in power. Such things aren't easy to be dealt with. But the present government is trying its best to grapple with the situation and make amends for what has gone wrong.

People joining the chorus of boos, throwing dirt and questioning the present government should be thinking twice, questioning what it is that went wrong in the past for which the Power Department is now suffering or rather is crippled. As enlightened citizens of the State we should not just be blown about by the wind but need to reason and think logically and ask the right questions to the right quarters and ask why something is the way it is. Sometimes the answer is right there so we simply cannot feign ignorance.

Yours etc.,
Natasha Pariat,
Shillong - 3

Cleaning Shillong

Editor,
I write to support the proposals expounded by Toki Blah in his article 'Cleaning Shillong's rivers' (ST March 10, 2021), which are workable and sustainable, and need to be implemented immediately. These may also be extended for keeping lewdih and Khyndailad clean. People may be employed to remove the waste materials periodically throughout the day, to be financed by the shopkeepers and vendors. At the household level, we must take the responsibility of keeping our neighborhood clean throughout the year. This responsibility should include the drains, for that's where the waste ends up. We shall take the responsibility of segregating the waste, but we must not be made to stand on the road every morning, waiting to hand over the garbage to the truck. We may be allowed to leave the bags in front of our homes, tied with distinguishing string, say green and blue.

Yours etc.,
S Ahmed
Shillong 1

Report unethical behaviour

Editor,
Apropos the letter titled, "Mental harassment at workplace" (ST 10 March, 2021),

I must commend the author's courage for calling out the unprofessional conduct of the Head of Department in question. Such behaviour on the part of such a senior official to lead astray the staff of the department from their daily duties is highly uncalled for. No wonder the government departments under such leadership earn a bad name and reputation for themselves. What is even more appalling is the allegation by the author that the said Head of Department resorts to racial slurs and abuses and even to the extent of withholding the disbursement of salary if lunch is not prepared in the office!

I request the author of the letter not to be scared at all. Many in the civil society are ready to fight their cause at this terrible evil going on in the office. If the author is afraid of revealing their identity it's perfectly alright. But please write an anonymous representation against this errant senior official of the government to the Chief Secretary, Government of Meghalaya and to the Addl. CS/Principal Secretary/Commissioner and Secretary who is the overall in charge of the Department. Please also send a copy to the Meghalaya Lokayukta and also send an anonymous petition addressed to the Chief Justice, High Court of Meghalaya. Do not be afraid. If need be, even send a petition to the PMO. Let's see for how long this senior official continues in this evidently unprecedented behaviour.

Yours etc
Jeremiah S
Via email

On vaccine diplomacy

Editor,
The competition between India and China to provide vaccines to more countries has risen to a pitch with ways to ramp up delivery of doses to developing countries becoming an important item on the agenda of the first Quad leaders' summit. India has realised that it is facing fierce competition from China in vaccine diplomacy. Hence it is planning to ramp up vaccine production to counter China. India and China have donated millions of doses to many countries. However, China has no publicly available official data on vaccine supplies when compared with that of India. India has urged the US, Japan and Australia to invest in its vaccine production capacity. The Quad countries will devise plans to increase vaccine manufacturing capacity in India. Indian manufacturers have a combined capacity of billions of doses.

China has distributed vaccines to many countries. However, the reluctance of China's Pharmaceutical companies to share details of their trials raises doubts about the effectiveness of the vaccines. In fact, more than a dozen vaccines

developed in China are in clinical trials with about half of them in phase III trials. As a matter of fact, only one Chinese vaccine has received emergency approval so far. News reports from many countries show that people in those countries are clamouring for Indian vaccines.

India's vaccine efforts need to be seen in the correct perspective. India has a track record of mass production of very important drugs. India has provided anti-AIDS drugs to African countries. Similarly India has provided different medicines to countries in times of health crisis. So it can be reasonably assumed that India's vaccine distribution is not completely in the context of competition with China.

This is an opportunity for Quad to prove that it cannot only deliver on security issues but also on critical issues like healthcare. As India has financial constraints, the other members of the Quad need to make concerted efforts to help India ramp up vaccine production. In this way they can prove their credentials as a significant power in crisis management.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS
Kollam -78

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"Inflation is the one form of taxation that can be imposed without legislation."

— Milton Friedman

The Shillong Times

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Democracy backsliding

V-DEM a Swedish Institute that measures democracy in all countries that have democratically elected governments recently said, "India is No Longer a Democracy but an Electoral Autocracy." The V Dem Institute's report notes that much of the decline in democratic freedoms occurred after the BJP and Narendra Modi's victory in 2014. This is a worrying observation for a country that has long been hailed as the world's largest democracy. Other than the 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi promulgated Emergency to keep her detractors at bay, India has held firm to the ideals of democracy as is proven by the orderly electoral processes to Parliament, state assemblies and all other representational bodies. If the domination of a dynasty for many decades raised question marks on India's democratic system, that too is now defeated at least temporarily.

Yet, today there is a sense of oppressiveness felt by those in the media, by activists and civil society. Anti-CAA activists and those taking the side of the farmers' protest have been jailed. Many are under arrests on charges of sedition. In this context, the scrutiny of India's credentials by V-Dem merits a wide discussion in this country.

V-Dem Institute reports that India has registered a 23 percentage point drop on its 0-to-1 Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) scale; which is cited as "one of the most dramatic shifts among all countries the world in the past 10 years. Its observation formed part of a global scan on the state of democracy. It states that India has, during this period, turned into an electoral autocracy — a far cry from being an electoral democracy.

Since 2014 India has been under the BJP Government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. If the V-Dem assessment is admitted as a fact, it would mean that the PM must shoulder the blame. The Modi government has been tough on many counts, refusing to give ear to activists, as in the farmer protests lasting for months now, after the Centre introduced three new agriculture reform laws. It was with the same toughness that the Modi government handled the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and allied laws, resulting in massive riots in the national capital, Delhi. The present government and its supporters feel that in India freedom is taken as license to disrupt governance thereby preventing the government from undertaking any reforms measures that are in public interest.

However, criticism about the state of Indian democracy must be taken in the right spirit, and governments must restrain themselves from imposing more curbs on individual freedom as also on group activism for justified causes. National interests must be kept in mind by both governments and activists.

Centre's fiscal policies taking heavy toll on country's economy

Steep rise in petro products prices contributing to inflation

By Prabhat Patnaik

Even the blinkered BJP government sees the need for a fiscal policy that would stimulate the economy by increasing government expenditure; but it finds itself in a bind since it does not know how to finance such larger government expenditure. Simply spending more by borrowing, that is, by enlarging the fiscal deficit, is frowned upon by international finance capital, and our government, notwithstanding its much advertised "hyper-nationalism", does not have the gall to violate the dictates of globalised finance. The question of enlarging government expenditure by borrowing therefore does not arise. At the same time, it cannot tax capitalists, whether through a wealth tax or through a higher tax on profits; its entire *raison d'être* consists in providing them with all manner of tax concessions in lieu of which it gets generous financial support from them. The professed belief is that putting more resources in their hands will increase investment.

This belief however is mistaken for two obvious reasons. First, giving tax concessions does not even increase total post-tax profits. Since the working people consume the bulk of their incomes, giving tax concessions to the capitalists without increasing the fiscal deficit, i.e., while simultaneously curtailing government expenditure to a similar degree, does not increase post-tax profits. The effect of tax concessions in increasing post-tax profits is offset by the reduction in profits owing to reduced demand on account of the curtailment in government expenditure.

There is a simple formula here: post-tax profits, when the working people consume their entire incomes, equal the sum of capitalists' investment, capitalists' consumption and the fiscal deficit, if we abstract from foreign trade (which we shall do as it is not germane to the argument here). Since capitalists' investment, decided upon earlier, does not change immediately, and since the same is more or less true of their consumption, post-tax profits can increase only if the fiscal deficit increases. Hence tax concessions matched by an equivalent reduction in expenditure, do not increase post-tax profits in the aggregate. True, the post-tax profits of some among the capitalists may increase (the favoured corporate groups) but then those of the others must decline. Even if we assume that capitalists who get larger post-tax profits invest more, even then total investment does not increase.

Secondly, the assumption we just made, namely that capitalists who get larger post-tax profits invest more does not actually hold. Capitalists invest more not when they get larger profits; they invest more only when demand increases, raising their degree of capacity utilisation. Hence no amount of tax concessions will induce them to add to capacity by investing more if demand is not increasing. Tax concessions in this case, while they might benefit particular corporate groups, will simply be pocketed by them, without making an iota of addition to capacity.

But this erroneous claim that tax concessions to capitalists boosts investment is used to justify such concessions. And on these grounds, larger public expenditure is not sought to be financed by larger taxes on capitalists. What the BJP government, unable to enlarge the fiscal deficit and unwilling to increase taxes on capitalists,

become extremely simple: raise revenue by imposing indirect taxes on petro products, and by privatising public sector enterprises (selling the family silver as some have called it); spend whatever can be garnered in this manner, while keeping the fiscal deficit in check so that global finance remains satisfied. Privatising public sector enterprises however has not fetched much until now, since the corporate know that if they wait a bit longer rather than rush into buying such enterprises immediately, they would get an even better deal and even more plum enterprises. So, taxes on petro products have been the most common manner of revenue mobilisation till now, with which the government hopes to revive the economy through larger expenditure.

This however has two obvious limitations. First, despite the huge burden it imposes on the people, the revenue generated from this

"Since capitalists' investment, decided upon earlier, does not change immediately, and since the same is more or less true of their consumption, post-tax profits can increase only if the fiscal deficit increases."

has chosen to do therefore is to finance larger government expenditure by increasing indirect taxation. Direct taxes on the working people are difficult to administer (since there are so many of them), and financing government expenditure through them does not add to aggregate demand: the boost to demand by government expenditure, financed in this manner, is offset by the reduction in demand through reduced consumption by the working people, a point which even the BJP government perhaps understands. So, the recourse now is to greater indirect taxes.

But, after the shift to the Goods and Services Tax, the indirect tax rates for most commodities now are a matter for the GST council to decide; the union government's hands therefore are to an extent tied. There is however one *milch cow* which is left out of the ambit of the GST and that is petro-products. The union government therefore has latched on to this commodity, on which it has decided to increase indirect tax-rates, as a major means of raising revenue.

Its fiscal policy has thus

single source is not adequate to enlarge government expenditure to the requisite extent. In the current year's budget for instance, the total nominal government expenditure is supposed to increase by less than one per cent over the pandemic year 2020-21(RE) which means a fall in real terms.

Obviously, no revival of the economy is possible if government expenditure is expected to fall, especially when capitalists' investment cannot increase, as it is limited by the paucity of demand, and total consumption in the economy follows rather leads an increase in income.

The second point is even more significant. The belief, that an increase in government expenditure financed by an equivalent increase in indirect tax revenue can always increase aggregate demand and hence output and employment, is erroneous. An indirect tax on wage goods is rather similar to a direct tax on wages; it has a demand contracting effect which would offset the expansionary effect of any increase in government expenditure. On the other

hand, an indirect tax on investment goods or goods for capitalists' consumption, can have an overall demand-expansionary effect, since capitalists can always maintain their real purchases of the taxed commodities by running down their cash balances or by borrowing from banks, while the expenditure by government would raise demand and output.

Now, the question is: is an increase in excise duty on petro-products to be categorised as an increase in indirect taxation of a wage good or of a luxury good? The government pretends that petro-products like diesel and petrol are consumed by those owning cars and other motor vehicles, and are therefore in the nature of luxury goods, so that rise in their prices cannot be claimed to hurt the poor.

But this is completely wrong. Petro-products, rather like electricity and coal, are "universal intermediaries"; they are used not just for private consumption but for a variety of other uses: for public transport, for carrying goods from one location to another, and as an input into agricultural production which provides the most elemental necessity of all, namely foodgrains. Since an increase in input cost at any stage must reflect itself in the form of higher prices of the final good, petro-product price-hikes must cause an increase in the prices of a whole range of final goods including those that enter into the consumption of the poor.

If the final prices do not rise, then that can only be because the profit-margins of the petty producers, like kisans, are squeezed to accommodate higher input costs without a rise in the final price. Thus a rise in the prices of universal intermediaries hurt the poor one way or another, whether they are passed on or not.

There is a further point here. One of the reasons for the rise in prices of late, despite the economy being severely demand-constrained, is the cost-plus effects of the rise in petrol prices. Government policy therefore is directly responsible for the recent spurt in inflation. In the face of this spurt, the obvious ploy of the Reserve Bank is to keep the interest rate high; and the high cost of credit, especially for the petty production sector, acts as an additional factor hurting the poor, either through a further impetus for price rise, or for further squeezing the petty producers, making them unviable. Thus the government's fiscal bind is taking a heavy toll on the Indian economy. (IPA Service)

American rescue act a big rebuff to neoliberal economic agenda

Both left and trade unions have reasons for some satisfaction

By Nitya Chakraborty

The historic American Rescue Act signed by President Joe Biden on Thursday marks a milestone in the struggle of the people of the United States for a better living standard defying the neoliberal agenda of austerity and robbing the poor while making rich richer. The \$1.9 billion package goes beyond the covid-19 related compulsions of the U.S. economy and deals with the demands which the American left led by Bernie Sanders has been making since the 2016 presidential election campaign.

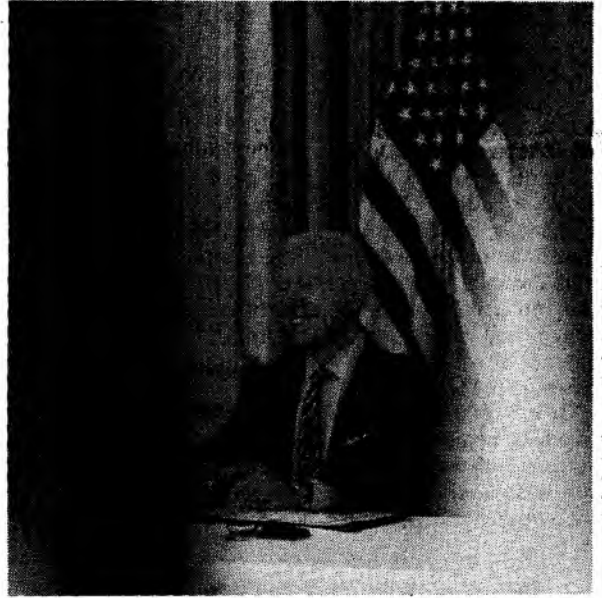
In fact President Biden has stunned the Sanders group, the trade unions and the U.S. Communist Party by the sweep of his package. The AFL-CIO, the largest federation of American unions, has termed the package more widespread than President Roosevelt's New Deal of 1930s. Biden has got the back of the U.S. working class, the leaders said. As some of the leading experts have commented, the Biden package is a repudiation of the trickle down theory, the favourite of the neo liberals in the last forty years.

As Dr. C J Atkins observes in US daily People's World, after more than 40 years of dominating American economic and political life, the extreme free market capitalist ideology of neoliberalism is starting to show some serious cracks. "Trickle down" policies that have for decades shoved money toward the top at the expense of the bottom are breaking down

of quantitative easing by buying up bonds along with interest rate manipulation, leading to an unequal recovery. Inequality widened and it reached its peak in 2020 during the pandemic.

Democratic senator Bernie Sanders who started his Peoples Revolution programme after 2016 presidential elections has been campaigning consistently since then that he will work for 99 per cent of the people and his programme contained Medicare for All and the minimum wage of US\$ 15 per hour. Biden is supposed to take up both the issues and if that happens, that will be a big victory for Sanders and the trade unions. That is a big change in the relationship of the trade unions with the Democratic Party also, especially with the left wing groups. President has supported the forming of unions at Amazon and that is a big shift. Amazon owner is close to the Democratic Party and a big donor. Biden's support has galvanized the trade union movement in the gig economy and demands are being raised for more facilities in the tech industry.

Many experts have taken notice of this paradigm change. Paul McCullery, a business professor at Georgetown, told the New York Times earlier this week, "Having the tools of economic stabilization work a whole lot more through the fiscal channel and a whole lot less through the mon-



etary channel is a profound, pro-democracy policy mix." In plainer language: It's better to have elected representatives rather than unelected bankers making the call on how public money is spent.

This fundamental shift has just not come so easily. It is the outcome of the long struggles of the American people against the establishment since the 2008-09 economic crisis and even before. The Occupy Wall Street movement, the Black Lives Matter struggles, the unity of action of the left of the Democratic Party with the trade unions and the communists have led to a broadened unity of the American people who were in the streets protesting against the policies of the Trump regime in the last four years. Biden, as a realist, has taken note of this shift in the mood of the American people. Sanders has popularized the words socialism and inequality to the American youth.

The victory of the American left through this rescue package is limited to domestic issues which have big importance for the American people. But in terms of foreign policy, President Biden is still following some of the old policies. The Left group has to continue to put pressure on President Biden to change the external policies, especially to the Latin American regimes. That will be a big test for him but for that the left has to move cautiously. The battle for a new America has started well, but many more steps have to be taken. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Azadi ka Amrut an elitist event

Editor,
The front page of The Shillong Times, (ST Mar 12, 2021), carried an ad from the state government announcing the launch of Azadi ka Amrut. Strangely, the event is being held in the plush security-restricted confines of Raj Bhavan, with the Governor, Chief Minister, Leader of the Opposition, and presumably other ministers, generals, police chiefs, and the so-called cream of the media and society as the special audience.

Social inequity is increased by such elitist events, all the more deplorable when organised by the government, spending tax rupees paid by the common person who are barred from such celebrations. It heightens the notion that the fruits, the heady brew, the amrut, of Independence are enjoyed mainly by the elite of society, while for the poorest of the poor, Independence has brought little relief. For them one yoke has been exchanged for another.

The launch of Azadi ka

Amrut could easily have been held in a public place with the event broadcast live. To keep numbers down because of Covid, a few representatives from sections like school children, youth groups, handicapped persons, senior citizens, and army jawans could have been invited. It would have been wonderful if a freedom fighter or an old soldier was selected as the chief guest. It is doubtful if they will even be invited.

This Freedom India program is being better celebrated elsewhere. Lt Gov Anil Bajjal of Delhi has stressed the inclusion of unsung heroes of the freedom movement. He advised participation of citizens from all walks of life, identification of themes and locations and preparation of a calendar of events for the coming 75 weeks and has ordered strict compliance of Covid norms for the events.

The Prime Minister himself will flag off a padyatra from Sabarmati Ashram. The padyatra will be joined by different groups of people on the way to Dandi. Union Minister Prahalad Singh will lead the first lap of 75 km. According to a statement from the PMO, the PM will

also launch various other cultural and digital initiatives for the India@75 celebrations. Modi is also expected to address the nation with a message on why this historic occasion is special for every Indian. The Prime Minister will highlight government plans for a new India, when we turn hundred in 2047.

The State Government should capitalise on such commemorations to give visibility to special schemes for development, assuring the people of the state that better days are ahead. Nowadays even lip service is lacking.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

China's dangerous intent

Editor,
PTI (Press Trust of India) has reported that China's Parliament on Thursday last adopted the 14th Five-Year Plan, the mega blueprint containing billions of dollars worth of projects, including the controversial hydropower project on the Brahmaputra river in Tibet close to the Arunachal Pradesh border over which India has raised

concerns. China could build up to 60 GW of generation capacity on the river, which would make it the world's biggest hydropower project. This would be extremely dangerous especially for Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and, of course, Bangladesh.

India, unfortunately, of late, has not been able resolve vexed issues with China. The prospect of the project spelling doom on the northeastern part of India is quite evident.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia
Guwahati - 19

Action against mobile service providers

Editor,
There are only a few business houses that are committed to their promises. Most of the companies just let their customers down at different points of time. Their promises and their business ethics are just thrown to the winds. It's pointless to even mention about the present deteriorating connectivity of mobile phones. For the past several months, people have been facing enormous difficulty

in using their cell phones but this case has hardly ruffled the companies' feathers. Despite repeated complaints, they have not bothered to improve their services. What is disgusting is that when they cannot even cater to and provide seamless services to existing customers they are in a rush to enroll new customers for connections thereby, overloading the existing technological infrastructure. Why is it allowed and why is the government keeping mum?

Has poor connectivity not adversely affected our day-to-day activities? Apart from business houses, the students and teaching community are now badly hit by the poor mobile phone services. While we cannot easily connect to some mobile phone numbers and only hear some slurring which is beyond comprehension at other times we are told, "The person you are calling is out of network coverage area. This has now become a regular affair. Sometimes it's ridiculous that the user has to dance around or even rush to the rooftop/terrace to have better network connectivity. During load-shedding, the situation gets worse; one cannot make any calls.

Poor internet connectivity is another irritant. One cannot download important files without a hitch. Most of the customers only pay money for the internet DATA without ever being able to use even 2/3 GB for the whole month or the time period of the specific plan.

Through this letter, I would like to draw the urgent attention of the concerned authorities, especially the Deputy Commissioner and the Ministry of Communications to take this case of worsening mobile service with all seriousness. The government should not fall short in taking the defaulters to task. No customer should be taken for a ride by the companies. The customers have pre-paid money only for better service, not to be taken for a ride. Once again I humbly request the authorities concerned to pull up those who promise the moon but only to show us hell on earth.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwalni
Shillong

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

Wildlife Rescue: Kashmir woman breaks stereotypes

The role of wildlife conservationists and rescuers, such as Aaliya Mir, is increasingly becoming important in the wake of frequent human-wildlife conflicts in Kashmir. A mathematician by training, she says changing people's attitudes towards wildlife conservation is a key challenge.

Athar Parvaiz of Mongabay India reports

In the last week of December 2020, a video of a leopard scaling fences and roaming the streets in the Baghe-Mehtab locality near Srinagar, startled people in Kashmir valley. It was unusual to have a leopard, prowling in a human-dominated area in Kashmir. But in the last 15 years, leopards have adapted to an urban and semi-urban style of living in the region, said Kashmir's wildlife warden, Rashid Naqash.

As the visuals circulated, creating a scare among local residents, many from the area took it upon themselves to launch an attack on the wild animal that they perceived as a threat to their lives.

Later, another video, that showed locals chasing the animal, made rounds on social media and was criticised by wildlife conservationists. Ultimately, the team from Wildlife SOS, led by Aaliya Mir, a wildlife rescuer in Kashmir, helped Kashmir's wildlife department rescue the animal and release it in its natural habitat.

"It was a challenging operation, especially due to the snowfall. But we managed to track the leopard's movement by following pug marks and observing faecal samples," Mir said about that operation. "Operations like this can be quite nerve-racking as the team has to exercise caution while approaching such a large and powerful feline."

There have been some incidents in the past when wild animals like leopards and bears were killed by mobs during human-wildlife interactions in Kashmir. The latest incident took place on February 24 when a leopard was killed in south Kashmir's Pulwama district in a mob fury after the wild animal reportedly attacked villagers, injuring two of them.

According to the official statistics reviewed by Mongabay-India, 44 leopards and 124 black bears have died because of retaliation or natural causes

from 2012 to 2020, though separate data about how many have actually been killed in attacks is not available. In the past 14 years (from 2006 to 2020), as many as 242 people have died and 3,528 were injured in human-wildlife conflict in Kashmir. With natural prey base during winters becoming scarce, wild animals are often forced to venture into human habitations searching for food and shelter, wildlife experts say.

The leopard in the December 2020 incident is suspected to have come from the 'Karewas'—elevated tablelands located near the Budgam-Srinagar division. "It was so satisfying to see the animal released into its natural habitat," said Bilal Ahmad, who runs the South Asian Voluntary Association of Environmentalists (SAVAE), a Kashmir-based organization focused on environmental policy in South Asia. "The leopard could have been killed by the people who felt threatened," Ahmad said.

MIR'S PASSION BECOMES HER CAREER

Mir, who was at the forefront of the successful rescue operation, has so far rescued dozens of animals which include snakes, bears, birds, and leopards. Cool and composed, Mir has also rescued poisonous snakes from the residences of former chief ministers of

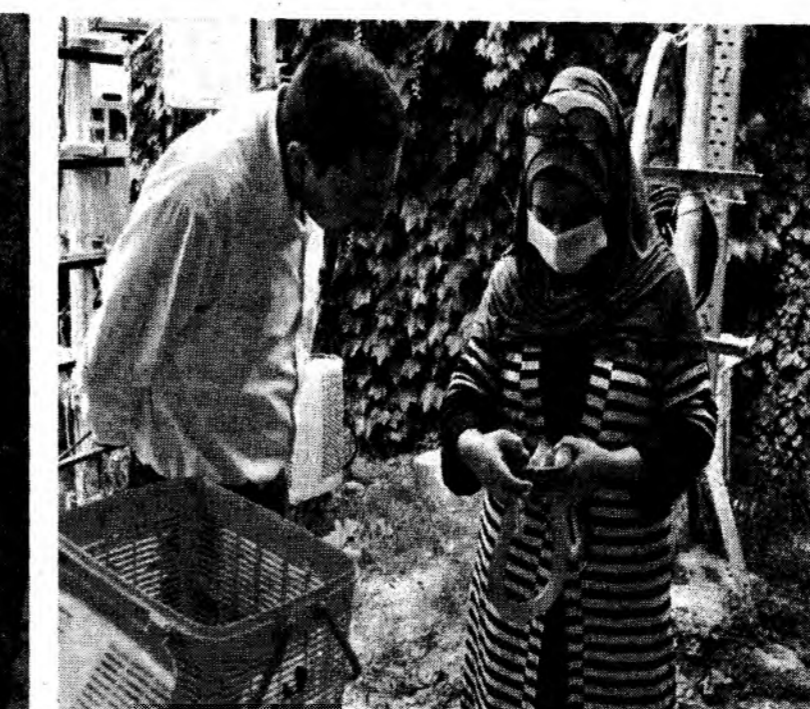
Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, and Mehbooba Mufti. She once used a fire-service ladder, said a wildlife enthu-

siast working in the wildlife department, to rescue an injured barn owl stuck on a huge chinar tree, a heritage tree of Kashmir with leaves resembling that of the maple tree.



A few years ago, Mir was able to rescue two bear cubs separated from their mother and had landed up at Srinagar's Botanical Garden. Mir and her team tried hard to reunite the cubs and their mother; she amplified the cubs' recorded voices near the forest to attract the mother's attention but without any luck. Ultimately, Mir and her team shifted them to Dachigam National Park, where she kept feeding them milk until adulthood.

Hailing from the Wazir Bagh area of Srinagar city and a mathematician by education, Mir said she always had a



started teaching in one of the reputed schools of Srinagar for a few months. She married a veterinarian who actively worked for animal welfare and problems concerning wild animals, Mir said. "We share the same philosophy as far as human-wildlife conflict is concerned. We believe that it can be effectively reduced by educating people, spread-

ing awareness on wildlife and working to change people's attitudes," she told Mongabay-India. "The synergy has helped me a lot and has made it possible for me to convert my passion

into a career as a wildlife conservationist along with the support and the inspiration of the organisation (Wildlife SOS)," she said. "Over the past 13

She said that she is impressed by the interest shown by the younger generation in wildlife. "I have a high hope from the younger generation who does understand the importance of wildlife and wants to conserve it. They ask very good questions about wildlife and are always keen to learn how to play their bit in conserving wildlife," she said while recalling her interactions with young students in training sessions in different schools and colleges. But she agreed that the entire population has to get involved in conserving nature. "It is crucial that we spread awareness amongst the public on issues of conflict mitigation to sensitise people and encourage them to be more tolerant of wild animals."

'How can a woman rescue animals?'

While working on wildlife rescues, one often comes in direct contact with the wild animals. During such operations, the attitude of people, especially those who happen to be around, can be challenging.

"Once I land up at the place where the rescue operation has to be carried out, people start looking at me and pass remarks saying how a woman can rescue wild animals," she said.

"I had people telling me, in fact commanding me, several times, 'Madam aap side main ho jayain, aap kay liyay mushkil ho jayaga (Madam, please step aside. This will be difficult for you)'. But when I finish the job, often with consummate ease, they are wonder-struck," Mir told Mongabay India.

"I feel changing the attitudes of the local communities is more difficult than rescuing wild animals, especially when the goal is to get people interested in saving wild animals that have historically been damaging to their property or threatening to their wellbeing. Interactions can turn ugly, which indeed is a difficult challenge to handle. Also, the working conditions in a place like Kashmir, which can have hostile weather, difficult terrain, and a fragile political situation, make things challenging in my role." (Mongabay India/TWF)

Transgenders: The outcastes of South Asia prisons

In South Asian countries like India and Pakistan, the judgments from apex courts declare self-determination of gender identity by trans people as fundamental to gender recognition. However, it is yet to be realised by those admitted to prisons, writes Sai Bourothu

Transgender communities in South Asia have a rich history, through various socio-religious and cultural trans identities. The Hijra and Khwaja Sira communities have common cultural roots across India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh but historically they have faced criminalisation in the region.

Anglo-Saxon colonial legal legacy and the implementation of religious laws, which view trans persons as heretics and blasphemous, have erased these persons from policy and law as complete citizens.

LAWS TO PROTECT TRANS PEOPLE

In recent years, countries in South Asia have promulgated law and policy to recognise and protect the rights of trans persons. This sudden interest and action towards recognition, inclusion, and protection of trans persons raises unprecedented legal questions. For decades, the interaction of transgender communities with the criminal justice system has been through the lens of criminality and punitive action.

Apart from general vulnerability in the criminal justice system, they face specific challenges in prisons. These vulnerabilities are accentuated by the fact that prisons have largely been conceived as male spaces, with a lack of infrastructural and policy initiatives to address gender-specific needs.

Indeed, as Justice Madan B. Lokur, former Judge, Supreme Court of India (SC) says, "Transgender persons in prisons are treated as outcastes, with basic

facilities being unavailable to them." He made the comments at the launch of a recent report, which highlighted the lack of uniformity in recording data of transgender persons in Indian prisons. Separate data on transgender persons in prisons is also maintained between April 2018 and March 2019 in only nine states out of 28.

Simultaneously, no substantive training/awareness programmes on the rights of transgender persons were conducted despite the directive on the same from the SC India, in the landmark National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v Union of India judgment. The apex court in this judgment had declared the transgender people as 'third gender.' The report has been a conversation starter on the issue of transgender persons in Indian prisons, and calls to question similar vulnerabilities of transgender persons in the region and globally.

Apart from applicability of general standards for the treatment of prisoners, there are certain gendered policies which have to be restructured, in a rights-based perspective, to incorporate the experiences of trans persons.

The question of legal and constitutional rights for trans persons is a global

issue, with various countries and regions legislating/litigating to ascertain the same while being cognizant of regional contexts.

The South Asian region due to common antecedents of cultural/religious/social existence of transgender persons have parallel conversations across bor-



ders on the issues of Trans persons.

In this context, there are specific themes that arise for the protection applicable to Trans persons in prisons.

RIGHT TO IDENTIFICATION OF GENDER BY SELF

Self-determination of gender identity has been a global demand by trans persons for long. However, the realisation of this demand in law and policy has been difficult, to say the least.

There are countries in South Asia, for example, India and Pakistan, where we have judgments from apex courts declaring self-determination of gender identity by trans people as fundamental

to gender recognition. Where the SC India, has used the phrase "right to self-determined gender identity," while in Pakistan, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 has phrased it as "gender sovereignty." At the same time, in Bangladesh, the process of determining one's Trans identity is through the word 'Hijra'.

The process for determining the last is based on a medical inspection of the person's body. This leads to varying degrees of affirmation or indignation associated with the process. Further, this marks a shift in perspective from a genital based identification to an identity-based affirmation of gender.

SEGREGATION IN PRISONS

While chairing a commission on jail reforms constituted by the Islamabad High Court, Dr. Shireen M. Mazari, the Pakistani Minister for Human Rights, called for separate wards for trans persons in prisons. Similarly, there are international models in Brazil and other Latin American countries where segregation of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender)+ prisoners from male and female prisoners has protected them from violence in prisons.

However, the genital based process of identification of trans persons drastically restricts the scope of who gets awarded protection against violence through segregation.

The use of genital based identification presumes validity only of trans persons who have gone through a spectrum of surgeries and medical interventions (both in the case of trans persons assigned male and female at birth).

This process is incognizant of the fact that gender affirmative surgeries require a plethora of resources including financial, social, and psychological support. Further, it leaves no scope for any person identifying as transgender to be recognised as such in case of their choice or medical requirement to not undergo said surgeries.

Implementation of court rulings are yet another major hurdle in realising protection against vulnerability for trans persons. In India, the NALSA vs Union of India & Ors judgment by the Supreme Court of India legally recognised trans persons as "third gender" and promulgated the right to self-determination of gender simultaneously.

However, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) report, 'Lost Identity: Transgender Persons in Indian Prisons' noted a "lack of any uniform policy regarding placement of trans persons in prisons. Varied responses were received from both the state prison headquarters as well as individual jails in regard to the question of segregation of male, female and transgender prisoners during admission."

The report elaborated on the processes of segregation to conclude that the right to self-determination of gender is not yet realised for transgender persons admitted to prisons.

LIVELIHOODS AND CRIMINALISATION

Colonial and religious laws have criminalised identities that deviate from the norms of a binary biological gender and heterosexuality. The same attitude has translated into further criminalising traditional livelihoods of trans persons, who have been historically mandated to bless in return for money (termed as beggary or vagrancy) and perform sex work. The instances of criminalising beggary and sex work are prevalent to this day in South Asia. However, opportunities to any employment beyond what is culturally assigned are yet seemingly distant.

A review of criminal justice systems show that recruitment of trans persons in the various departments of police, prisons, and judiciary are minimal. Further, from the Indian experience, though recruitments in the police have been initiated, they have been a result of extensive litigation on part of the transgender applicants. In Indian prison departments, as of January 1, 2019, no transgender persons had been recruited. The policies which have been developed seem uninformed by the lived realities of transgenders in the South Asian region. Governments need to place the diversified and varied lived experiences of trans persons at the center of policymaking for the protection of Trans persons in prisons.

(The writer is a project officer with the Access to Justice (Prison Reforms Programme) at Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative. Views are personal.)

Social media use and the rise of disruptive leaders

By Vishnu Makhijani

Ubiquitous technology and social media platforms have led to the rise of "disruptive" leaders like Arvind Kejriwal, Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron as they have been able to "speak directly to their citizens", who get the "illusion that they are being listened to", but whether they deliver is a different question, says a new book that examines the new levers of state power in the modern context.

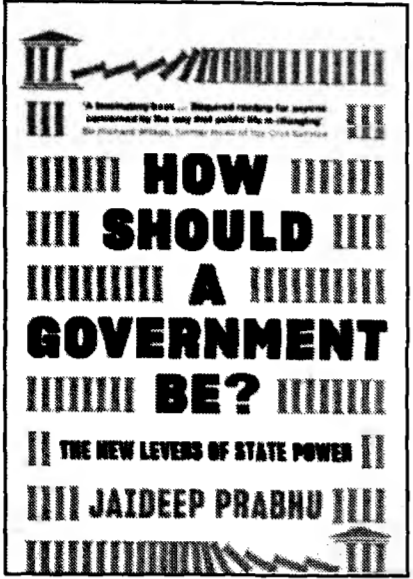
The rise of such leaders "is an interesting and potentially disruptive phenomenon in the development of governments and states. To some extent it is a consequence of the new world of ubiquitous technology and social media platforms that we see," Jaideep Prabhu, Professor of Marketing and Director of the Centre for India & Global Business at Cambridge Judge Business School, and author of "How Should A Government Be? - The New Levers of State Power" (Profile Books), told IANS in an interview.

"But it is also a response to two other trends: 1) that citizens are increasingly restless and demanding of their leaders, i.e., they want more and better from the state, faster and cheaper, and 2) they are increasingly empowered to make these demands.

"Recognising these two trends, we see that some leaders around the world have found a way to speak directly to their citizens, often using social media like Twitter to great effect to do so. This gives the citizens at least the illusion that they are being listened to and that their leaders are responding to their needs and concerns. Of course, if that is actually the case, remains to be seen," Prabhu added.

Trump, of course has been voted out of office when he caused more disruption than delivering on his promises. "Macron is being pulled in contrary political directions, swerving both left

and right, as he seeks to work out the political trajectory most likely to secure him re-election next year", a commentary by Jamie Dettmer of the Voice of America said on March 2, adding that



Liberation, France's leading left-wing daily newspaper, has warned that many on the left, who backed Macron in 2017, handing him a landslide election win over far-right leader Marine Le Pen, won't do so again next year.

Keriwal's Aam Aadmi Party won 62 of the 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly elections in 2020 to give him a second successive term in office and has scored some notable success in the recent civic elections in Delhi and Surat. It sees this as a signal to expand pan-India but the jury is out on that, with most political analysts suggesting Kejriwal stick to the national capital.

The book is Prabhu's third from a career spent in studying innovation in the private sector.

"In the first part of my career, I studied innovation in large western companies. I then turned my attention to emerging economies like India where I had grown up. From my study

of India and related countries in Asia and Africa, I developed an interest in jugaad and frugal innovation. I wrote two books about this phenomenon: 'Jugaad Innovation' (2012) and 'Frugal Innovation' (2015).

"Every time I would speak about these books to audiences from around the world, people would ask me: But what does this mean for governments? How does the ability to use new technology and organise in new ways impact the way that governments work? They would then go on to tell me about innovations in government too. Over time, I began to think of researching and writing about such frugal innovation in the public sector and that's what led me to write this book," Prabhu explained.

Speaking about the research that went into the book, he said a lot of it was similar to that which went into his previous books.

"I didn't just want to write an 'academic' account of the subject. Rather, I wanted to ground everything I said in actual cases from around the world. So I set out writing to and interviewing public servants and policy makers from both emerging economies (such as India, Bangladesh and Kenya) and developed economies (like the UK, US, Canada and Denmark)," he said.

At Cambridge, where he teaches, he also became involved with a number of training programmes for senior and mid-career civil servants from around the world. For instance, he was the programme director from 2012 to 2019 of a senior leadership programme for Indian civil servants. He also taught on an MPHil for early career civil servants interested in technology and policy.

"Finally, Cambridge has a centre for science and policy that links UK and European policy makers with academics in the university, and over the years I met with over a 100 of these fellows of the centre. All these conversations provided me with ideas and material

for the book. In addition to all this data, I also read books on political theory, especially about the long debate that has existed about how big the state should be and what its role in society is," Prabhu elaborated.

His key argument is that governments around the world can now use new technologies and forms of organisation to be more effective and efficient in delivering for their citizens but that in the process they might also increase their power to be more controlling and authoritarian. To balance effectiveness and efficiency with freedom and liberty, governments need to adopt five principles in how they operate:

"They need to be responsive to their citizens (i.e., operate outside-in rather than inside-out); they need to be inclusive (i.e., be able to serve the interest of multiple competing groups); they need to be experimental (i.e., constantly trying new ideas, testing them and then scaling them up); they need to be entrepreneurial (i.e., engaging in a proactive way with the private sector and NGOs and cultivating the economy); and they need to be innovative (i.e., constantly improving how they function internally)," Prabhu explained.

Citizens play a major role in this process.

"It is citizens in the end who provide the constant pressure for governments to get better, and so it is crucial that they perform this role well. Doing so involves citizens being informed and engaged and knowing how to choose their political leaders and teams well. But it also means they have to hold their governments to account at all times, either through movements from outside or even better by joining the government and working for its improvement from within," Prabhu said.

What next? "I will probably return to my main area of interest and expertise, namely businesses and how they operate.

Unravelling the India Covid story

When WHO first declared Covid-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, there was a great deal of apprehension about how India, the country with the highest TB cases and diabetes, inadequate health infrastructure and a population of 1.3 billion, would fare.

Between the Janata Curfew and the first vaccinations, a massive machinery has been working as seamlessly as possible to make sure that, despite some missteps and missed infections, India conquers what has been the greatest challenge the world has encountered in decades.

Covering the pandemic from the start, the author, Abantika Ghosh has had a ring-side view of India's battle against the pandemic. A thrilling tale of unnamed thousands battling against a little-understood virus from the frontlines, *Billions Under Lockdown* (Bloomsbury) brings that gripping theatre and its dramatis personae to life.

"Journalists are usually accused of having very short memories. Of course, this is not unfair criticism as we, far too often, look at issues only fleetingly, and superficially. Having said that, in the twenty years that I have been in this business, 2020 was the first year in which, for ten months, I followed one story: Covid-19. I may even go so far as to say, that I lived in a Covid bubble. I was reading about it, writing about it, and, in

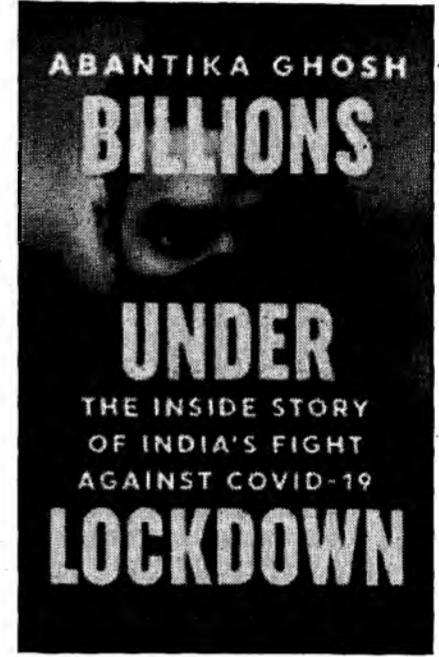
whatever time I had left, I was answering questions from friend and family," Ghosh writes.

"I have tried to keep my own opinions at a minimum to tell India's Covid-19 story that lies somewhere between the official statements, scientific hypotheses and conspiracy theories. It is not yet fully understood, and some of what appears in this book may change over time," Ghosh adds.

To that extent, starting from the government's first Covid-19 meeting (it was not yet called that) on January 8, 2020 to the approvals of the two eMeds in India' vaccines on January 3, 2021, the book attempts to cover all the major aspects of the pandemic through the year, with the world view in the background.

The book is a valuable contribution to the growing narrative on the pandemic and how it has affected every sphere of our lives.

Abantika Ghosh is passionate about public health and popular science communication. After graduating from Presidency College, Kolkata, she did her masters in Physiology from the University of Calcutta and has worked with *The Statesman*, *The Times of India* and the *Indian Express* in the past. Currently, she is with *The Print*, where she heads the team covering Covid-19. She is keenly interested in non-cricket sports, is a voracious reader and loves to explore the intersection of politics and society. She lives in New Delhi with two dogs and some books. (IANS)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi Sunday, March 14, 2021

Sun transit in Pisces on your solar return chart and it will give very good results for the whole year. Your confidence will get boosted and also your spirits will be high. You will meet lot of influential persons. And will be able to get your work done. You will also clear major administrative/departmental exams. Contacts with government officials will be fruitful. Your tax disputes will also get resolved. Those who are entrepreneurs and in business can enter into a new association or partnership. You will get good returns from investments you had made in the past. There will be warmth and cheer in family relations. You will remain devoted to your family. Your marriage might get finalized. Love birds will have a wonderful time. You will do noble deeds and your name and fame will rise. You could also get a reward/award.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
The planetary configuration this week indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for projects at work. Your job environment is teeming with activity. You take small yet sure steps towards your financial goals. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. Children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and or structure. There are some contentious issues that are laid to rest as you tackle them and take a bold stand.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
Some of you may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make definitive choices; they could even be between career and family goals. Some of you may be promoted or your career will take a new direction. The challenge is to find a healthy balance—to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Romantic and personal relations would be more practical than fun. For some, a romantic relationship stabilizes and becomes more serious as you look at it with a long term perspective. Some of you will meet a new romantic interest who is perhaps more younger and energetic as compared to you. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring of late, and you meet new and unusual people.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
New friendships are likely to emerge during this time: supportive and easygoing ones. Happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background than you are indicated. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. Do not allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains is on the cards but analyze data at hand before you invest. Energy is high and things happen swiftly and decisively.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
You would be blessed with good health, love in relationships and harmony at the work place. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract opportunities which hitherto seemed out of reach. You desire to learn and improve on your practical skills. Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you that enable you to quicken the pace at your workplace. Tension could run high and reach an emotional peak. Do not get carried away without first getting the facts. Yoga and walking would prove to be beneficial.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
Your social life is likely to increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful people who could prove to be helpful as they extend a helping hand. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training or to further your education. Happiness and fulfillment through close friendships and relationships is indicated. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to aim for a sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
The planetary combination this week tends to change your outlook on life, perhaps stimulated by travel. Some changes in your social circle have been occurring and this brings about a new awareness. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and are more strategic in the manner you go

about doing so. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. New projects excite you but remember that bringing them to a completion is just as important. A little attention on fitness and health related programs would be helpful.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
This phase brings money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a realistic approach to business and finance. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement and professional activities. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is more intense. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. You look to networking to leverage your contacts. You may be quick to anger and could antagonize some whom you want to win over.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
This phase is good for money, status and enhancing your standing this week. Your entire focus shifts in this direction. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges it presents. Your belief systems and personal philosophies are especially important to you, but do not often coincide with your methods. This dichotomy will inculcate new attitudes towards finances, and social relationships before you strike a balance. It is an excellent time for travel, higher education and communications. The family is supportive and helps you look at the larger picture.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
You may feel the need to be appreciated by family members and the need for togetherness with others this week. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach towards your life and you cultivate true friendships. 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. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You would stand alone, take action and start afresh during this week.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
You would be able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility in personal and professional relations this week. You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding and are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with your more sensitive and spiritual qualities. You have to maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and profit this week.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
You feel on top of things in domestic issues and spend quality time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. You tend to be traditional and restrictive in family matters and may have to face opposition from younger ones. It is time to expand your social circle and to make more contact with groups and friends. Your unselfishness and willingness to listen will help boost your magnetic appeal. Your professional skills, wisdom and craft are appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You need to tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively this week. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well on your own rather than place trust upon others. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. A business venture could be fruitful if you are willing to lend it some energy. You are involved in multiple tools of creativity that you possess. A gentle and softer approach can resolve an old conflict this week.

Career in Baking

By Ranjan K Baruah

We often buy baked products from different bakeries. Different eatables are available in bakeries which are baked by people who are expert in it. Baking, one of the oldest professions in the world is a very dynamic and innovative culinary technique used for making bread and confectioneries. I still remember about my school days and the bakery that was in our school. One may recall the tempting smell when we are passed by any bakery. Baking is the process of cooking food through dry heat which is usually done in an oven, hot ashes or hot stones. But with the changes of time there have been some changes and new innovations have come into the fields of baking.

It is a profession which combines both art and science and creativity. Baking is a career that demands lots of creativity, commitment and passion for food. Some might become experts in baking without much qualification. Experiences might make someone experts in the long run but it is always advisable to undergo some of the courses / training programmes to become successful in this field. For skilled bakers, there are lots of options to travel overseas and earn money.

To excel in the field of baking and to enhance skills, one can enroll for any bakery and confectionery course offered by various hotel management institutes located across the country. These institutes offer certificate, diploma and degree courses specializing in food and beverages. Ad-

mission to the 3 year hotel management degree program in any recognised Institute of Hotel Management (IHM) in the country is through Entrance Examination. One can also make a career in the baking field by joining short term certificate or diploma courses in bakery and con-

passion for food. One may not get a good job or highly paid salaried job just after finishing any training, so one needs to have patience and gather experiences. Good communication skills are always an advantage for those who want to excel in the baking profession. One must



fectionary. The duration of these courses may vary from 4 to 6 months and students who have completed their class 10th/12th with good grades are eligible. There are institutes under skill development which conduct short term free courses for 10th or 12th pass students. Many vocational institutes offer courses at a subsidized rate or free of cost. Some of the courses are Advance Certificate Course in Bakery and Confectionery, Advance Diploma in Culinary Arts and Patisserie Studies, Certificate Course in Bakery and Confectionery, Certificate Course in Food Production and Patisserie, Diploma in Bakery and Confectionery, etc.

be creative and have ideas to critically understand the taste and choice of the customers. Some of the terms related to these professions are bread chef, cake stylists, patisserie / dessert specialist, artisan bread specialist, confectionery baker, institutional and cafeteria baker, etc. The job openings for a baker range from hotels, restaurants, caterers, supermarkets, bakeries to grocery stores and baking manufacturing companies. Aspirants may also try to have their own openings by becoming entrepreneurs in this field.

Apart from training, a baker should have a love and

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"Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier." — Mother Teresa

The Shillong Times

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MeECL's existential crises

THE biggest state run Corporation - the MeECL jumps from crisis to crisis. This is bound to happen when Government is engaged in fire-fighting instead of addressing the problems at the source. The battle of words between the Congress and the MDA Government on this issue has reached a feverish pitch with the former going for a privilege motion against Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma on his allegations that the Congress led government signed bad deals with the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) which has plunged the state into an irrevocable debt burden for the long term. Now the Engineers' Union is up in arms against the Corporation and its management. They have spilled the beans on the goings-on in the MeECL which, simply put, is getting from one scam to the next. Mention of a particular firm that has been favoured with supply works for the MeECL and which is charging nearly five times per unit cost for supply of a computer, complete with table and chair. Clearly the tendering norms have been given short shrift here and a firm that is willing to do deals with the MeECL management and/or the Power Department gets the contract. This does not bode well for the already beleaguered Corporation which is managing the immediate crises through loans etc.

Now the Corporation intends to start another run of the river hydel project with the Wah Umngot as the pivot. But there is already a strong public reaction against this proposal. The Umngot river keeps the plantations in the Ri War area moist and fertile. People have now started growing strawberries which is fetching them an enviable income. Governments fail to get public cooperation for their projects because they don't consult the public before conceiving such projects, especially those that could have far reaching impacts on people. Damming the River Umngot is comparable to what might happen to India's North East should the Chinese build dams over the Tsangpo river which flows to India as the Brahmaputra. The science of Hydrology informs that upstream activities always impact those living downstream. A public consultation on this issue would have given the Government a fair idea of the pros and cons of damming the River Umngot apart from displacement of hutments and villages. The Leshka run-of-the-river project for which over Rs 1300 crore has been invested but which is not yielding electricity commensurate to the investment should have been an eye opener for the Government before it launches a similar project. Sometimes the public is left to wonder as to whether there is a think-tank guiding the present Government or if some high flying, highly-paid consultant is behind these hare-brained projects.

AIS and the Arc of Natural Justice

By HH Mohrmen

The argument made by the All India Service officers that the Government's decision to reimburse the officers' income tax is an act of natural justice is not convincing at all. In fact it raises more question than it answers. It was also argued that the reimbursement is based on the principle of equal pay for equal work, but the question is, why the arc of natural justice is selective and bends only to please certain sections of income tax payers in the state. Why is this so called natural justice applicable only to certain sections of government officials or particularly those who are close to the power centres in the state?

Now if the principle of natural justice is to be taken as the yardstick for reimbursement of income tax, then what about the state government officers in the different departments who work even in the far-flung areas of Meghalaya? Why does the arc of natural justice not bent to include them too? After all they also receive their salaries from the same government treasury? Why is natural justice not so natural as to include the officers who have to pay income tax which includes engineers, doctors in the various state government departments who have equally toiled hard to serve this state and its people?

What about the income tax payers who work in the different banks, central government offices and other institutions in the different parts of the state? What about income tax payers like those in the North Eastern Hill University, IIM, Shillong, Regional Engineering College, Shillong, NEIGRIHMS, Shillong and others? Why does the State Government's arc of natural justice not cover them too? Why is the arc of natural justice limited to the All India Service officers? Income tax payers who are working in these different offices and government institutions also work for the welfare of the people and the development of the state and if the reimbursement is based on natural justice then it is only natural that their income tax should also be reimbursed.

It was also argued that the decision of the government will encourage AIS officers to come back to their state cadre but the lay person's question to this baseless argument is, isn't the service called 'all India service'? Why did they opt for the service in the first place if they are not ready

to serve the nation and its people who reside in different parts of the country? How can reimbursement of income tax be a morale booster for the officers? Does it mean that monetary compensation is the only factor that can boost the morale of the officer?

It is obvious from the justification of the All India Service cadre serving in the state that they take their appointment in the state as a punishment. Therefore they are entitled to some kind of special reimbursement for the sacrifices they make. What is more painful (and perhaps it is not wrong too) to surmise from the argument is that the cadre also see income tax as a punishment. If what is considered to be the steel frame of the country still regard having to pay income tax as a punishment, then what is the future for this country? How can we expect other lesser advantaged sections of the

to circumvent the system by getting the tax they paid reimbursed by the Government?

But the most important point is - if and when the AIS officers collect their reimbursement does it not reduce their status as officers? How different are the officers from their helpers or their drivers now? How can they be different from them when they are also paying only indirect taxes? With all the pay, the perks and the statuses that they have, when it comes to paying tax to the government the officers are no different from the least of all their helpers and employees. They are no different from even the fourth grade staff because at the end of the day, like the low income government staffs, they too are only paying indirect tax.

The officers still have the option to demonstrate to the people of the state that they

The officers still have the option to demonstrate to the people of the state that they are not going to be lured by this Government's appeasement policy. Perhaps it is not surprising if all or some of the officers reject the reimbursement that was offered to them.

population to wilfully pay income tax when the officers who are well paid and are supposed to lead in the nation building, consider paying income tax as a punishment? Where is the pride of being an income tax payer?

How can one expect that the AIS officers will one day come up with a policy document to include the rich and the high ranking officers in the state to pay income tax, when they themselves take a u-turn when it comes to paying income tax. By getting their income tax reimbursed the officers no longer have locus standi or have lost the ground to push for policy changes with regards to income tax payment in the state. The other important question is how can the steel frame of the country hope to convince the rich and well to do tribals in the state and even their own colleagues at work to pay income tax when they themselves are trying

are not going to be lured by this Government's appeasement policy. Perhaps it is not surprising if all or some of the officers reject the reimbursement that was offered to them. The officers still have the option of saying 'No' or even if it is reimbursed to them, they can contribute the money to charity.

Obviously this Government is only trying to please the officers in the state, but at what cost? A precedent is set and now if the government continues with its appeasement measures, it will have to bend its arc of natural justice to include and cover all and sundry income tax payers in the state. As of now the scale of natural justice is tilting only towards those who are in the position to influence government policy. Only if and when all the income tax payers are included in the concession can the government claim that there is equality and justice is served.

This Government is facing (or rather is creating) another problem with the management of the Meghalaya Electric Corporation Limited. The employees of the Organisation are pitted against each other. Now in spite of the Books of Accounts of the Corporation being in the red, it is alleged that the management still offers special concessions to big companies who have defaulted in their payment of electricity bills. What kind of example does the Corporation wish to demonstrate when it rewards instead of punishing the defaulters. The allegations made by the Union of Engineers with regards to the implementation of the centrally sponsored Saubhagya scheme is very serious and needs to be investigated immediately. It is sad that even before the smart meter project is being implemented it is already steeped in controversies. There is obviously something not very right in the way the Corporation is managed and the Government needs to immediately address the issue before it is too late.

But how can we expect the Corporation to provide better service to the State when the management and the employees are not in the same page and are even at odds with each other? The management of the Corporation has already lost the confidence of the public and it now needs to work hard to even gain the confidence of its employees.

The Government is also in a catch 22 situation between enhancing power production through hydro-electric projects and promoting tourism. The Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board has notified that MeECL has proposed to set up a 210 MW Umngot Hydro-electric Project near Siangkhai and a public hearing is proposed to be held on April 9, 2021 at Moosakhia village. Now the question is whether construction of the run of the river (RoR) project upstream of river Umngot will not affect the tourist spots downstream like Amkoi, Nongbareh, Shnongpdeng Darang and Dawki. Will the construction of the project not affect the crystal clear condition of the water which is in fact the unique selling point (USP) of these spots? If the water loses its crystal clear component or transparent state which makes the above places famous the world over, will it still be able to attract tourists to the different tourist spots? Will the Government answer the above questions?

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First Quad Summit - A Milestone for Indo-Pacific

By TP Sreenivasan

Quad has come of age and will be a key pillar of stability in Indo-Pacific region," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the first-ever summit of the Quadrilateral, seen by China as an "Indo-Pacific NATO." No amount of talk about vaccine production, climate change, critical technology, cyber-security, anti-terrorism or maritime co-operation will blunt the sharpness of the grouping as an instrument of containing China. If the agenda items of the Quad were as listed, China would have been a crucial player in each of them. But the US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, came closest to the truth when he said that though the four leaders had indeed discussed China, "today's meeting was not fundamentally about" that country.

The virtual Quad summit of the US, Australia, Japan and India and its joint statement on March 12 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of the grouping, giving it an agenda for "a free and open Indo-Pacific." PM Modi acknowledged that the initiative came from President Joe Biden, who had accepted President Trump's formula for the region, the only Trump policy line he had endorsed. By taking the Quad initiative, President Biden signalled that "our agenda, covering areas like vaccines, climate change and emerging technologies make the Quad a force for global good," PM Modi characterised the grouping as an "important pillar of stability in the region." No reference was made to the military exercises the Quad had conducted against the backdrop of China flexing its muscles from the Himalayas to the South China Sea.

The Biden initiative establishes that his "softer line" on China as evidence of his iron fist with velvet gloves. His characterisation of China as the biggest competitor and not an adversary also appears to be a posture. Significantly, Sullivan affirmed the "centrality of the Indo-Pacific in U.S. national security" for Biden administration in a post-summit press briefing. Indian reluctance to take the plunge into an alliance also must have played a role in the US adopting a cautious approach, stressing the public good needs of the Indo-Pacific. The ASEAN countries also are likely to welcome the softer version of the Quad as they have no intention to confront China.

The vaccine initiative for the region, in this context, is a masterstroke, as it is as much a humanitarian need for the region. The combination of the manufacturing capabilities of India, US technology and financial, Japanese and Australian funding and logistical support will be an effective counter to China, which has already started a vaccine offensive around the world. India has confirmed that it will be manufacturing up to 1 billion single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccines, which will be delivered to the Indo-Pacific and beyond. China may see it as an adversarial act but can counter it only by doing better with the vaccine, contributing to the global effort.

The other items on the agenda, such as maritime security and cyber issues are also unquestionable, even though the anti-China dimensions of both are evident. The Chinese presence in the Indian ocean through massive ports and visits of submarines is already perceived as a threat and Japan and India have been suspected of being victims of cyber-attacks.

The philosophical underpinnings of the Quad have also been strengthened in the joint statement in "The

Spirit of the Quad". It has been stated, "We strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion," broadening the scope of common action. It recalls that the positive vision of the Quad rose out of the Tsunami of 2004 and affirms that the global devastation wrought by COVID-19, the threat of climate change, and security challenges facing the region summons the group with renewed purpose.

"On this historic occasion of March 12, 2021, the first-ever leader-level summit of the Quad, we pledge to strengthen our cooperation on the defining challenges of our time."

The Joint Statement is categorical in its determination "to promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity. Full of potential, the Quad looks forward to the future; it seeks to uphold peace and prosperity and strengthen democratic resilience, based on universal values."

The Joint Statement also goes into some specific current issues, indicating the evolving common positions on issues like denuclearization of North Korea in accordance with United Nations Security Council resolutions, resolution of the issue of Japanese abductees and the urgent need to restore democracy in Myanmar and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience. Clearly, the engagement of Quad will go beyond the common good and take common positions, where possible, on political issues.

In terms of practical action, the Quad established a vaccine expert working group on safe and effective vaccine distribution, a critical and emerging technology working group to facilitate cooperation on international standards and innovative technologies of the future and a climate working group to strengthen climate actions globally on mitigation, adaptation, resilience, technology, capacity-building, and climate finance. An agreement was also reached to hold an in-person summit by the end of 2021.

The Quad, which had dragged on for years with only informal meetings on the margins of other conferences, was elevated to the ministerial level in 2019 and a couple of meetings followed. After much trepidation on all sides, Australia joined the India-Japan-U.S. Malabar naval exercises last November after a gap of 13 years. The dramatic appearance that Quad has made for the first time in the virtual summit in 2021 against the backdrop of a tense standoff with China in Eastern Ladakh assumed a symbolic coming of age as a potential force in the Indo-Pacific. India's emergence is particularly significant as the other three countries are allies already. The concern for the global commons made it easy for India to join, but India is clearly engaged in a security dialogue with the three major powers with the possibility of common action if the situation so demands.

About the author : TP Sreenivasan, (IFS 1967) Former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA Chairman, Academic Council and Director, NSS Academy of Civil Services, Director General, Kerala International Centre.

Letters to the Editor

Is MDA serious about addressing corruption?

Editor

It is an embarrassment when grown-up men behave like small boys. The heated verbal duel between the Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and the MLA from the Shillong North constituency brought to light one very important factor that is lacking in the leadership of our state. This can be summed up in one word, "Character." Borrowing a famous quote from the 1800s, I think we can all agree that, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." One thing that is certain about our elected representatives is that they usually behave like servants before the elections, but usually act like monarchs for the next five years. There is nothing wrong with monarchy, provided we have a king or a queen who is willing to lay down his or her own life for their subjects. In fact history has proven time and again, that some of the best periods have been during the rule of a good king. Unfortunately, history has also proven that some of the worst periods have been

during the reign of a tyrant king, or dictator. Hence we are stuck with democracy, which is at the lower level order, between the best and the worst form of governments.

If this government wants to prove that it truly has character, then it will have to begin to deliver on its promises, and come up with more creative ways on how to bring an end to corruption. If the government is really serious, then it has to seriously consider how deeply corrupt all of the departments have become. We might just end up having a government that is famous for saying a lot of things, that it never intends to do, and dreaming big dreams, without ever having a clear vision on how to accomplish those dreams. Mr Adelbert might have not been as eloquent in a foreign language, as those who have had the privilege to study abroad, but I guess his question is seriously valid, "MDA Government, are you really serious about the welfare of your subjects?" There is no point dreaming about electric cable cars when there is no proper electricity even to recharge the battery of an ordinary Nokia handset.

Yours etc.,
Pyndappha Warjri
Shillong-2

Decriminalise sex work

Editor,

You probably don't have any idea of who we are. Many of us have children; while some are divorced or widowed. A prostitute is not by definition an alcoholic, a drug user, or a victim of a trafficking gang. Some of us even have diplomas. We are not in this trade for pleasure, contrary to popular belief. And we do not do anything wrong; we only satisfy our needs but we are not against the law. Things were fine until a clever comment by one of our "respectable lawmakers" who stated that "Khyndai Lad has become a pick-up point of sex workers" hit the headlines.

To be exposed as commodities in a market; to be publicly humiliated; to have a hostile establishment and a very tense climate; discrimination from many politicians who do not respect the limits of their job; a lack of consultation from the authorities; the "don't care anymore" attitude of our human rights crusaders and the fact that we are not let allowed to do our work at ease, which has strong consequences on our daily life; that our situation is worse than before and no alternative has been offered to us are stark and painful

realities. We have decided to write this letter because our voices are not heard anywhere. Though we are the first respondents we are barely considered as human beings in this affair.

What makes us furious is not the state of our situation, but the fact that our State Government is not making any effort to do anything to make it better for us. The fact that political leaders like Adelbert Nongrum, HM Shangpliang, Lakhmen Rymbui and Ampareen Lyngdoh aren't working together to solve our problems infuriates us sex workers — as it should. Adelbert Nongrum's rather naïve hope that he could change the atmosphere in Khyndai Lad and get warring sides working together was part of his enormous appeal. But instead of taking the hint that constructive compromise would be popular, politicians like him have spent most of their energies blaming each other for obstructionism.

For once in their miserable tenures, MLAs could help their fellow MLAs understand the difference between dialogue and debate and the importance of dialogue in solving problems including interpersonal problems or political ones. In a debate, you are trying to win. In a dialogue, you are trying to

find common ground. Part of the experience of being in the Assembly should be to practice understanding what another person's point of view is. If lawmakers were encouraged to practice dialogue frequently, we would train a whole generation of problem-solvers.

All this may sound hard, but without an effort to get the political system working thoughtfully again, we will miss the opportunity to enjoy a potentially great economy with rising prosperity. We prefer to remain anonymous. An interview is possible if the interview remains anonymous. For ten years the Rot Association of Meghalaya (RAM) has always offered support to fellow sex workers but we are still unknown to many. Sex work will always exist, and it is irresponsible to avoid making progressive change. The way to protect disadvantaged citizens like us and tackle the deeper problem is simple - decriminalize our work. Decriminalize sex work! Fellow sex workers can share their grievances at our Telegram messaging platform (@RotAssociationOfMeghalaya).

Yours etc,
I. Kharmuti (President),
P. Mylliemngap (General Secretary),
D. Mawlong (Publicity Secretary)

Tourism yet to take off

Editor,

The Shillong times carried a news report captioned "Ampareen wants more flights to Delhi" (ST March 13, 2021). I have views on the matter because my friends and I have traveled several times after the pandemic but the number of passenger to and from Kolkata via Umroi airport are on the lower side. I have spoken to local drivers, hoteliers and even hawkers and they all say that Government should encourage the tourism sector because the economy of large sections of the people of this State are dependent on tourism.

The State Tourism Department should take the initiative to create an attractive environment for travelers, so that they can enjoy the beauty of Meghalaya. Travelers from outside state have been eagerly waiting for almost one year to come to Meghalaya. The ordinary people of Meghalaya are hopeful that the Tourism sector will continue to thrive in the state as before.

Yours etc.,
Mithun Sikdar
Shillong - 1

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“Education is the vaccine for violence.”
— Edward James Olmos

The Shillong Times

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Sparte of rape and murders

IT was just a few months ago when a young girl was murdered in East Jaintia Hills. Before that crime could be solved another similar incident happened a few days ago. Once an FIR is filed and a rape or murder is reported, the media too usually does not follow up on a case. Since media follow-up is weak the police take things lightly. It is rare for the police in Meghalaya to arrive at any conviction on rape and murder cases. It's almost as if no one has killed the young girls and/or the killer has just disappeared from the scene. The question then is whether we have a credible police force that public can rely on to carry out its work dutifully. In fact, a time has come when the police should be asked as to why conviction rates in Meghalaya are so woefully low. Between January to August 2020 there were 44 cases of rape, 16 cases of attempted rape and 194 cases of other crimes against women. There were 36 PCSO cases (sexual assault against children) in the same period. We are looking at reported cases. Also the cases above are for 8 months - January to August 2020 which also happen to be the months under lockdown when filing police complaints might have been more difficult as it involves travelling from the villages to a police outpost which is several kilometres away.

It was a revelation to learn that the Madanting Police had to rush all the way to Syntung when tourists were attacked and one tourist died as a result, two years ago. The distance between Syntung and Madanting is 58 kilometres and takes anything between 2.5 to 3 hours to reach. Clearly there is a huge policing vacuum in Meghalaya if police stations are so distant from villages.

In October last year the NCRB published a report that Meghalaya has done fairly well in terms of conviction rates on crimes against women. The figure shown is 57.3%. Conviction rate is the ratio of convictions to cases prosecuted. But much depends on how many cases were actually charge-sheeted and led to conviction. For instance, if there were 10 cases that were charge-sheeted and 5 reached conviction that would make it 50% conviction rate. Studies show that if only the strongest cases are prosecuted the conviction rates would be high. Any system that pays attention to conviction rates, as opposed to the actual number of convictions, is liable to abuse, scholars opine. The conviction rates alone without the numbers, does not tell the real story. In Meghalaya we have had the Civil Society Women's Organisation (CSWO) diligently following up cases of violence against women but when the head of the Organisation is herself attacked and there is no conviction of the criminals as yet, then police have not been doing their job.

Meghan and Harry's Oprah Interview – the implications

By Albert Thyriang

Recently Meghan Markle and Prince Harry dropped many bombshells in their interview with the popular talk show host, Oprah Winfrey. The allegations during the two-hour-twenty-minute long chat rocked the western world and shook Birmingham palace. The media in the US and UK went into melt down. Media persons were sharply divided – one set in defence of the monarchy and the other in defence of the royal couple. Surprisingly the interview did not resonate with the Indian population in spite of the obvious implications.

The explosive interview is opined to have brought the worst crisis to the British Royal Family in many decades. The British monarchy, the most well-known among the 43 constitutional monarchies in the world, has faced many challenges including scandals in its history. The internet will provide you with long lists of the royal family scandals and secrets. It just shows that human nature is the same – royal or no royal. Those who are born privileged have the same human inclinations and weaknesses. There is no pretence.

The history of the British monarchy dating back to the 10th century and transformed into a constitutional monarchy with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, is held in high esteem. Those who have castigated Meghan and Prince Harry as defenders of this institution. They want to preserve its grandeur. That is the reason they find it hard that someone should attack it resulting in a negative cascading effect. They wish to see that the Monarchy is insulated from damaging criticisms. One damning allegation is the presence of racists among the Royal Family members. A prominent member was supposed to have expressed fears that the colour of Meghan and Harry's first child could be black. The pro-monarchy and hence critics of Meghan and Harry found it impossible to digest that the 94 year old queen Elizabeth II or/and any other of her family is racist. The counter to this defence is the compelling argument by one Dr Shola Mos-Shogbamimu. Bitingly slamming Piers Morgan, a die-hard critic of Meghan who had indulged in diatribes against the actor-turned duchess, the political and women's rights activist, reminded us that, “The royal family, as an institution, is rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, and racism. The legacy is right there.”

Yes colonialism was expanded, racism and slavery

was committed and white supremacy was expressed, all in the name of the queen or king of England. European institutionalised colonisers engaged in unimaginable crimes ‘against humanity’ and made other races serve their greed, including legalised slavery, because the Blacks and the Browns were considered inferior to the White race. Even the founding fathers of the United States of America owned slaves who worked in the agricultural farms. Colonists looted the wealth of Africa and Asia. The British looted \$45 trillion from India alone. London was built on the wealth plundered from colonies. The least reparation the Royal Family can offer is an apology for the historical wrongs.

That some families are still considered royal is outdated in the 21st century. Why should they be royal just because they are born in a family? There is no merit at all. They happened to be born in that family. There is no royal blood. There is no royal flesh. There is no royal nature. All are scientifically the same. Then why is this ‘royalty’ accepted and respected even today?

The enormous privileges enjoyed by the British monarchy are unjustifiable. In 2020 it was revealed that the tax payers had to spend 82.4 million pounds for the monarchy. The Monarch can't be prosecuted. The Monarch is the head of state. The Monarch is the head of the Commonwealth of Nations. The queen is the head of the Church of England. These constitutional, legal and religious privileges are automatically and exclusively gifted to the British monarchy for no merit at all. No one in the UK can aspire to be head of state. Why? Just because he or she does belong to the Royal Family! It is bizarre, frankly! There is a mighty valid point for calls for the abolition of Monarchy in England. As ‘insiders’, for Meghan and Harry to dare to call out this age-old institution is commendable!

Those who disapprove of Meghan and Harry's interview point to the timing. Queen Elizabeth is 94 years. Her husband Prince Philip, 100 was hospitalised when the interview was on air. Critics were quick to accuse the duo of insensitivity. Well, there is no perfect timing for anything. Something parallel will always happen. One can't wait for the most suitable time to raise pertinent issues. The leadership

in the Monarchy enjoys all the privileges and adulation and have to take bitter pills as well.

The sensitive mental health issue reveal by Meghan is not surprising but the allegation that she was denied help is shocking. Meghan is not the first in the royal family to open up on their mental state. Princess Diana was one of the first and the most high profile of the royals to speak about mental health experiences. No one is insulated from mental disorders, including the high and mighty. That Meghan was candid with her illness - to the point of constant suicidal thoughts - was no astonishment but reactions belittling that were disgusting. No wonder Piers Morgan, the host of the TV show, “Good Morning Britain” was ‘sacked’ for his thoughtless lashing of Meghan thus demeaning mental health of others as well.

Now, let's delve a bit more into the implications. Equality is still a far cry. Equality remains largely a concept. In reality some are always more equal than others. Worse, those who are at the ‘higher state’ owe it to their births. In India monarchy may have been abolished in 1971 but royal families live in luxury. Inheritors of princely states have become political families and continue to hold a firm grip on Indian politics. The ‘inheritance’ is passed on from one generation to another. Members of these families are elected to the parliament and legislative assembly on the basis of their background. Some have become Chief Ministers. We all know the political family that has ruled this country for a long time.

In Meghalaya too political families are in dominance. It is common sense to observe that had many of these politicians not been born in their respective families they would have been ordinary citizens like you and me.

Certain individuals and institutions are put on a pedestal and criticism against them is not welcome. Many would not contemplate to do so. Some have to pay the price. Individuals have to face police and legal actions for calling out PM Narendra Modi and UP CM Yogi Adityanath and for censuring the central and state governments. Others are condemned as anti-nationals for being vocal. In Meghalaya too complaints against the institution of Rangbah Shnong, Syiemship, NGOs,

the Church, traditions and Ka Jaitbynriew is detested. FIRs and court cases have followed for critical opinions. A summary of reactions to this writer may be of interest. ‘You are a church man you should not criticise the Church and religion. You are a Khasi you should be careful while discussing the Rangbah Shnong, the Syiemship, Khasi traditions and Ka Jaitbynriew, are some of the scathing ones. Then on what subject do we speak?’

Regarding race we acknowledge that we prefer the white-skinned. Hollywood stars are fair. Even in Southern movies and television serials most actors and actresses are ‘air dropped’ to be fair. Fair dancers, including foreigners are placed at the fore front. Since we have historical connections it is detected that we in Meghalaya too admire Europeans and Americans. In fact, foreigners are affectionately called ‘Phareng’ while other outsiders are ‘degradingly’ called ‘Dkhars’. The Whites might have also been thought to be beyond reproach.

Last year WHO estimated that 7.5 per cent Indians suffer from some mental disorders and predicted the disease could affect up to 20 per cent of the population due to Coronavirus. One survey found that 61% percent of Indians experienced mental-health related issues during the lockdown last year. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data India reported an average 381 deaths by suicide daily (1,39,123 fatalities yearly) in 2019 out of which over 90,000 (67 per cent) were young adults. Last week it was reported that a boy died of suicide due to his parents' inability to pay school fees. In Meghalaya <https://meg-police.gov.in/statistics> states that from 2005 to 2018 there were 189 cases of suicide. A few days ago a 90 year old man ended his own life.

There have been increasing reports of suicides in Church/religious circles. The environment might have been made toxic for victims. Despite the rise in suicides among priests and nuns, discussions on the reasons and remedies for them, is lacking. Due to stigma mental health is largely neglected.

Discrimination on the basis of caste, race, colour, religion, region, sexual orientation, mental illness sufferers, etc is omnipresent in India. An attitude of entitlement is also still prevalent. Meghan and Harry speak to us and for us as well!

Email: albertthyriang74@gmail.com

Covid-19 and tourism

Insights from Sohra and Shnongpdeng

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The year 2020 was a global disaster for tourism. For Meghalaya, the Covid-19 pandemic happened at a time when the tourism season was about to commence. In general, all the economic sectors of Meghalaya were adversely impacted; however, tourism was the most affected primarily because the restrictions on tourism activities were the last to be lifted. The other economic activities were gradually opened from September, 2020 whereas tourism was allowed only from February, 2021. This basically means that tourism in Meghalaya was at a standstill for a period of 10 months (April, 2020 to January, 2021) altogether. This equates to 10 months of hardship and turmoil for the tourism stakeholders, particularly the ones at the grassroots like micro and small tourism services providers such as cafes, souvenir outlets, home-stays and bed and breakfast accommodations, etc. Accordingly, this column is aimed at highlighting some of the tourism hardships arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic by focusing on two popular tourist destinations in Meghalaya, namely Sohra (also known as Cherrapunji) and Shnongpdeng. The lines penned in this column are an outcome of recent interactions and observations conducted in these destinations.

At the outset, it is to be noted that this is not a comparison between Sohra and Shnongpdeng. In any case and in keeping with the ‘nature of attractions/activities offered’, these two destinations are incomparable and any attempts to do so will be like comparing apples to oranges. The end result is that the understanding will be disoriented. This is because Sohra is a tourism circuit starting from Dympep-Mawkdok Duwan Sing Syiem Bridge (also known as Mawkdok Bridge) and stretching till towards Laikynsew village. The attractions on offer are primarily nature-based scenic views in addition to caving and trekking (particularly at Nongriat village), etc. On the other hand, Shnongpdeng is a community-based tourism adventure destination along the river Umngot in West Jaintia Hills District with a number of tourism activities on offer such as kayaking, boating, cliff jumping, snorkelling, zip lining, scuba diving, trekking, etc. In terms of scale, Sohra is bigger than Shnongpdeng. Nonetheless, the Covid-19 pandemic did impact the tourism of both these places. As tourism is predominantly an economic sector, the consequences were primarily economic in nature but, also included social and environmental problems. Moreover, the mental stress and anxiety amongst the tourism stakeholders was widely prevalent and explicitly observable in many. A single Coronavirus did turn their worlds upside down!

In economic terms, the numbers were damaging. During the lockdown/restrictions period the revenue flows was zero/negligible. For example, in the tourist hub of Dympep-Mawkdok which primarily comprises of cafes and souvenir shops the pre-lockdown peak tourism figures used to be a profit of Rs. 30000 - to 35000 per month and sales of Rs. 5000 - 8000 per day respectively. The pandemic brought it down to zero and in recent days the revenue flows are just starting to pick up again. There was a similar situation in Krem Pubon (also known as Mawsmai Cave). During the pre-lockdown peak tourism periods it receives footfalls ranging from 2500 to 3000 tourists a day. The food outlets around it do brisk business and the souvenir shops on location manage sales of Rs. 20000 - 25000/per day. Here too tourism is struggling to pick up still. At Shnongpdeng, the adverse

impacts were similar. During the pre-lockdown peak tourism periods, Shnongpdeng receives a footfall of around 300 tourists and the food outlets do brisk sales of around Rs. 20000 a day. The adventure tourism activities were all in high demand and revenue flows were brisk. Being a small village of around 130 households, these revenue flows are hugely significant in terms of development. In addition, since camping is one of the main attractions for the tourists; home-stays are less in number amounting to only around 10. However, the pandemic did bring all these numbers to naught. At present, the destination has opened up again along with an effort towards following the necessary Covid-19 protocols.

Against the above backdrop, the tourism service providers in these two destinations were having a very difficult and uncertain time during the lockdown/restrictions period. Most of them depend on tourism entirely for their livelihoods. Hence, it goes without saying that they had a horrid time. In Sohra, a lady who runs a small binocular and tea joint at the seven sisters falls viewpoint sadly stated, ‘lah ia long kum ba bie phi, ym ngwev nang leh ei ei ruh da kumwei pat’ (we feel so helpless and lost, we do not know a trade other than tourism). In Shnongpdeng, similar difficulties resounded albeit with a difference. A youth who runs adventure activities quipped ‘baroh ngi ia shem jingeh, hynrei namar ba don ka wah Umngot, ngi ia pynleit ngi da kaba khwai dohkhka’ (all of us faced difficulties, but thanks to the river Umngot, we got involved in fishing for food). This was also practiced in nearby villages like Darrang which is only 1.6 kilometers away from Shnongpdeng.

Be that as it may, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus one very important point; that being the need for tourism enterprises to diversify and learn to prepare for difficult and uncertain times like the pandemic of last year and ILP-linked agitations. To this end, the challenges faced by the tourism service providers are more serious than the ones faced by the tourists. For the tourist, ‘travel insurance’ is available so as to mitigate the losses in relation to cancellations, baggage lost, etc. In fact, travel insurance has now become one of the hot topics of discussion amongst the tourists. For the service providers, Covid-19 has thrown open a vacuum that needs to be filled. The stakeholders who depend on tourism need to be given awareness and training on preparing for difficult times. After all, tourism is a highly sensitive sector and the inflow of tourists can stop at the drop of a hat. As such, the NGOs and people involved in tourism including the Tourism Department of the state government needs to play a vital educational role. The point here is that the awareness focus must not be in terms of a bail-out from the government; rather, capacity building so as to empower the stakeholders to mitigate such challenges.

In the end, over-tourism including waste and sewage management is an issue for both destinations. This is more so in the case of Shnongpdeng as the tourists primarily stay in tents. This also involves the health of the Umngot River. As such, it is high time that the state government devises strict and punitive guidelines on waste and sewage management. After all, there are many other destinations in Meghalaya that are lackin on this front. (benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in, The Author teaches at NEHU)

Letters to the Editor

How RAM came to be...

(A Response to STIEH)

Editor,
We used to think that people who did sex work had found themselves in a situation where they had no choice but to do sex work, and that the job of feminists was to help sex workers find alternative sources of income. A few years back, at a workshop organised by the Meghalaya Aids Control Society (MACS) in the state, we attended a session on sex work. There we asked a question that today we feel embarrassed to own up to: “Why would anyone choose to do sex work?” You can imagine how the temperature of the room – full of sex worker rights activists – plummeted. We can't even remember what response we got from the panel, but we do recall the conversation we had later with an employee of the Society.

“Discrimination and stigma against sex workers generates violence”
Most of us (as STIEH announced) grew up in a patriarchal society and are fed particular “narratives” around what is “right and wrong” from birth. But as a young girl at a Catholic school I was taught that only bad girls had sex. Some girls were even described as “tusk” because, allegedly, all the boys in the neighbouring schools had slept with them. It was only when stories started to spread about who I had slept with that I realised

that rumours were just that. It took many more years before I began to question why our Khasi Society tries so hard to control women's bodies, choices and sexualities.
On the way back home, another Shillong-based social worker explained to me that people are entitled to make choices about their life, and that they may make different decisions depending on their current life circumstances, and that for many people sex work is a logical choice. That very conversation started a journey for me. I began to think about sex work as legitimate work, and eventually started to work with others to create spaces where activists, including sex workers and other historically oppressed groups, are able to share the realities of their own lives with other people.
Ten years ago, I saw there was a need for an association focused on sex workers rights as Amnesty International puts it: Sex Workers rights are Human Rights. So, I brought together a group of disadvantaged women who earn a living through sex work, to work together and defend fellow sex workers. The following year, in April 2011, our first official “Get Together” took place where participants spoke about the violence that they all faced in Meghalaya, from Student Union leaders, politicians and police officers in particular, who arrest and rape them, before robbing them of their earnings.
We were clear that these acts of violence are perpetrated against us because our

work is criminalised. So, we call for its decriminalisation – a demand long made by several sex worker activists in the country. According to Human Rights, consortium: “To a large extent, the violence in the lives of sex workers is created by the conditions of criminalisation. Sex work is not inherently violent but discrimination and stigma against sex workers generates violence and limits sex workers access to justice.”

Some of the stigma faced by us sex workers comes from self-professed “feminists” (two in particular from STIEH) who seek to end sex work, and conflate the trade with human trafficking. Yet the difference is clear. Sex work is undertaken by consenting adults and human trafficking is not. As stated by Human Rights Watch, “...in reality, anti-trafficking investigations are often racist, anti sex-work and anti-migrant. The intersection of criminal laws, immigration laws and municipal bylaws are used against migrant sex workers while human rights violations against these workers are justified by labelling them as illegal workers and criminals.”

Clearly, people don't switch in an instance from being a feminist who judges the work of others to advocating/defending for sex workers' rights – so I want to share some of what has helped expand my understanding of this subject. I started reading books, articles and resources about sex work. I also attended panels, events and conversations convened by

sex workers and their allies outside the Ri Tip-Briew Tip-Blei of Meghalaya to get a deeper understanding of the issue. When you listen to the people who are most affected by an issue, you are more likely to gain a deeper understanding of that issue. On social media, I followed some sex worker activists and human rights crusaders such as Hasina Kharbhii, Agnes Kharshing, Angela Rangad, Rica Lamar, Meena Kharkongor and Patricia Mukhim and their posts and insights into their work continue to give us members of RAM opportunities to learn and grow.

Sadly, the issue of sex workers' rights here in Matrilineal Meghalaya continues to be a point of tension for the feminist movement, and there are too many feminists who today feel how I felt ten years ago when I put together RAM. All I can encourage those feminists to do is to open their hearts and minds, and to listen to sex workers. It is way past the time for all feminists to recognise that advocating for sex workers' rights is a fundamental contribution towards the battle to end violence against women and girls. It is time for us all to suspend judgement, and to join sex workers in advocating for rights and justice for all... Because, after all, we're humans too!

Yours etc.,
I. Khamuti (President),
P. Mylliemngap (General Secretary) & D. Mawlong (Publicity Secretary)
Rot Association Of Meghalaya
Shillong – 19

Vacant nursing posts at NEIGRIHMS

Editor,
Very soon NEIGRIHMS will conduct a written test for filling up the vacancies for the post of nurses (Entry Pay of Rs.44,900/-) vide Advertisement No. NEIGR-E. III/10/2016/Pt dated 26.02.2019 which was 2 years ago (which clearly shows that there is no urgency in the matter since vacancies can be filled by contractual staff). The designation for nurses was re-designated to Nursing Officer few years back with the same qualifications but higher pay. As someone who wants to see this Institute growing in the right direction, I would like to point out some facts which need to be addressed before such vacancies are being filled. As per the advertisement the reservation for the said number of posts will be All India basis which is SC-15%, ST-7.5%, OBC-27% and the remaining will be UR and EWS. Looking at this distribution it is very clear that employment opportunities for our youth in the state has been treated as the least important. After enquiring, it is understood that since the pay band is high and falls under group “B” category, the All India Reservation Policy is to be followed as per rule. Going deeper into the spirit of the rules it is obvious that it was meant for filling up few group “B” posts like Section Officer etc., where there are not enough candidates available from the local or regional

population. It is also learnt that earlier before the pay revision this post fell under “C” group category and a regional reservation was followed which is SC-1%, ST-44%, OBC-5% and UR-50%. The question is, whether the All India Reservation Policy will benefit the patients in this Institute since the majority of nurses will be coming from the other states of India when 99% of patients are from the region and 85% are from the state of Meghalaya? Is not the name of this Institute REGIONAL?

Then why is the All India Reservation criterion being applied for filling up these vacancies? In fact, we have enough candidates for these posts to be filled by our own local job aspiring candidates which will provide income to many households. These posts are the most highly paid in the Institute with only matriculate and GNM as main qualifications criteria. I cannot but ask myself, what is the state government doing when the Health Minister is the member of the Governing Council by default? How can the State Government wash its hands on this matter when they had been hands in glove to oust the last Director of this Institute without thinking about a replacement? What is the stand of the NGOs on this? I hope someone listens and stops this nonsense which keeps on happening in this institute which doesn't have even a permanent Director till date and is actually being run by a monarchy!

Yours etc.,
A Rani,
Via email

"Environmental pollution is an incurable disease. It can only be prevented."

— Barry Commoner

The Shillong Times

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DFI, infra funding

A Development Financial Institution (DFI) is in the offing. This is the latest in a series of "attempts" from the Union Government to "speed up" infrastructure and other development activities of the nation. The move, as was proposed in the last budget, comes at a time when the nation's financial institutions, prominently the banking sector, are faced with a serious existential crisis. Frequent strikes by unions to protect the already well-protected employees' interests only add to the existing mess.

The reason cited by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman for setting up the DFI is that there was no bank that could take up long-term risk and funds development. In her budget proposals, she had proposed to set apart Rs 20,000 crore for the DFI, as part funding for the \$1.5 trillion infra development plans for the coming years. With a capital base of Rs 20,000 crore, DFI aims at meeting a lending target of Rs 5 lakh crore in three years. Initially, DFI will be fully owned by the government and over time the government's share will come down to 26 per cent. Governments come and go and institutions created at one time are mishandled by successive governments in apparent trial and error modes. The arrival of Modi in Delhi in 2014 saw the Planning Commission being disbanded and the Niti Aayog come into being. How much such fancy changes helped the nation is a subject of serious debate.

Bad debts saga, meaning Non-Performing Assets of public sector banks that ran into more than 10 lakh crore a while ago, is only one part of the overall crisis gripping India's financial sector. Regulatory frameworks failed. The health of the banking sector is going from bad to worse. While the first Modi government took some steps to improve the scenario, nothing much could be changed. Such was the rot that has set into the system. Things are moving around in circles. The government is finding it difficult to get back the billions funneled abroad by big business sharks, who took huge loans and would not repay citing one excuse or the other.

Faced with this situation, the government is pumping in huge sums to save the banking sector. This is the money that the citizens pay as taxes and that lay in the exchequer, which is being squandered rather than making serious efforts to set things right with the banking systems. With whimsical changes, the systems get shaken and often weakened. Now the banking sector is also up in arms against the privatisation plans of the Modi Government.

Why the Sex Worker is not a Sex Worker

By Deepa Majumdar

To those we call the "sex worker"

Patricia Mukhim's article, "Sex workers figure in Assembly debates....but," (ST, Mar 12, 2021), reminded me of my old concern and empathy for the so-called "sex worker." I believe deeply that History has visited upon mankind something as dangerous as the sexual revolution, as punishment for the great sins we have committed against the "sex worker." Although the pain caused by the so-called sexual revolution can in no measure compare with the pain of having to provide sex in exchange for money, we have en masse experienced a slight hint of the "sex worker's" agony. By leveling all of humanity to almost her level and by stripping all of us of respectability, many now have at least a slight idea and direct experience of her pain and humiliation. To understand her plight, we must first understand the premises that encircle the "sex worker" in puritanical (rather than chaste) forms of "respectable" society.

First, we must distinguish entirely between true chastity and puritanical caricatures of this virtue. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle flanks each moral virtue by two vices, one a qualitative excess and the other a qualitative deficit. Thus courage is a moral virtue flanked by the vices of rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficit). Applying Aristotle, we would have to conclude that while true chastity is a moral virtue, lust is its deficit vice, and puritanism its excess vice. Yes, puritanism is a vice. India has a formidable history of masculine (and sometimes feminine as well) puritanical violence against women. The acrid stench of Sati lingering in the annals of Indian history, should remind us daily of the dangers of such puritanism. Modern feminism, despite its shortcomings, has done a good job of debunking the unbelievable masculine hypocrisy and lust underlying such puritanical notions of the female body.

What else can it be but rank hypocrisy to veil little girls in societies that permit and encourage polygamy for men? No little girl should have to feel unclean because adult men have impure eyes. What else can it be but rank hypocrisy to define a woman's virginity in physiological terms, with no accountability for philandering men? What else can it be but rank hypocrisy, to punish women survivors of rape in societies where male rapists go scot free? Indeed, the Indian Supreme Court recently displayed this hypocritical masculinity, when Chief Justice Bobde asked a man accused of raping a minor, if he would "marry" his victim. Although

Bobde says his remark was complete misreported, his credibility is weak because India has a long history of forcing abused women to marry their abusers. All this speaks of how primitive and literal-minded, their notion of marriage is. Instead of seeing marriage as a moral institution resting on the bedrock of mutual respect and responsibility (moral and otherwise) for one another, the puritanical mind envisions marriage in terms of a perverted notion of sexual purity. This is particularly relevant for the "sex worker." For many, she can never reach the threshold of respectability represented by

"Where chastity means sublimating body consciousness by drowning it in divine consciousness, puritanical caricatures of this glorious virtue, apply more to women, in the form of a degraded politics of the hymen."

even such degraded notions of marriage.

Even Aristotle's philosophical schema cannot do justice to the gulf that separates true chastity from puritanism. Where chastity means sublimating body consciousness by drowning it in divine consciousness, puritanical caricatures of this glorious virtue, apply more to women, in the form of a degraded politics of the hymen. This implies a lethal body-over-mind, rather than mind-over-body approach. I call this puritanical definition of literal physical virginity, "carnal chastity" — because it forgets altogether that true chastity depends on the mind — not the body. Thus it is perfectly possible for married men and women, with children, to become chaste, by disciplining the mind and sublimating lust. Equally, it is quite possible for those who are virginal to have a lustful mind of which they are not yet aware. The innocence in true chastity therefore is far greater than that in mere virginity. Where the former is earned, through conscious moral effort, the latter is not.

Second, we must recognize that "sex work" is entirely demand-driven. If men did not solicit and purchase sex, there would be no supply. I am dumbfounded why any man would so lack in self-respect, humanity, and a parental perspective, that he would torment an unknown woman's body with his sexual demands. The very existence of "sex work" and the "sex worker" depends on a sick form of masculinity, which has never received adequate revulsion in Indian society. One bad side-effect of India's otherwise glorious

history of ascetic traditions, is a saffron sexism that sees men as monks and women as natural temptresses. A true monk would transcend male and female, seeing the Divine in both. In a civilization where rapists escape punishment with impunity, this is particularly disturbing. Moreover, in a civilization with a history of puritanical violence against women, where hypocritical men suspect all women of natural lasciviousness, thus replaying the tragedy of Sita, to have to be a "sex worker" is unbelievable agony. I cannot think of a greater human rights tragedy than that of the

"sex worker," in puritanical societies, ruled by religious fanatics. Even without going so far as the "sex worker," beautiful women are punished in puritanical societies as natural temptresses for men. Many experience needless guilt. Thus, feminists have long urged men to take responsibility for their own passions, instead of blaming women.

I am dumbfounded as well by the sheer asymmetry of male and female, biologically and historically. Biologically, women bear the entire burden, pain, and risk to life of bringing children into the world. India eulogizes mothers. But apart from some outstanding monks, I have rarely known Indian men to truly understand what a woman undergoes when giving birth. If they did, they would insist on fewer children. Moreover, they would cook for, nurse, and serve their wives when they are pregnant. This glory of motherhood becomes degraded when mothers are coerced, neglected, despised, or abandoned. There should be a separate day set aside as Single Mother's Day. By raising a whole generation, while enduring rebukes from a judgmental society, the single mother has proved her mettle. I shudder at the cosmic punishment that awaits men who abandon women when they are pregnant. But above all, I shudder at the cosmic punishment that awaits men who abandon someone as helpless as the "sex worker" when she is pregnant.

True motherhood is a cosmic force that civilizes mankind. Recently I read of freed Yazidi women, once forced into sexual slavery

by ISIS men, returning to reclaim babies born of their torment — but now forced into exile by their own elders, who have accepted them, but not their children. So great is the power of motherhood that these women prefer exile over abandoning their children. So the asymmetry between male and female continues into parenting responsibilities, with women far more committed than men.

But the greatest asymmetry between male and female lies in the gulf between the historical incarnations of God, who have been mostly male, and the hapless "sex worker" "dancing girl," or "courtesan," who have all been female. To add insult to injury, incarnations have been known to uplift and redeem such "fallen" women. To the Buddha's Amrapali, we have Christ's Mary Magdalene. I admire the Buddha because when the courtesan Amrapali came to him, he commented, not on her body, or her place in society, but on the concentration of mind he saw in her eyes.

I understand that perhaps only the Incarnation has the power to heal the "sex worker" of her agony. I also understand the risk of moral decline in her lifestyle. But I have wondered why even incarnations see her as "fallen." While some women may indeed be tainted by "sex work," others may remain mentally chaste and unswayed by the horrific sexual abuse they endure. It saddens me that even incarnations of God (as reported by subjective men), have noted the "fallen" condition of the "sex worker" — not the unspeakable agony she suffers. Instead of redeeming her, why did they not redeem the men who exploited her? Of the two, surely the male clients were the greater sinners?

At long last, I now understand the logic of history. Given the horrific abuse that fallen men perpetrate on women, it makes perfect sense that divine incarnations have been mainly masculine. For men stand in need of redemption and for historical examples of ideal masculinity. Moreover, the freedom of women depends on the redemption of fallen men.

The "sex worker" is not a worker because providing sex to strangers in exchange for money is not work, but exploitation. Unlike other forms of work that produce and sell commodities, sex is not a commodity. Moreover, any work, even if sold, comes with the potential for a spirit of service. But only a sadist would expect a spirit of service from the "sex worker," whose label, therefore, remains a politically correct sexist euphemism.

Development versus survival

By Barnes Mawrie

Probably we have not given enough thought to the irony of development. It is true that everybody and every country wishes development for their well-being. Who does not want a better house, better food, better supply of electricity and water, better clothes, better education etc? Which government or country does not desire to generate a stronger economy, better health system, stronger defence system, wider transport network, more effective communication system or greater industrialization etc? Development is what every government works for and every community and family seeks.

However, what is being

over the place putting people in danger of getting sick. The innumerable cement factories in Lumshnong are a profit for those big companies while the thousands of poor residents will gradually succumb to pollution-related sicknesses.

The way we understand development today is truly a "penny wise pound foolish" philosophy. Some may make a few hundred crores of monetary gain but in the long run they destroy the very ground on which they stand. The gain they make is short-lived and unreliable while the damage caused is irreversible and fatal. Think of the coal mines in Jaintia Hills and in other parts of Meghalaya. How long will



practiced today in almost all countries of the world is unsustainable development which means a one-sided development or a win-lose formula of development. Because of this formula of development humanity today runs the risk of becoming extinct.

We cannot deny the fact that the ecological woes that we are experiencing today are the results of this tragic formula of development. Climate change for example, has been triggered by the excessive CO2 emission into the atmosphere brought about by fossil fuel burning from factories, thermal plants, thousands of airlines and billions of automobiles. It is true that manufacturing has increased and we are able to enjoy all sorts of products in the market, we can have any brand of automobiles; we can communicate faster and more easily through mobile phones and we can travel all over the world by trains or by flights. Little do we realize that all these advantages and comforts come at a great cost. The tragedy of the Chernobyl accident in 1986 which killed 28 persons and caused thyroid cancer to some 5000 persons and resulted in the evacuation of 350,000 people is still fresh in our minds. The Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant disaster in Japan in 2011 where 154,000 people had to be evacuated outside a 20 km radius is another grim reminder of the high price we need to pay for our craze of development. The recent bursting of the dam in Uttarakhand in February 2021 where 150 persons died and villages were washed down and cultivable land destroyed is yet another example of how development can become a curse for society.

Coming closer home to Meghalaya, we know how unscientific coal mining in Jaintia Hills which has profited a few rich families, has brought about environmental disasters to the masses — rivers are polluted and poisoned and fishes are becoming extinct; water is no longer suitable for use, the carbon laden water from the mines are poisoning the paddy fields making cultivation no longer feasible and underground mining caves are like a Damocles' sword to inhabitants of the region. In fact, if mining goes on in this manner, Jaintia Hills will become an ecological disaster in Meghalaya. Besides these, the air is continuously being poisoned by the carbon emitted by huge coal reserves all

they last? Perhaps three or four generations but what will become of the later generations? When the coal is exhausted, what will their posterity live on? By then the place would have become barren, fields would have become uncultivable, rivers devoid of fish, drinking water scarce and breathing air highly contaminated.

Looking at our own city of Shillong, we lament the disappearance of the erstwhile beautiful rivers we had — Wah Umkhrah, Umshyrti, Umkialiar etc. Development has killed all our rivers and today they have become mere narrow drains carrying the filth of the city. In the name of development we have lost the large expanse of fertile fields of yesteryears extending from Polo up to the slope of Mawpat village. Today this particular place has turned into a residential area with buildings mushrooming everywhere. The permanent adverse impact of this would be the disappearance of cultivation and the threat to ground water deposits. In the coming decade we will face the crisis of drinking water shortage.

The rise in temperature, which we are experiencing today is a direct result of air pollution caused by CO2 emission through fossil fuel burning. Looking at all these irreversible negative impacts of the so called "development" we realize that we are actually engaged in a process of "self destruction." Development as we see today is a pseudo-terminology used by the greedy and ambitious individuals, corporates and governments. True development will result when human beings would have achieved a symbiosis with Mother Nature, learning to respect and love her. True development will come when we would have overcome our greed, and ambition and try to live with the essentials.

Today the world faces the challenge between development and survival. Many countries in the west have given up thermal power and nuclear power plants because they realize that they are a threat to their own survival. Can we in India or in Meghalaya do the same? As the saying goes "why sunset is more colourful than sunrise? It's an irony of life saying, "sometimes good things happen in goodbyes." Perhaps we will ensure our own survival when we would have learnt to say goodbye to the so called development.

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Letters to the Editor

Opposition, why play the victim card?

Editor,
"It is tempting, is it not? To take credit when things go well, but deflect the blame when they don't?"

As coach and author, Ben Dattner said "It's a natural human response to play the blame game. But good leaders avoid the temptation to blame others or hoard credit."

As humans, we all want to be recognized for our efforts and accomplishments and we resist being blamed when things go wrong. What we forget is that, the most successful of leaders are able to see their role in the blame game, admit mistakes and focus on fixing or rather helping to fix the situation rather than blaming.

In the last few days of the Assembly Budget Session, I think we have seen much of debate going on. The hot topic was of the NTPC Agreement which was signed in 2007. This Agreement was signed during the Congress rule in the year 2007, when the portfolio of the Power Minister was held

by Dr. Mukul Sangma. In the agreement signed between NTPC and the government, the latter had agreed that from the year of installation of the last unit at Bongaigaon thermal plant of the NTPC, the pact would be valid for the next 25 years. Now, since the installation of the last unit was done in 2019, adding another 25 years to this will mean that the pact or the agreement will be valid till the year 2044. Based on this same agreement, the NTPC also invoked certain provisions where they can simply stop the State from purchasing power from other companies. Another interesting finding is that, in all contracts, a right to termination is available to both the parties but no such right has been given to Meghalaya under this agreement which shows that the interest of the people of the State has been overlooked.

This certain agreement has now put not only the Meghalaya Electric Corporation Limited (MeECL) but the State government too in a tight spot. They are now bearing the brunt of this one-sided agreement signed by the then Government in 2007. This is arm twisting and paralyzing the govern-

ment from purchasing power from other power generation companies. We can also see how the current Power Minister and the Chief Minister are pursuing this matter diligently with the NTPC to invoke the unreasonable clauses mentioned in the agreement.

In the August house, the CM also clearly admitted that there are a number of blame games being played rather than debate and discussions in the Assembly. There is a lack of constructive criticism and suggestions coming in especially from the Opposition side. The very purpose of having the Opposition is to have a healthy discussion and suggestions coming in from their end based on various issues, but it is sad to see a lot of destructive criticism being spurted out. We can see the Opposition now blaming the MDA government as to why it is not invoking or doing something related to the NTPC agreement. Questions I would like to raise here are, why did they not ponder upon the clauses? Why was this ill-fated agreement signed in the first place? A hidden agenda in place? Why were the interests of the people not

taken into account? Questions I simply might not receive answers to.

The Opposition Congress tabling the 'breach of privilege motion' against the Chief Minister in the Assembly, only makes me wonder if they are playing the victim card, knowing very well the NTPC agreement with unbiased clauses were all signed under the then Congress government. There is no question that the blame game exists and it can be painful if we don't receive the credit we deserve or are blamed for things we feel we are not at fault for. At this point of time, it is the need of the hour for the Opposition to change their approach, evolve and focus on the future. Yes, in the world of politics, one simply has to dream of the Ruling and Opposition parties working hand in hand. But why not for the sake of good governance? Why not for the good of the citizens and the State? Now is the time for change, to make amends for what has gone wrong. Enough of hiding under sheep's skin. Enough of playing victim!

Yours etc.,
Jordan Diengdoh
Shillong - 2

Rising crimes against girls

Editor,
Apropos the news item, 'Minor's body recovered in EJM' (ST March 14, 2021) I would like to raise my voice as a senior woman citizen of the state and urge the government to take immediate steps against the culprit/culprits who dared to rob a minor, innocent school-going girl of her life while she was returning from school. What can be more disappointing than when young girls cannot even move safely in broad daylight? Where is the safety and security for women in Meghalaya? The Government has failed to ensure law and order. On February 20, Ms Ampareen Lyngdoh, Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Women's Empowerment assured that crime against women and children will not recur else it would tarnish the essence of the matrilineal society for which Meghalaya is widely known for.

Dr. Rekha M. Shangpliang of NEHU wrote, 'Women's rights are human rights' (ST, March 3, 2021), but these are only theories. Humans and women are not

dealt equally! Two heinous incidents of rape and brutal murder of minor school girls happened in the same District of East Jaintia Hills while they were returning from school. Does not it expose the ineffectiveness of the administration and reluctance on the part of the Government to do anything meaningful?

It is unfortunate and disgraceful for the state that girls and women are highly insecure and their lives are at stake. But criminals even when caught red-handed are not given exemplary punishment. Some cases are pending for years and justice is delayed on the plea of investigations etc. As a result, the criminals are emboldened to repeat their crimes of atrocities against women. How long can women tolerate this weak and debilitating justice delivery system? May I draw the kind attention of the Chief Justice of Meghalaya to these crimes against women?

Yours etc.,
Uma Purkayastha,
Shillong - 4

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"We've got to be judged by how we do in times of crisis."

— Johnnie Cochran

The Shillong Times

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Stop the politics over Meghalaya's power crisis

SO Meghalaya's power woes are about to resurface come March 20 or so we are told by NEEPCo the power generation and distribution company. For those outside of the MeECL it is difficult to connect the dots and understand at what point the Power Grid comes in and NEEPCo goes out and vice versa. Recently the Power Grid had given a green signal not to disconnect power to the MeECL grid. But that soon turned out to be a short term agreement. Meghalaya went back into load shedding mode and citizens suffered six hourly power cuts and longer in some districts. Then the Power Minister gave us hope that the power cut story has reached its concluding chapter. Now NEEPCo has come up with a new diktat — pay or suffer power cuts. The previous Congress-led government has been blamed for a bad deal signed by the then Power Minister, Mukul Sangma with the Bongaigaon based National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) entailing an annual payment of over Rs 130 crore to the company despite not purchasing power from it in the past 3 years. The deal is locked for the next 25 years and the Meghalaya Government, would have to pay Rs 3,300 crore approximately to the NTPC in the next 25 years. This is what Chief Minister Conrad Sangma explained on the floor of the House.

The Congress took umbrage at this allegation and raised a stink. It threatened the Chief Minister with a privilege motion. The question is whether the Chief Minister had breached any privilege by informing the House about the power deals that have put Meghalaya in a soup.

As per the Electricity Act 2003 the power sector was corporatized to introduce competition, protect consumer's interests and provide power for all. The Act provides for a National Electricity Policy, Rural Electrification, Open access in transmission, phased open access in distribution, mandatory SERCs, license free generation and distribution, power trading, mandatory metering and stringent penalties for theft of electricity. It is a comprehensive legislation replacing the Electricity Act 1910, Electricity Supply Act 1948 and Electricity Regulatory Commission Act 1998. The aim was to push the sector onto a trajectory of sound commercial growth and sustainability but obviously Meghalaya did not comply with the rules of the game. We are yet to hear of any stringent penalties on power thefts and disconnection of power supply of the defaulting companies that run into crores of rupees. Why? Will the Government come out with a white paper on the actual position of the MeECL and future plans to turn this corporation into a financially viable one? The blame game over MeECL should end. All MLAs should put their heads together to get the MeECL out of the present mess. Enough is enough!

To celebrate or reflect

50 years of statehood

By Teiborlang T.Kharsyntiew

In less than a year, Meghalaya will celebrate fifty years of statehood. While the government has started to plan the itineraries for this celebration, the question remains - are we to celebrate or reflect on what the state has achieved in these 50 years. Today, Meghalaya is a rusted and broken engine were a minority class of elite power brokers, politicians, contractors, and coal barons, flying business class are trying to convince the poor and the wretched that the engine of development is running and we are in for a 'golden' era. Who are we trying to sell this mendacity to? It is a fact that for the last several decades there has been a complete breakdown in the machinery of governance in Meghalaya. For example, for the last decade and a half, a simple act of travelling from point A to point B is today held hostage by an incessant traffic jam. The dilapidation of the public transport system led the traffic police department to manage the traffic at their whims and fancies where 'one way' and 'no entry' are often implemented, changed, or interchanged without any rationale but a recipe for disaster.

The government may have invited national and international experts to solve this mess, but the fact is: any plan of decongesting the city's traffic will mean nothing without first fixing the responsibility of the mismanagement of the Shillong Public Transport Service buses and taxis; the way it was tendered, operated and junked at the expense of tax payers' money. Similarly, the absence of school buses for most schools or the flagrant misuse of official vehicles for personal errands, are questions of ethics and responsibility that need to be addressed. As Utpal Kumar De and Gitumoni Rajbongshi of the Department of Economics, NEHU found out in their study on the impact of Traffic Congestion in Shillong, everyone knows, from patients rushing to the hospital to anyone rushing to catch a flight or a train, deliver food, official work, a miasma of traffic jams is translated to the loss of lives, loss of man-hours and productivity that ruin the state's economy.

Another issue that illustrates our broken system is our education system. Shockingly, till date Meghalaya has only one state-sponsored university—the Captain Williamson A. Sangma technical university. But even this University does not do justice to the name of Captain Williamson A. Sangma when it is shrouded in mystery as no information or a webpage is available to inform us about its status. This also shows the frivolous attitude of every government when it comes to education. In almost fifty years, we are yet to see the light of a state-sponsored medical college, research institute, center of excellence, or a state university other than the technical university.

While private schools, colleges, and universities are mushrooming in the state, government schools and aided schools and colleges are left high and dry. It is disheartening that now and then, school teachers have to beg and protest for their salary, or advertised faculty post in colleges are subject to whippers of delay, nepotism, and underhand appointments.

Out of the many private universities that set up shop in the state, few fly-by-night universities continue to operate and fleece both students and teachers disregarding institutional rules and ethics. The fact that these universities blatantly continue to violate all norms begs the question as to who they are being patronized by? We all know how teachers in most private schools, colleges, and universities are being exploited with a bare minimum wage that eludes human dignity and labour rights. For most teachers teaching in private colleges, running between colleges to supplement their income is a regular sight. While the presence of private educational institutes and universities allows for healthy competition in the education sector, the question remains whether the majority of our students can afford to pay the high cost of private education when about 12 percent of the state's population are still living below the poverty line and three fourths of the population are landless. To the children from this section of the population or even those who are just above the poverty line, the choice is either to drop out or continue their education at a certain financial and personal sacrifice. Perhaps none of our policy makers or even pressure groups—will bleed at this except for an occasional noise of reforming our education system without much conviction. For the rich, powerful, and well-connected the grim state of education will not itch them. Their children will be guaranteed admission in 'public-funded state government schools' or elite private schools in the city, or better still in private expensive schools, colleges, and universities elsewhere in India and abroad. There is nothing at stake for them or generations after them. It would be interesting to conduct a study among college teachers and bureaucrats and find out how many of them are sending their children to study outside the state. And how many of our millionaires and billionaires have invested back in the community through the establishment of schools, colleges, and universities? Perhaps this exercise will provide a few of the answers to the state of our education system.

Meghalaya which once boasted as being the destination for students not only from Northeastern states but from other parts of India and abroad to pursue their study

is no longer the destination. We are archaic! If parents from outside send their kids to study here, perhaps, it is because they were once students in one of our school and colleges and carry good memories of not only good quality education but of a welcoming and peaceful state that embraces all. Today, as most states like Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Sikkim, Mizoram are well connected with other cities in India by train and air, neither geographical proximity nor emotional attachment will hold. Quality education, a peaceful environment, and unrestricted entry are what most parents will contemplate before sending their child to study away from their hometown. No parent would like to send their child to study in a city that does not provide quality education, assuming that quality education is available in that city. But if safety is of concern, or children are required to take a permit every time they come to visit we might as well forget the beauty and value that students will learn while studying in a multicultural and diverse classroom.

Nothing empowers and enriches children and young adults more than a lived experience of being together, observing, and learning other cultures inside and outside the classroom. Students are the best ambassadors and well-wishers. No matter how much we talk about tourism, successive governments fail to recognize that the presence of quality educational institutions (not just in Shillong) is one aspect of any tourism policy.

Talking about tourism, so much for the attempt to attract high-end tourists! Meghalaya, indeed, did witness an increasing flow of tourists over the last few years but how many of these are high-end. The dream of attracting high-end tourist is ironic when after 30 years a five-star hotel at the heart of the city is an eyesore that is still under construction; when rampant and illegal mining has poisoned water aquifers and river systems and endangered the survival of subterranean caves system; when load shedding and traffic jams are today memes and jokes. The dream of attracting high-end tourists is but a self-deception of living in cloud cuckoo land. So which high-end tourist are we fooling? A stop at any tourist site will be met with all sorts of garbage. Even the cleanest village cannot escape the filth and garbage strewn around in corners away from the public eye. Along with the encroachment of streams and river banks and a failed garbage disposal system, our streams and river banks are being encroached, mutilated, and choked with garbage. The hullabaloo of the banning of plastic bags and styrofoam is

a brutal joke when every corner of the city, town, and villages are inundated with the sight of disposable styrofoam, plastic bags, and packets.

Today, any attempt to ban these items is defeated. Instead, there is a digression. The plastic we are told can be turned into wealth if we collect and sell them to the cement industry and turn them into fuel for producing clinkers in the cement industry. In other words, it implies that there is no need to ban plastic but we can keep polluting and then pick a few kilos of them and sell them to another polluting industry. Such is the irony of tackling pollution that no wonder in the Swachh Survekshan 2020, annual cleanliness survey of the country carried out by the Central Government, Shillong ranked among the top 10 dirtiest cities of the country under the category of the population below 10 lakhs.

How are we going to get out of this mess? There is hope. But for now, we are in limbo. We are in limbo because pressure groups, opposition parties, and even the ruling government are in a political game of one-upmanship. It is easier to blame than to take responsibility. Or better, the adage "if you can't beat them, join them". This is what happens to interminable debates on the ILP. We have failed to see beyond the ILP and think of other ways and means of balancing between the need to protect the indigenous and welcome others. Instead of finding the real reasons - besides the obvious - of why the demand for ILP keeps recurring, everyone is in a game of one-upmanship and electoral politics. Political parties that are in government and opposition jump on the bandwagon in support of the chorus. The reason: when there is little or no achievement to show; when governance is stalled because election and party funds come before the welfare of the citizen; when leaders of the many pressure groups are eyeing to contest the next election what we get are incessant bombardments of terminologies like 'us' vs 'others' and 'insider' vs 'outsider' and less on issues of the economy, unemployment, health, education, environment, crime, and violence. We might deny all we can, but the murder and attack on labourers in South West Khasi Hills on February 24 is an outcome of our leaders' failure to see a larger picture of the toxicity of the politics of 'insider'-outsider that is at the core of the ILP. Enough of feeding us with optics of awards and achievements and public relations advertisement on social media that we live in a hunky-dory state. Yes, we ought to celebrate our statehood; but to celebrate we also must start reflecting on where we have failed and what we can be.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies JNU, Email: teibor@gmail.com)

Using people's misery as a 'resource' for govt is lamentable

Oil companies resume their diabolical pre-poll game

By K Raveendran

Whenever petrol and diesel prices go up, the government claims it is open market forces at work. But like all pre-election times, fuel prices have suddenly stopped rising and there has been no increase for the past two weeks or so. While it is true that international crude prices have taken a breather in recent days, the reason for a stall in the century run of fuel prices in India is anything but that. It is a deal between the government and the oil companies.

Otherwise, how is that whenever elections come, the open market policy suddenly becomes people's friendly while at all other times it works to generate 'resources' for the government and the oil marketing companies? There is, in fact, a clear pattern in the behaviour of fuel prices. A month before any crucial elections -- this time there are important assembly elections in West Bengal, Assam and two other states -- prices stop at whatever levels they have been. But once the elections are over, sometimes

consideration of the government. Then she gave an officious explanation that such issues are decided by the GST Council and that the council has not so far made any such recommendation. The council may consider the issue of inclusion of petroleum products "at a time it considers appropriate keeping in view all the relevant factors including revenue implication," she said.

So, it is obvious that the government's revenue consideration is the main determining factor, when it comes to pricing of petroleum products. All other issues, including the hardships higher prices bring to the common people, are irrelevant, except in times of elections.

It is sheer coincidence that the international crude prices have lost some momentum in their relentless upward push ever since the producers' cartel decided to be firm on their output curbs. It is only due to setback in the vaccination programme that the prices have stayed within the \$70-mark, which can translate into retail petrol



even before the results start coming in, the companies are back to their game and prices start going up with a vengeance. The companies and the government more than make up for the loss, the worst part being that it is only an opportunity loss.

Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan had recently assured the people that the price hike was only temporary and that India was in talks with oil producing countries to reduce the prices. There is no doubt Pradhan needs to be complimented for flying on the wings of imagination, but that is not going to have any effect on the thinking of the oil cartel, the sole focus of which is self-preservation and enrichment.

Pradhan says taxes are 'resources' for the government to help revive the economy hit by the pandemic. He has shown a small mercy by not saying that people's misery is a resource for pursuing nation's progress, although this is what the government has been practising all along, at least in the case of petroleum prices. While recently there has been much discussion about petroleum products being brought under GST, which would have helped prices come down a bit, such hopes have been dashed, with Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman clarifying in parliament that there was no such proposal under the

prices in the vicinity of Rs 100 in India. It is a different matter that even when crude prices were at their historic peak, prices in India were nowhere near the 100-mark. It is a point of consolation for the Indian consumers that for global oil demand to fully recover to pre-Covid levels, a successful and rapid inoculation of the global population needs to take place. Before the recent setback, there was positivity that the campaigns under way were on the right track. Halting the application of AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine in several countries across the world has caused many more nations to debate a similar stance and has put the speed of the oil demand recovery at risk. It now depends on how quickly the vaccination campaigns resume, for which some scientific proof is needed that the vaccines are safe and unrelated to blood clots, and providing that can take some time to research and verify.

Developments on the vaccination front are in fact moving in the reverse direction. An increasing number of European countries have suspended the use of AstraZeneca vaccine over reports of dangerous blood clots in some recipients and the countries include Germany, France, Italy and Spain. The company insists there is no basis for the fears, but that is not convincing enough. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Controversial Bill

Editor,
The central government introduced a controversial Bill in the Lok Sabha that gives very important powers over Delhi's daily functions to the centre-appointed Lieutenant Governor. The Bill was introduced to amend the 1991 Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act. The Bill cites two judgments by the Supreme Court. Both judgments describe the powers of the Centre and the Government of Delhi in administration of the national capital. However, the Bill and its purpose have aroused anger from the Delhi's ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). It criticised the central government for proposing amendments to the GNCTD Act in parliament saying the bill will snatch all decision-making powers

of the elected government and empower the Lieutenant Governor far beyond what's needed.

The amendments to the GNCTD Act contain provisions for making it compulsory for the Delhi government to seek the opinion of the Lieutenant Governor before taking any executive action. It does not give any power to the elected government to exercise its discretion in deciding matters. As per the provisions, a prior consultation with the LG or sending of files to the LG after a decision is made is required. The central government that made this provision shows a flagrant disregard for the judgments of the five-judge bench in 2018 and a two-judge bench in 2019. The first judgment had made it clear that LG is bound to act on the aid and advice of the council of ministers. The bench suggested that the LG must work harmoniously with his ministers

and must not seek to resist them at every step. The decisions of the ministers must be communicated to the LG but this does not mean that the concurrence of the LG is required. The 2019 judgment also acknowledged that the LG must be informed of all decisions of the government but there is no requirement of concurrence by him.

The apex court has said in different places in the constitution bench judgment that the Delhi assembly has legislative and executive powers over all subjects except three subjects—police, land and law and order. Notwithstanding this judgment, the 2021 amendment clearly seeks to give an upper hand to the LG and the central government in administration of the Capital. This is unwarranted and erodes centre-state relations and the spirit of federalism.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS
Kollam

Fleeing parents

Editor,
With regards to the above subject I would like to bring to your notice that, on March 16, 2021, I had gone to collect the nursery report card of my son from Tender Care School (Bishnupur) as his class teacher had called up the previous night stating that I could collect the report card today. To my surprise I was told that I have to pay the March 2021 school fees if I want the report card. When I asked the staff that since the last page of the bill book was only till February 2021 and I had paid all dues, they mentioned that the government had asked the school to collect the fees till March 2021. I was surprised and felt like a fool who could not afford to pay my son's school fees. It was such an embarrassment.
Also few months ago

when I went to pay the last installment which is for January- February 2021, I was told that all parents have to keep the report card right from KG till Class X so that whenever the students go for professional courses they can produce all those report cards. Is this just a tactic to extract money and to make sure the parents pay the extra month's fees?

I write this letter so that such things do not happen to the vulnerable. And after all that had happened, they finally agreed to give me the report card of my son but I refused to take it.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Cancer Institute at NEIGRIHMS

Editor
On March 16, The Shillong Times carried a

news report regarding the construction of Regional Cancer Centre at NEIGRIHMS. This is indeed good news because people of the state as well as the whole region will be able to get treatment at affordable rates closer to their homes. But our goal must be to prevent cancer than to cure it. Sadly, the number of tobacco related cancer patients in this state is very high. It is indeed unfortunate that while tourists from far and wide flock to Meghalaya to enjoy its climate and natural beauty, the people of the state suffer the highest incidence of cancer in the country. A large number of people, young and old are addicted to this deadly drug due to lack of proper publicity. The State Government has to campaign extensively through various means so that the youth of Meghalaya refrain from this deadly intoxication.

Yours etc.,
Mithun Sikdar,
Shillong -1

"You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough."

— William Blake

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 211 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

Yes to judicial service

A statement by Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad in Parliament that a properly framed All India Judicial Service on the lines of Civil Services is important to strengthen the justice delivery system in the country. However, not much need be read into this statement as it has come by way of a written reply, in Rajya Sabha, and not as a policy push or affirmation of the Modi-led central government.

The central government has not serious about this proposal since 2012, or much earlier too. The minister himself admitted that a comprehensive proposal was formulated and approved by the Committee of Secretaries in that year. Eight years have passed without any action, other than casually circulating the matter for comments from state governments. The matter was left unattended thereon, rather than taking things forward.

When the minister says such a service is good for justice-dispensation, a question is why did he, as minister for law, sit pretty on it for seven years since he took charge of the ministry in 2014? What little was done by the government thereafter was to include the proposal in the agenda of the high court chief justices' conference in 2015 and then conveniently put it back in cold storage. In fact, the present Chief Justice of India, Justice Sharad Arvind Bobde, made a statement shortly after he took over in 2019 that he would push for a national judicial service. He is to retire next month.

The judiciary was thought to be sacrosanct until recently and then skeletons started tumbling out of its cupboard. Fashioned on the British legal systems, it is facing problems of ageing, corruption and much more which are well-known by now, at least in part. Crores of cases are pending in Indian courts.

Lots of those manning the judiciary today are relatives of those who held posts in the judiciary in the past. What this means is all too clear.

The Modi government(s) hardly touched on critical matters such as these on multiple fronts. It is natural that, over time, the strengths of systems get reduced, and reforms are the way forward. Lack of strong leadership with the vision and courage to change things for the better is a problem that India is facing. Since the turn of the century, things are going from bad to worse. The judiciary is the last refuge of the people, over and above the political leadership. It must retain its original strengths and improve upon it too.

Is Meghalaya staring at a black hole?

By Patricia Mukhim

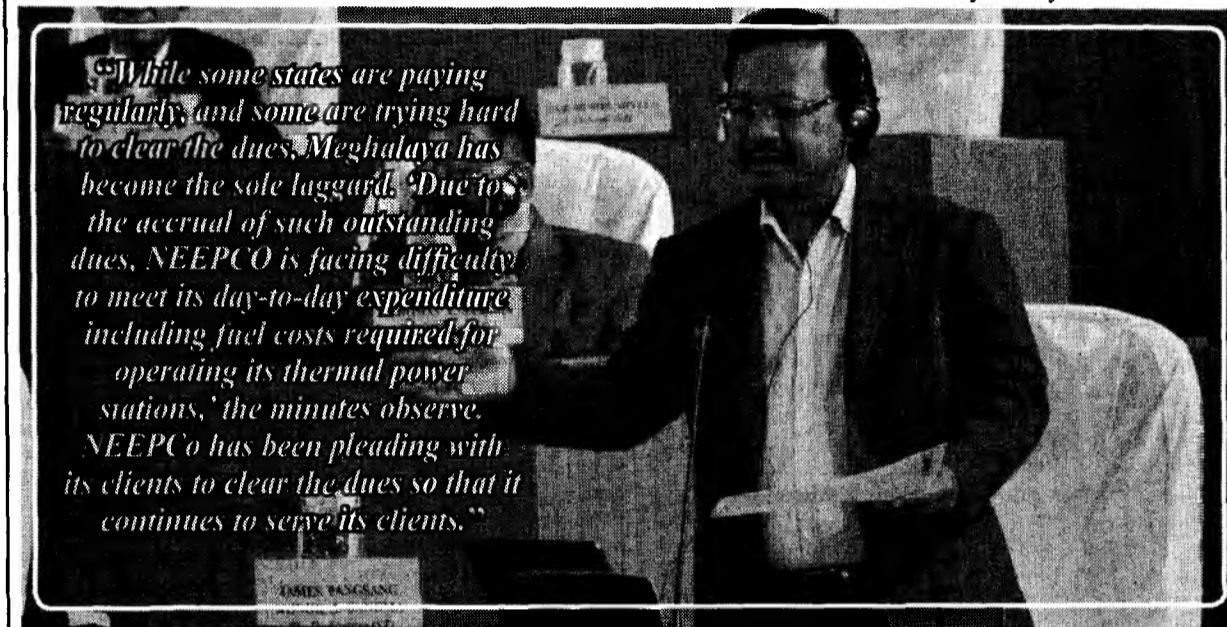
Meghalaya's financial woes seem to have piled up over the years. While we cannot blame the cumulative debts that have piled up for the MeECL on the present government, the fact is that the MDA Government has not shown any kind of financial discipline despite the financial crunch that is staring at the state. Meghalaya has been fortunate to garner funds from international agencies like JICA that are investing in the region and the state with an eye on long term economic cooperation since the North East is a crucial link to South East Asia and countries like Japan want to counter the influence of China in the Asia-Pacific region. Meghalaya is also getting loans from the World Bank, ADB etc. which are

amount is only likely to go up since Meghalaya is only fire-fighting. In fact the situation is quite alarming as NEEPCo threatens to shut off power to Meghalaya.

The minutes observe that the above statement reflects an alarming situation. While some states are paying regularly, and some are trying hard to clear the dues, Meghalaya has become the sole laggard. 'Due to the accrual of such outstanding dues, NEEPCo is facing difficulty to meet its day-to-day expenditure including fuel costs required for operating its thermal power stations,' the minutes observe. NEEPCo has been pleading with its clients to clear the dues so

brandish figures around as being the most well-governed state will no longer wash. Meghalaya has failed in nearly all fronts from health to education and now the power sector. It is not as if the central government has not bailed out the state. The amount of central funds that have devolved to the state are a staggering amount and this is evident from the kind of real estate acquisitions of those in politics especially the current crop of politicians who seem to be buying property the way ordinary humans go to Police Bazar to buy a pair of shoes or clothes. It is indeed a sad scenario when the voters have become poorer by the year and landlessness is looming large but politicians are getting richer by the day. In fact it's time to

evaluate their properties and see whether these acquisitions match their incomes. What are the private businesses that they are engaged in before and after entering politics which has pushed up their wealth ranking? If the people of Meghalaya don't wake up now and seek transparency in every branch of governance they are going to pay a price that they cannot afford in the future. Already our roads even within city limits are not motorable. A bridge that is just a few meters long takes years to complete pushing people to take the long route to their homes and burn more fuel. There is complete lack of accountability from our elected representatives and as voters we overlook all these faults when we are paid money to vote for the same politician again and again. This has to end. People are supposed to be the real rulers in a democracy but we have put democracy on its head by allowing people to become rich at our expense. The choice is entirely ours whether we want this elitist rule to continue even while we are pushed to the margins.



While some states are paying regularly, and some are trying hard to clear the dues, Meghalaya has become the sole laggard. 'Due to the accrual of such outstanding dues, NEEPCo is facing difficulty to meet its day-to-day expenditure including fuel costs required for operating its thermal power stations,' the minutes observe. NEEPCo has been pleading with its clients to clear the dues so that it continues to serve its clients.'

returnable. We are unsure how the debt servicing is being done or whether the above international funding agencies are actually giving grant assistance.

What is a matter of great concern however are the contents of the 148 page minutes of the 21st Technical Coordination Committee (TCC)-North East Regional Power Committee (NERPC) meeting held on Feb 3-4, 2021 at Kohima, Nagaland. If one goes through the minutes and looks for Meghalaya's outstanding in the document one will get to know the extent of the crisis faced by the MeECL. It is the worst performer among all North Eastern states. A comparative analysis shows that while Assam owes NEEPCo 1.72 crore, Mizoram 1.82 crore, Manipur 36.97 crore, Tripura 133.23 crore, Nagaland -nil, Arunachal Pradesh .07 crore, Meghalaya is highest at 700.38 crore. The break up is Rs 358.19 crore outstanding over 45 days and Rs 342.19 crore as late payment surcharge. This is mentioned in page 52-53 of the minutes document. This

that it continues to serve its clients. NEEPCo has been urging all its clients to pay their dues regularly but to no effect. This is what is noted in the minutes of the meeting. The question to ask is why has Meghalaya run up such a huge bill when others have not?

Meghalaya also has outstanding to another company - the OTPC which supplies gas-based power from Tripura. The amount outstanding against Meghalaya is Rs 166 crore while other states net in lower amounts. The comparative figures are Arunachal Pradesh 3.77 crore, Assam 85.81 crore, Manipur 42.5 crore, Mizoram 6.30 crore, Nagaland 4.95 crore and Tripura 74.34 crore. The meeting observed that auditors have been regularly reflecting the issue of outstanding dues and absence of Letter of Credit from Meghalaya as a special concern in the NERPC Board Meetings.

But the above are not the only debts. On page 55 of the document, Meghalaya is shown as owing Rs 510 crore to NTPC, the highest among

at Rs 5.58. This is simply not sustainable. The industrial units have been enjoying power subsidies for setting up shop in Meghalaya. The idea was that these units such as cement companies etc., would create jobs for local youth. There is no study as yet to establish whether the companies that are benefitting from several subsidies over the decades have added any value to the state or have used up its resources while only leaving behind a trail of pollution.

So what happens now that Meghalaya is staring at a grim power scenario? Speaking of digital connectivity when power supply itself is not guaranteed is like flying a kite without the wind to propel it to the skies. The kite will come down to earth instead of flying. For years we have netted these outstanding debts but politicians have taken the easy way out because they believe taking hard decisions will hurt their vote banks. If politics has to decide every step of the development process then Meghalaya will become the worst performing state. To

evaluate their properties and see whether these acquisitions match their incomes. What are the private businesses that they are engaged in before and after entering politics which has pushed up their wealth ranking?

If the people of Meghalaya don't wake up now and seek transparency in every branch of governance they are going to pay a price that they cannot afford in the future. Already our roads even within city limits are not motorable. A bridge that is just a few meters long takes years to complete pushing people to take the long route to their homes and burn more fuel. There is complete lack of accountability from our elected representatives and as voters we overlook all these faults when we are paid money to vote for the same politician again and again. This has to end. People are supposed to be the real rulers in a democracy but we have put democracy on its head by allowing people to become rich at our expense. The choice is entirely ours whether we want this elitist rule to continue even while we are pushed to the margins.

Two day general strike in banks gives strong signal to centre

Anti-privatisation movement gathering national dimension

By Krishna Jha

On the concluding day of the Bank strike on March 16, there was enthusiasm among not only the employees but millions all over the country. The participation was hundred percent, on both the days. About future course of action, they have told the government that if the privatisation bid is not rolled back, they would launch an agitation that would be as massive and long drawn as the one by the farmers.

The strike was massive with nine lakh bank employees taking to street in a two-day protest. Nine banks are facing privatisation. The unions are demanding roll back of the government decision and concentrate its efforts on strengthening the public sector. According to government data itself, 119 public sector units are earning profit for last five years continuously, and only thirty are running losses among the total of 366 public sector units. Same is true about airports also. There is the proposal for thirteen airports to be privatised which would be a combination of profitable and non profitable both.

top for considering privatisation, there are three other general insurance companies in its folds, National Insurance, New India Assurance, and Oriental Assurance. It has been the general observation that if the government decides to privatise GIC, it has to leave the general reinsurance business too. Then the privatisation itself has its own devastating consequences, and the consumer who is the target of production, bears the burden of ever growing prices.

The government equity in the form of AAI stakes is something that ensures the balance in terms of keeping user cost within reasonable limits. Once it is gone, government would not be able to intervene at any stage, and thus the decisive steps cannot be taken any more.

The government has set an ambitious target of around 3.5 lakh crore through asset monetisation in 2021-2022, comprising various asset categories across eight ministries.

It is proposed that NITI Aayog should take steps to identify twelve PSUs in



ST File Photo

Among them are those that are considered best in the world.

First is Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi. Then come the other four, that are Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in Mumbai, followed by Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, Hyderabad, International Airport in Bengaluru, and finally the International Airport in Chennai. The story however is not without its anti-climax. It would be in these very airports that the government has decided

there would be shedding of stakes in AAI share. These are Mumbai, Hyderabad, Delhi and Bengaluru airports. It is to be done precisely to meet the target of its ambitious asset monetisation of Rs 20000 crore. Usually the reason given for privatisation of airports is that more revenue can be earned through minor stakes than those that are fully owned by the state.

According to the Civil Aviation Ministry, the plan to privatise 13 more airports would be monetised through the operation, management and development (OMD) model. The entire project is awaiting approval for disinvestment of equity shares of AAI in the joint venture of Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru airports. After the approval, the government wants to sell remaining shareholding of AAI in these four key airports stakes.

The buck does not stop here. Now it is the turn of General Insurance, in which government holds 85.78 percent stake.

As the government has started mulling over the theme, the obstacles are also getting visible. It would not be easy to disinvest GIC since there are apart from United India, which is at the

these sectors for privatisation.

The NITI Aayog, according to sources has listed the PSUs primarily from among those comprised in public sector banks, and then the insurance companies.

The PSU disinvestment is rarely reviewed by the department of investment and public asset management (DIPAM). After getting the required approval, it would make a move to get principal approval from Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA).

The Finance minister in her Budget speech had announced that the government would privatise two banks together with general insurance company (GIC). The government declared without any mincing of words, its intention to exit management control and limit the list of PSUs in the country. The government intends to keep only a very limited number of core sector industries in its hands. The remaining ones would either get privatised, merged or closed.

The saffron regime has announced that the time for public sector units is over. They are getting obsolete, without any relevance in India. The government would now seek sources in listed PSUs that are primarily comprised in public sector banks, and then the insurance companies. But in all these ventures, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had declared that it was the duty of the government to help the enterprises to grow but it certainly is in no need to own them.

The question remains how the government would help if it has no stake. And its sole stake is people themselves, of which it is inalienable part, for which it is elected to serve. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

A correction

Editor,
In connection with the news item appearing in the front page of your esteemed daily under heading "12 member NGT panel...", (ST March 17, 2021), your reporter has used the term "...dismiss the Justice BD Agarwal Committee". The word dismiss attributed to me was never quoted from my end while giving my observation on the development. As Hon'ble NGT has closed proceedings in the entire case, Justice GD Agarwal Committee of NGT for Meghalaya, after the closure, automatically stands dissolved and the 12 member oversight committee, constituted by NGT in its March 15, 2021 order, shall assume charge, to ensure implementation of all NGT and Supreme Court orders issued since imposition of ban on coal mining in the state.

I request you to kindly issue a corrigendum for which I shall remain grateful.

Yours etc
Naba Bhattacharjee
Shillong-4

Marten a mountain of garbage

Editor,
I happened to drive through Marten earlier this week because of a project. A place I had visited a few years back with fresh landfill sites and processing units for segregated waste, now seems to have transformed itself into a mammoth mountain of garbage with no demarcation what so ever. It's sad to see how none of the machines are in use and the only activity happening there would be the blazing white fumes flowing through the entire place. I'm imagining a few years down the line, the only other option for waste disposal would be to cross borders and ask others to take our trash. Why aren't we doing something about this?

We had international experts coming into the state to help us with better waste management practices and solutions, but as is the case with everyone else coming into our state to help, they get shown the exit sign, and

we end up only procuring the hardware. The segregation processes that had been put into place in the state have also lost steam.

Marten is a disaster waiting to happen and it is entirely our fault. A new waste processing and disposal facility which should have been the top priority of the day is being ignored completely. Political leaders are talking about waste to energy plants and South Korean solutions to help with waste management but all we see are fumes slowly but steadily choking up our city.

We can turn a blind eye to all this today, but how long can we ignore an awaiting catastrophe. Marten has lived its life. Shouldn't our priority be to find an alternative site for waste disposal?

Yours etc.,
Emica Nongkynrih
Via email

MeECL a white elephant

Editor,
While the common people have to dig deeper into their pockets to pay their

inflated power bills, the state-owned electricity supply corporation - MeECL seems to outfit other 'elephants', present in and around the state by granting contractual supply work to firms outside the state for its so-called improvement while at the same time turning itself into a unique 'white elephant'. It is astonishing to note that the cost to supply chairs, tables, UPS, CPU system, computer monitor, printer, scanner, sever system and all the gadgets to make itself 'hi-tech' (pun intended) has been inflated to the tune of Rs 3.36 lakh per work station. To add insult to injury, the "corporation mafia" as I would call them have allowed the purchase of a 'networked laser jet printer' at an exorbitant cost of Rs 1,19,888 without probably going through the technical aspects of such a cost. My question is how such highly inflated bills will be paid by the MeECL management. Are they planning to transform the "White Elephant" corporation into something of a 'Space Station' or into some 'Super Power Station'? If that is the case they had better also equip their brains with some good mathematics for a public audit when demanded.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

Take strict action against Covid protocol violators

Editor,
With a huge spike in Covid 19 cases again in different states, the Health Department has issued guidelines to contain the virus and advised citizens to wear masks and maintain social distance in public places. Spitting and smoking in public places should be prohibited. Surprisingly several people in Shillong fail to strictly follow Covid appropriate guidelines. I urge upon the authorities to take strict action against those who violate the Covid protocols since the virus as stated by some doctors is here to stay. We cannot have a situation like that in Maharashtra and other states where Covid cases have risen exponentially.

Yours etc.,
Prasenjit Das Purkayastha,
Shillong-4

Politicians and their blame game

Editor,
Why are our politicians playing the blame game when it comes to the MeECL? Ms Angela Rangad has pointed out that so many wrong deals are happening in the Saubhagya Scheme to be undertaken by the MeECL. How long can the Power Minister deny all the wrongdoings in the Corporation? When he was Home Minister he handled that portfolio badly by allowing illegal coal mining and transportation to carry on. After him Mr Lakhmen Rymbui stepped into the Home Department. But is there any change in the illegal coal mining business? No there isn't. Why? Because corruption is written into the DNA of the MDA Government! Now the MeECL will sink into a deeper mess.

Yours etc.,
GM Nongrum,
Via email

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

"The best revolutions are unplanned,
and the most democratic are leaderless."

— Maajid Nawaz

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.212 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 20, 2021

Lokayukta – toothless tiger

AFTER receiving a complaint from former Chief Minister and present leader of the opposition, Mukul Sangma on the illegal coal mining and transportation with details of the modus operandi, the Meghalaya Lokayukta observed that the mastermind behind the illegal mining and transportation of coal could be unearthed only through an independent inquiry by a central organization like the CBI. Earlier the Lokayukta's order for a CBI inquiry into the same issue was challenged in the High Court of Meghalaya. If the anti-graft ombudsman does not have prosecution powers then it might as well not exist. The Lokayukta's observations that it is public knowledge that the racket is being run by some powerful syndicate against whom no individual citizen could come forward to lodge a complaint and reveal their identity, shows how powerless the Institution of Lokayukta is. In state after state the office of the Lokayukta is reduced to recommending actions to the state governments. Without prosecution powers they cannot take action against the corrupt. In most states the office of Lokayukta lacks basic infrastructure and staff. Politicians conveniently sit on the appointment of a new Lokayukta. The sorry state of Lokayuktas across the country suggests a deliberate attempt to undermine the Institution. In West Bengal and Gujarat there is the Lokayukta Act with no one holding the post. The West Bengal Lokayukta office is manned by two Group D staff.

In Goa, the Lokayukta, Justice (Retired) Prafulla Kumar Misra stated publicly that his powers were severely curtailed. The state government refused to take action on even one of the 21 reports that he submitted against public functionaries during his nearly four-and-a-half-year tenure as the Lokayukta. He even gave an interview saying the institution of Lokayukta should be abolished as the Act is being trashed by all state governments.

Indeed the Lokayukta Act needs urgent intervention and must be given more teeth if it is to have any meaning. As of now the Meghalaya Lokayukta has recommended to the State Government that the CBI be tasked with enquiring into the allegations of illegal mining and transportation of coal. This is like asking a cat to stand guard over meat. It is public knowledge that coal is mined illegally and also transported in a blatantly illegal manner with the full knowledge and consent of the Government, since some of the ministers actually own coal mines and run a flourishing coal export business. Also the NPP had promised to lift the ban on coal mining if it is elected to power. That was what ensured its victory. Hence the present government is only fulfilling a poll promise even if it is doing so by the illegal route.

What's the point of the Meghalaya Lokayukta then? Why have a debilitating institution that exists only in name?

Identity issues to be major deciding factors in Assam elections Congress-AIUDF alliance finally feels upbeat against BJP front

By Sagarneel Sinha

Identity factor has always played a role in the politics of Assam — and this election is no different. In fact, with the Supreme Court's order in 2013 to complete the pending updation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) — based on the historic Assam Accord signed in 1985 by the Centre led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi with Assamese organizations, including AASU (All Assam Students' Union) — in the state, identity politics took the centre stage. State's maiden BJP government led by Sarbananda Sonowal, a former member of AASU associated with the Assam agitation, which resulted in the signing of the Assam Accord, took steps to fasten the much-complicated process of the long-pending NRC updation. The Supreme Court-monitored NRC updation,

protests against CAA erupted in Assam and the north-east and later spread to different parts of the country.

However, it was the Covid-19 pandemic that halted the anti-CAA protests — but CAA remains a factor in Assam. It is this anti-CAA factor that has given birth to new regional parties in the state. The parties are the Rajior Dal, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Anchalik Gana Morcha (AGM). The Rajior Dal and AJP — backed by influential non-political organizations like AASU, All Assam Jatiya Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) — are fighting together against the two major other alliances — BJP led NDA and Congress-led Grand Alliance.

United Democratic Front (AIUDF) led by Dhubri MP Badruddin Ajmal. The Assamese-speaking population and the tribals view AIUDF as a communal party as they believe that it represents the interests of the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. Importantly, AIUDF was formed in 2005 when the Supreme Court in the same year struck down the much controversial IMDT act or the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act. The IMDT act brought by Indira Gandhi's government was seen by Assamese as a pro-Bangladeshi illegal immigrant.

The Atul Bora-led AGP — fighting for existence in the state as an ally of BJP — is now trying to recover

Amid all this, BJP with its style of regionalism is trying to negate the anti-CAA views in the elections. To high-light BJP's regionalism card, both Sarbananda Sonowal and finance minister Himanta Bishwa Sarma — party's strongman in the north-east region — are attacking the Congress for its decision to ally with AIUDF and are also focussing on work done by the saffron government to allot land pattas to indigenous communities and grants given to develop the Vaishnavites-tras and namghars, including the birthplace of Shri San-kardeva, the 15th-16th century Bhakti saint of Assam.

On the other hand, in the Barak valley, which accounts for 15 assembly seats, BJP is expected to gain — as the Bengali Hindus of the valley are vocal supporters



which gave birth to many controversies not only across the state but also across the country, was finally completed in 2019 — although failing to satisfy most of the Assamese groups and political parties, including BJP and Congress.

The identity politics took a more sharp turn with the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) brought in 2018 by the Narendra Modi led BJP government — but the bill failed to convert into law as the government failed to get required numbers in the Rajya Sabha — unlike the Lok Sabha. Even though CAB is very much opposed by the majority of the Assamese speaking community, BJP during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections promised to bring it back, if elected back to power. In the 2019 general elections, BJP returned to power with a bigger mandate at the Centre — and even won big in Assam. As promised during the election campaign, BJP brought the CAB again in the same year and was successful in converting the bill into a law — Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) — by managing the required numbers in the Rajya Sabha. Subsequently,

AGM led by journalist and Rajya Sabha MP Ajit Bhuyan is a part of the Congress-led Grand Alliance. AJP is led by Lurinjyoti Gogoi, former general secretary of AASU, while Rajior Dal is led by Akhil Gogoi, who formed the KMSS. Akhil Gogoi is presently in jail and is contesting from the Shivsagar constituency — an important center of Assamese regionalism. Importantly, the Assam agitation against Bangladeshi illegal immigrants gave birth to Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), which once was a major player in state politics and is now reduced into a minor player and presently a constituent of NDA.

With new regional parties jumping into the election fray, Assamese regionalism is back into focus — although issues like development and peace are still the most crucial factors in this election. Particularly, AJP and Rajior Dal are focusing on the anti-CAA factor and Congress too is leaving no stone unturned to make it clear that the grand old party is also strictly opposed to the CAA. Amid this, Assamese regionalism is more visible in this election due to the Congress party's alliance with the All India

its ground by attacking Congress for its decision to ally with the AIUDF. AGP is facing threats from new regional entrants like AJP and Rajior Dal — as they all share the same vote-bank, Assamese regionalism.

No doubt BJP would face some setbacks in Upper and North Assam dominated by the Assamese due to anti-CAA factor but Congress is unlikely to reap benefits due to its alliance with a communal party like AIUDF. Upper Assam and North Assam account for 43 and 16 seats respectively. Importantly, it was the Congress party that once used to label Ajmal's party as a communal one. Now the irony is that the same Congress party is reiterating repeatedly that AIUDF isn't a communal party! On the other hand, the ideological divide whether to ally with the Congress-AIUDF alliance has resulted in cracks between the two regional parties — Rajior Dal and AJP. Rajior Dal is open for alliance with the Grand Alliance to unite all the anti-BJP forces but the AJP has issues with AIUDF and also with Congress. Both the partners are also having friendly contests in 9 seats.

of CAA. Also, Congress's alliance with the AIUDF is largely going to affect the party in the region as seen in the 2019 polls. The Barak valley is almost equally divided between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims — and the region is now more polarised among religious lines due to the CAA factor. Significantly, the Congress-AIUDF alliance is expected to gain in Lower Assam — as the region is dominated by Bengali Muslims, a major vote-bank of both Congress and AIUDF. Lower Assam accounts for 47 seats.

Actually, in Assam, illegal immigration has always been a major factor. This was worsened by vote-bank politics practiced for decades by the Congress party, which dominated mostly the state since independence. Undeniably, there has been a lack of seriousness shown by the ruling parties, including Congress, AGP and also to some extent by BJP, over the last decades in the state to resolve the identity issues of various communities. That's the reason the state keeps facing the same old identity issues every time — and this election is no different. (IPA Service)

Equitable distribution of vaccines can help world to combat crisis

WHO report indicts rich nations for initial tepid response to pandemic

By Marc Vandepitte

A new World Health Organisation report, prepared by a panel of experts, begins with the findings that the world was totally unprepared for this pandemic. For decades, however, it had been predicted that such a viral pandemic would inevitably come our way.

Five years ago, the World Health Organisation (WHO) even stated that there was an urgent need for more research into corona viruses. At the time, such research was not profitable for pharmaceutical giants. As a result, hardly any research had been done. The pursuit of profit had prevailed over public interest.

Then the pandemic arrived. In early January 2020, a new coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan. On January 24, it turned out this virus could be transmitted from person to person and that it was also highly contagious. One week later, on January 30, the WHO declared an international medical emergency.

Some countries did not wait that long and reacted immediately. Vietnam, for instance, introduced social distancing and stricter border controls from mid-January onwards. As early as January 12, Taiwan had sent two epidemiologists to Wuhan to study the virus. In Africa, foreign travellers were systematically screened in many airports from the beginning of February.

The WHO and other agencies repeatedly issued warnings and pointed out the seriousness of the situation. Most Western countries, however, thought they were untouchable. "In far too many countries, this signal had been ignored," the report states.

The Western countries did not take real action until mid-March, after the stock markets had collapsed (on March 12). According to the panel "the reality is that only a minority of countries took full advantage of the information available to them to respond to the evidence of an emerging epidemic."

Thus, very precious time, at least a month and a half, had been lost. Yet every day counts at the beginning of an epidemic. In the initial phase of the first wave, before protective measures had been imposed, the virus multiplied at a rate of ten every ten days. In other words, if the Western authorities had intervened ten days earlier, the infection rate (the curve) and the death toll would have been ten times lower.

Due to this late response, the intensive care units filled up quickly, at the expense of other patients requiring urgent treatment. This also increased the total death rate. The consequences were correspondingly as the graph shows. Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of the renowned medical journal The Lancet, therefore concludes that most Belgian coronary casualties could have been avoided. The situation will not be much different in neighbouring countries.

The report also blames healthcare sector officials for being slow in responding to early stage indications that people could spread the new coronavirus without any symptoms. Reports from China and Germany, however, had documented this phenomenon at an early stage. But leading healthcare authorities, including the WHO itself, nevertheless gave contradictory and sometimes misleading advice.

Most Western governments refused to learn from the experiences of countries that were hit first. Evident measures such as social distancing or wearing face masks became the subject of sterile political debates in our regions. Lockdowns were undebatable, because they did not comply with our

"Western values" — until, of course, there was no other alternative.

In many countries early in the pandemic there was a shortage of essential supplies such as face masks, protective clothing, oxygen, ventilators, etc. The market is apparently inefficient in dealing with an unforeseen health crisis. Years of neoliberal austerity had also caused a shortage of (adequately trained) available medical staff, as became painfully clear in the residential care homes in Belgium and elsewhere.

With few exceptions, governments have failed to establish a high-performance system of testing, tracking and isolation needed to control Covid-19. In Belgium, this system still does not work 100 per cent.

In the West the population's distrust of their governments was already quite high. The clumsy Covid policy only increased this lack of confidence. Yet such confidence is essential to achieve good results in a pandemic fight. These are lessons from the Asian countries' experiences too.

As a result of this lack of confidence, there is less compliance with measures, conspiracy theories are proliferating and many misconceptions are circulating. The former leads to more infections and an extension of the sanitary measures. The two other factors cause an increase in vaccine scepticism which is alarming in many countries.

The WHO report says: "The Covid-19 crisis has revealed a trust deficit between people, institutions and leadership in some countries. The trust deficit has also fuelled the 'infodemic' and set up a vicious cycle of disinformation and inadequate response. The profound trust gap combined with the use and impact of social media (...) illustrates once again the failure of analogue responses [newspapers, TV, radio, ...] in a digital age."

According to the report, governments were and are guided too much by economic considerations, thinking that excessively strict measures would harm the economy too much. Wrongly.

"A preliminary observation by the panel is that economic outcomes have been better in economies where strict public health control measures have been implemented effectively. In those countries health outcomes (...) have been substantially better. The same pattern appears to apply to the pace of recovery, with more strict public health measures being followed by stronger economic recoveries."

The lack of decisive action has led to months of (semi-)lockdowns and uncertainty in the markets. This cost the global economy 7 per cent, or \$6,000 billion, last year. "This is clearly a case where billions can save trillions," the report concludes.

In the past, WHO secretary general Tedros Ghebreyesus has repeatedly expressed his anger at the rich countries' hoarding of vaccines. While rich countries will have enough doses this year to vaccinate their citizens three to five times, a large proportion of the population in the poorest countries will not receive any dose.

The WHO report is very critical about this: "The full potential of vaccines cannot be realised if narrow national interests and economic power determine who gets access (...) We cannot allow a principle to be established that it is acceptable for high-income countries to be able to vaccinate 100 per cent of their populations while poorer countries must make do with only 20 per cent coverage. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Education for all

Editor,
As educational institutions start reopening after the closure of last year, it's heartening to see some semblance of order and discipline come alive again for students who have been living in a self imposed limbo throughout last year. Once again the headache of parents who need to get books and other school supplies have come to the forefront, the most vulnerable being the poor and daily wage earners, who suffered the most because of the pandemic.

I was however taken aback when I heard of a missionary school in the suburbs which caters to most of the poor and marginalized, give a date for buying of books for their wards during the last week of this month. They have also been told to get new uniforms for the children as the uniforms bought just last year are outdated.

Where are they supposed to get the money for all this? Their employers will not be able to give them advance as they themselves get their salaries late because of the financial year ending. Being a school run by the Church, much of the finances comes from Church donations from the faithful. So why can't those in authority spare a thought for these poor households who struggle to send their children to get education?

It is high time that such schools actually serve the poor and underprivileged and not crush the hopes and dreams of their children and truly serve God by serving the poorest of the poor.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong-14

Poor internet connectivity affects students

Editor,
The front-page picture

of The Shillong Times of March 18, brought out the ground reality of how students suffer the pain of poor internet connectivity. The caption reads: "Students from Iapngar, Mawlasnai, Kyrdem and Bhoirybong villages in Ri Bhoi write online examination from the flyover bridge at Umiam due to poor internet connectivity in their villages. The students have urged the state government to address the problem of the poor network in the area." How do we describe this situation when tender school students are made to run to a flyover which is at a higher level in order to write the online examination? This is just the tip of the iceberg. Almost all sections of people/employees are left in the lurch by the internet service providers.

Have the customers not paid money with the expectation of the seamless service? What do you call it if the company never budges an inch on "demanding the

full pre-payment" for the 'abysmal' service? It is simply looting — it is daylight robbery. I feel the Government must not remain silent when the public is suffering so miserably.

Incidentally, there is much uproar in the banking sectors too. Due to the frequent "internet link failures," lots of banking activities have been badly affected. Booksellers in Iewduh B. Guatam and Ranjit Singh says, "We cannot get our banking transactions done without glitches; at times we have to wait as long as two to three hours to withdraw/deposit cash and update our bank passbooks. It is disgusting to stand in the queue for hours together for petty banking transactions." Similar is the case with the post office, particularly during the load-shedding hours.

It is my humble request to the government authorities to address this issue of mobile and internet service at the earliest possible. The

companies have no right to charge money from the public without providing better service. If the companies cannot ensure seamless service, the government should consider looking for other options in the larger interest of the public. Asking pre-payment for the worst service is no less a crime.

Yours etc.,
Sahil Gwali,
Shillong

Leaderless politics

Editor,
As a political observer I have noted that the common people are quite frustrated with the present government and there is hardly any realistic governance happening on the ground and we know the reasons and causes. Not one of the regional parties including the NPP or BJP have even looked back at their manifesto or the promises that they made in 2018.

Unfortunately, the fact is nothing is spoken on how to deliver the right kind of governance and solution to pressing issues. The party that needs a different kind of vaccination is the state Congress Party which seems leaderless without a functional MPCC President. With a number of contenders and internal support for an acceptable candidate to lead the party, the time for the Congress at Delhi is to look deeper right to the grassroots and reinvent itself before the water level hits the neck. If the party is to take a serious plunge in 2023 I feel the time is to kick out the rotten potatoes and bring in new seedlings that would regenerate a new vision and a strategy for its political future.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong

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

Sita as an icon of the #MeToo Movement

By Vishnu Makhijani

When Indian American writer Sini Panicker, a trained chemist who is a heroin profiler for the US government, began her research into the Ramayana in early 2018, the #MeToo Movement was extremely popular and highly successful in the United States. And, in her debut novel, "Sita: Now You Know Me", Panicker was inspired by these MeToo voices to give her protagonist a spirited and resilient voice befitting the present-day affairs that occupy the news cycles and social media.

By the time Panicker began her final editing process with Rupa Publications on the novel, the US and the world had been changed considerably. Black Lives Matter has gained significant strength; millions and millions of people have been protesting in countless cities and towns all over the world against racism and social injustice.

In addition, a pandemic was raging on, killing people daily in several thousands, across the continents. Isolation and loneliness. These two words have started to define life for almost everyone on this earth, regardless of their race, age, nationality or faith. In an extremely cruel and punishing manner, these words began to define death too, for millions.

"I thought the world in the novel is surreal. It is an ancient world, it is an imaginary world, dating back to two millennia or more, where we, the good-natured humans fight the ghastly demons. But no. The world outside - the living, breathing world of ours - is the surreal one," Panicker, whose normal topics of engagement are organic chemistry, forensic sciences, heroin investigations, and intelligence information on global heroin trafficking, told IANS in an interview.

"There has been utter chaos and deadly fear from the virus. There has been torture and pain inflicted upon humans by fellow humans, just because they could.

All of this began to make me feel like our world exists on another unfamiliar and abnormal realm," she added.

"The George Floyd video showed the demons are still here, that they are in us. We are the demons. A microorganism, a simple messenger RNA, is powerful enough to teach us, the egotistical, narcissistic human race, a few tough lessons on nature and humility. I compared and contrasted the world in my novel, to the world we live in, throughout the editing process in 2020. Of course, there were plenty of chances for me to ponder these things, because of the isolated and lonely life under the pandemic," Panicker explained.

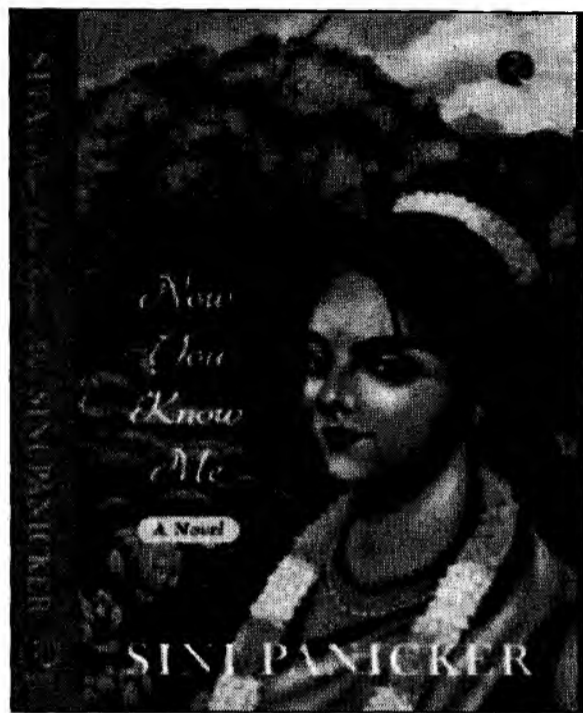
Coincidentally, the most continual feelings Sita experiences in the novel are isolation and loneliness. The Dandaka exile is not a series of wonderful and joyful excursions to the hermitages for Ram, Lakshman, and Sita in the book. The three of them are separated from the rest of the world, from fellow humans, and they lead an insulated lonely life in the deep jungle for 13 long years; their struggles and depression are openly discussed in my novel. Then there is a year of loneliness and misery for Sita in Lanka, which is almost immediately followed by her isolated life at Valmiki's ashram after Ram banishes her.

"I could not help but think about our current feelings, under the pandemic vs the emotions detailed in the novel.

"I wrote this novel because of MeToo. MeToo is still happening. There are several movements occurring as we speak, under the umbrella term Black Lives Matter

too. The pandemic is still not over. It seems like everyone and everything on this earth is a work in progress. And a novel, a short story or a poem often provides a great opportunity for us to reflect on this work in progress; on what we are and what we should be, about our past, present and future.

I hope 'Sita: Now You Know Me' will provide such an opportunity for the readers," Panicker



elaborated.

The novel introduces the reader to a conflicted Sita, aged approximately 50, living like an ascetic at Sage Valmiki's ashram. She is evaluating her prospects for the following day as she has been ordered by her husband King Ram to appear in his court in Ayodhya. Sita suspects that she will be asked to prove her chastity.

Overwhelmed by an array of emotions - ranging from agony, resentment, and distrust, about the trial that occurs after long years of her punishment in exile - Sita realizes that in order to secure the future for her young sons, she has no choice but to appear in Ayodhya. The message from Ram, a husband whom she loves

very deeply despite their estrangement, begins to torment Sita; and she reflects on her life's events, a series of misfortunes that led her to the ashram.

Sita narrates her turbulent life in extensive detail, revealing her deepest desires, grief and horrors, as well as her profound love for Ram and for scripture. This Sita is deeply rooted in two major elements of her time: the agricultural practices that are further cemented by her connection to the mother earth and the magnificent era of debates on life and the cosmos, of the Vedas and Upanishads.

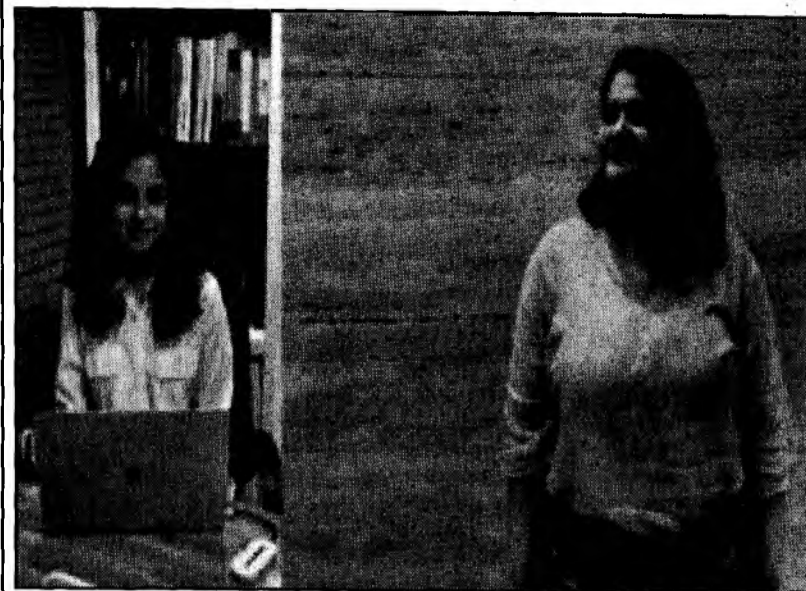
We journey inside Sita's mind, to the steely core which sustains her through a life of stark privation and abundant emotional riches. As she contemplates hymns and the very meaning of life, we see a woman evolved far beyond her time, a woman who speaks to us today, out of the narrative of one of the oldest epics of our world. "While keeping the epic's storyline mostly intact, I have changed some events and subplots, added new scenes or twists, and altered a few characters as I needed to narrate Sita's story for contemporary readers," Panicker said.

Sita journeys to Ayodhya and enters the palace to face her estranged husband and family. Instead of a formal trial, the reunion becomes highly emotional. Ram offers her a public apology and pleads with her to stay with him and their sons in Ayodhya. Despite her intense joy upon seeing Ram, the agony and resentment over Ram's deceitful act cannot be forgotten or forgiven by Sita.

To Ram's utter shock and torment, Sita walks away from him boldly, with a plan to convince her boys to stay in Ayodhya, without her. However, the cyclonic storms of emotions that she has experienced lately become unbearable for her already weakened heart. She collapses and dies in the hands of Ram, as he laments, broken-hearted.

"Sita: Now You Know Me" is a novel that will stay etched in your mind for ever. (IANS)

What makes publishing industry tick



The Indian publishing industry is thriving with a wave of new publishers, international contracts, and authors but the average Indian reader and first-time author knows very little about the intricacies of the publishing process.

In an attempt to bridge this gap between readers, writers, editors and publishers, Mumbai-based literary company Bound's 13-episode podcast, "The Book People", will be exploring Indian publishing through the eyes of the people who work in it.

Each episode will include series-host Aishwarya Javalekar in a conversation with an industry expert about their role, experience and opinions about the industry and its future. Prominent guests include Ishani Butalia (Zubaan Books), Sayantan Ghosh (S&S India), and Harshad Marathe (Designer), to name a few. Packed with industry insights and fun book conversations, each episode in the series will be released every Thursday, starting March 18.

'Bound' founder Tara Khandelwal said she started the company "because I noticed a lack of infrastructure for creative people to learn and form communities in India. Creative and artistic fields like writing, podcasting, etc. have always struggled to be taken seriously, but with a growing audience waiting to consume content across platforms, writers and storytellers of all kinds are more important than

ever before. Our interactions with writers during our retreat, classes and services revealed the sheer lack of information available about books and publishing in India".

"In the last 6 months, we have combined our experience and extensive primary and secondary research to create two comprehensive projects that make publishing 'transparent and accessible to everyone: content creators, curators and consumers.

"With 'The Book People', they can get to know the people working behind the scenes, and understand their roles and opinions about the industry. We hope that together these projects will demystify publishing for writers, readers, aspiring professionals, and people and organizations working in and around publishing", she added.

Aishwarya Javalekar, the podcast-host, commented: "As a writer, reader and an editor, I found the publishing and literary world to be an echo-chamber, with conversations that were inaccessible to me due to lack of context or data. There was no information available on how to get published or work in the industry. 'The Book People' is my attempt to show that behind all the processes and data and lack of information are real people with a love for stories and books. Just like the audience, I want to understand what they do and how they feel about books and publishing." (IANS)

Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra is a man with a vision

By Sukant Deepak

Exactly a year back, filmmaker Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra had shifted to his small village in Maharashtra before the lockdown was announced. Luckily, he had his writing material and was with his family. Cut off from newspapers for five months, Mehra requested the post office for an Internet connection and started working on his film 'Toofan', starring Farhan Akhtar, Mrunal Thakur and Paresh Rawal, which will premiere on Amazon Prime soon.

"So, in a way, the lockdown was liberating for me. I was working on it for 20 hours in a day without any disturbances. We managed to establish an editing line with one of my editors,

and the same with sound. This period also gave me space and time to finish other scripts," Mehra told IANS.

Talking about the boxing sports drama ('Toofan'), the director says that it is his second film on the streets of Mumbai, and he is expecting a positive response from the audience. "It is a lovely story carried by a strong voice. Though it involved a lot of hard work, it was real fun working on it. Every moment on the set was enjoyable. I hope this feeling can be transferred to the audiences."

For Mehra, who debuted with the movie 'Aks' in 2001 and made the smash hit 'Rang De Basanti' in 2006, the fact that the latter still resounds and remains relevant in contemporary times is nothing short of tragedy. "Yes,



I am not really happy that it's relevant. The film tackled multiple issues including corruption, tolerance towards each other, the idea of India -- which I feel is not an abstract term but all about people. All these issues still remain. The many gaps have not filled, sadly," said the director of 'Delhi-6' and 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag'.

The filmmaker, who spoke during Zee Live's 'Arth: The Cultural Fest' on March 19, and has explored diverse genres says that he is always excited about what he is going to tackle next. "There are so many things, I cannot even tell you. After finishing 'Toofan', I am once again on the crossroads. There are multiple subjects that I have been working on for years. So much is flying around, not just in India but globally as well."

He added, "So do you go with something which is very contemporary in today's time or back to mythology and see if it is relevant for today?"

Now let's not forget that too has been distorted. One can also work on a futuristic movie -- maybe look at a utopian future which is a new happy society, and where women will be safe. And all these questions trouble me constantly."

Ask him if there is a method to how he chooses his subjects, and he says, "Absolutely. Whatever gives me sleepless nights... Now we all want to have a peaceful sleep, no? Doesn't it make sense that you get over with what is making you stay awake."

While Amazon will be taking 'Toofan' to over 240 countries and territories, Mehra does admit that there is a flip side to OTT platforms too. "There is always a price to pay for gain. The experience and impact of the big screen is unmatched. However, I feel that in these unpredictable times owing to the pandemic, it was the right decision to take on our part." (IANS)

Penguin India to publish China Room

China Room by 2015 Booker Prize nominee Sunjeev Sahota, a riveting novel about two characters separated by more than half a century but united by blood inspired in part by the authors own family history, is to be simultaneously published by Penguin Random House India and Penguin Random House in the UK and in North America.

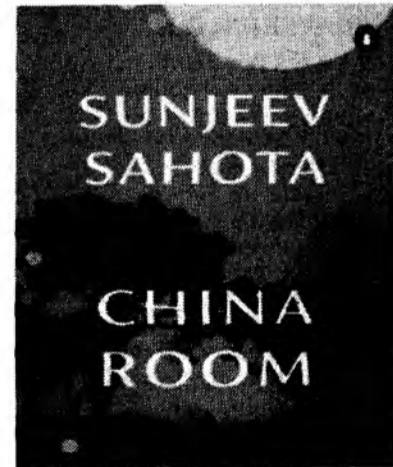
Mehar, a young bride in rural Punjab of 1929, is trying to discover the identity of her new husband. Married to three brothers in a single ceremony, she and her now-sisters spend their days hard at work in the family's 'China room', sequestered from contact with the men - except when their domineering mother-in-law, Mai, summons them to a darkened chamber at night.

Curious and strong-willed, Mehar tries to piece together what Mai doesn't want her to know. From beneath her veil, she studies the sounds of the men's voices and the calluses on their fingers as she serves them tea. Soon, she glimpses something that seems to confirm which of the brothers is her husband.

A series of events is set in motion, which will put more than one life at risk. As the early stirrings of the Indian independence movement rise around her, Mehar must weigh her own desires against the reality - and danger - of her situation.

Spiralling around Mehar's story is that of a young man who arrives at his uncle's house in Punjab in the summer of 1999, hoping to shake off an addiction that has held him in its grip for more than two years. Growing up in small-town England as the son of an immigrant shopkeeper, his experiences of racism, violence and estrangement from the culture of his birth lead him to seek a dangerous form of escape.

As he rides out his withdrawal at his family's ancestral home - an abandoned farmstead, his china room mysteriously locked and barred - he begins to knit



himself back together, gathering strength for the journey home.

At once sweeping and intimate, lush and propulsive, "China Room" is a stunning achievement from a contemporary master.

Sunjeev Sahota is the author of "Ours Are the Streets" and "The Year of the Runaways", which was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and the Dylan Thomas Prize, and was awarded a European Union Prize for Literature. In 2013, he was named one of Granta's twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists' of the decade.

Commenting on the book, Meru Gokhale, Publisher, Penguin Press, Penguin Random House India, says: "China Room" is "one of those books that stays with you long after you've put it down. Set in rural Punjab, spanning across generations, this story is full of moments of pain that are carefully layered within the plot - the pain of what it was like to be a woman in the 1920s, forbidden to love, and the pain of a young man today who has lost his identity. Sunjeev Sahota is one of the most gifted fiction writers I have read, and we are so delighted to be publishing him." (IANS)



E-book revisits Mumbai's iconic, British-era GPO

By Quaid Najmi

Like many of the magnificent British-era buildings, the iconic General Post Office of Mumbai is a riot of turrets, big and small spires, minarets, big and small windows which allow light and air inside, topped off by a majestic dome looking at the early-summer clear blue skies. Standing on a tri-junction behind its famed cousins of the same era -- the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) -- the 108-year-old, GPO Building is unique and exclusive on various counts.

Now, the history of the imposing building has come alive in an e-book -- "Dawn Under The Dome" -- released this week by Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari.

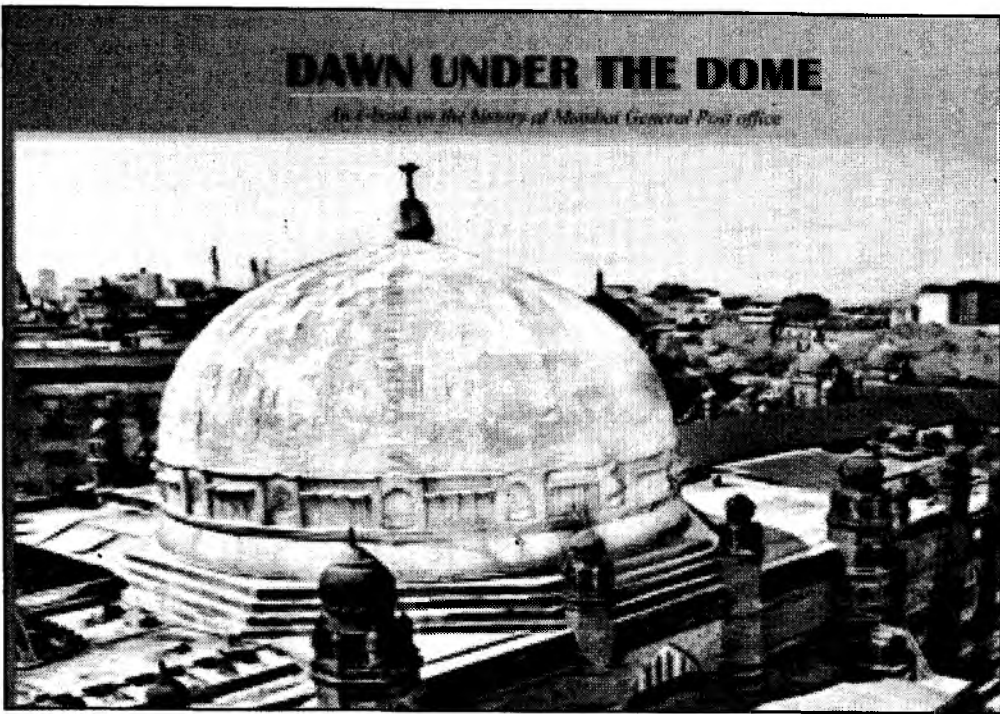
The book was researched by Post-Master General (Mumbai Region) Swati Pandey and a staffer, Orchida Mukherjee, with photographs by Krishna Iyer, Yash Kocchar and Orchida Mukherjee. A paradigm of Indo-Saracenic architecture, (blend of Persian-Hindu-Gothic), the GPO, with India's second largest dome of 65-feet diameter, was designed on the lines of the Gol Gumbaz of Bijapur (Karnataka) which has the country's biggest dome of 125-feet diameter.

The huge construction which houses the biggest postal hub in

Asia, and among the biggest in the world handles over 50,000 addresses per day besides offering other services, abuzz with visitors and staffers daily, in

who helped bring out many unknown facets of the structure in the e-book.

She terms the postal headquarters' striking construction style



lush greenery, swaying palms and shady trees dotting the GPO campus.

The building, designed by its Scotsman, John Begg and his protégé George Wittet, remains a marvel for modern architects for its interior designs, the striking exteriors, and the well-ventilated inner spaces which never evoke claustrophobic or cramped feelings anywhere.

Three different types of Indian stones were used to build the GPO - the Grey Kurla Basalt with buff trachyte, the Yellow Malad Stone and the White Stone from Dharandhra in Gujarat, with its subtly glistening quality.

"The GPO is a very important building of Mumbai. It helps connect people and it is for the general public," says Pandey,

as denoting the finest blend of Indian-Islamic-Gothic architecture in the neighbourhood tripartite comprising Victorian Gothic Revival (CSMT), Gothic (BMC) and Indo-Saracenic (GPO).

Work on the GPO -- rising to a height of 119-feet, length 522-feet, spread over 120,000-sq-feet -- started on September 1, 1904 and completed after nine years on March 31, 1913 at a cost of Rs 18,09,000, as stated on a commemorative plaque on the building.

"The GPO's gleaming white external dome at the top has a diameter of 65 ft, almost half that of the Gol Gumbaz, which is the tomb of Mohammed Adil Shah," said Pandey.

Though fully Indian in theme, design and material, Begg ar-

tistically stamped motifs of the Thistle (the National Flower of Scotland) and the Indian Lotus, in remarkable styles on all the walls.

The GPO has total 9 gates and at least 10 entrances, three basements considered a rarity even in modern buildings, 3 tunnels and a maze of staircases, besides 2 British era elevators.

The far-sighted Begg had interconnected the 3 basements and the 3 tunnels, which are modeled like dark caverns, with a wide hall, thick walls and muddy floors, with two known openings, one to the Mumbai Docks and the other to the Mint, both less than a kilometre away.

Historians believe that whenever there was danger from the Indian freedom-fighters aiming to plunder His/Her Majesty's gold stored in the treasury, the British troops would simply scoot with it and hide in the tunnels, safeguard it in the Mint, or in worst cases, directly ship it to Britain through the sea-route via the Mumbai docks.

The 2 eye-catching iron-wood elevators were imported from Great Britain, with exquisite mirror works, fashionable windows and artistically designed grills, though the mechanism is now modernized to electric, but GPO is among the few in the city that has preserved its ancient elevators. The GPO is also a regular with Bollywood with many films like "Lage Raho Munnabhai", "Once Upon A Time In Mumbai", "Daddy", "Sarkaar", "Big Bull", and more shot inside/outside here, capturing aspects of its timeless beauty on celluloid.

Despite the Internet era, the GPO remains a busy-bee with staffers manning it 100 counters, including an Indian Railway reservation counter, an Aadhaar Card centre, a postal stationery shop, a postal ATM, and offering a host of other philately services since over a century. (IANS)

Dara Shikoh Library to be developed by private party



The development and operation of the Dara Shikoh Library building in the national capital has been awarded to 'Monument Mitras' under the 'Adopt a Heritage' project, an official statement said on Tuesday.

The Tourism Ministry statement said that the 28th MoU under the "Adopt a Heritage: Apni Dharohar, Apni Pehchaan" project has been awarded for the Dara Shikoh Library.

"The project will be implemented by the government stakeholders, including the Union Ministry of Tourism, and the Delhi government, and the private entities - Monument Mitras, The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust (TAACHT) and the Museum and Arts Consultancy (MAC) acting in a joint consortium," it said.

The ministry said that under this MoU, Monument Mitras plan to take up development, operations, and maintenance of basic amenities such as cleanliness of building and outdoor area including provi-

sion of garbage bins, benches, toilets, interpretative signs and directional signage, drinking water facilities, illumination, landscaping, provision for ease of access or barrier-free monument, accessibility for all (differently-abled friendly toilets, ramps, wheelchair facility, Braille signages).

Monument Mitras will also set up galleries including interactive and experiential curation (projections, photo booths, touch screens and walls), set up the room for reserve collection of antiquities/artefacts, organise security and advanced surveillance system and offer advanced amenities such as cafeteria (outdoor cafe), souvenir shop, brochures and leaflets, library and reading area, art installations, website designing, app based multilingual audio-guide, and wi-fi.

"The duration of the MoU is for an initial period of five years, extendable based on the performance of the Monument Mitras," the statement said. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambani

Sunday, February 21, 2021

Sun is forming an angle of 40 degrees with Jupiter on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year. You will work hard to achieve your targets and keep things going. You will also face stiff competition at your workplace. But you will make best use of opportunities that will be presented to you in your profession. Your rivals will try to conspire against you and also try to defame your name and reputation. But you will enjoy full backing of peers and superiors who will understand you well. New job offers will keep coming. You will face some minor health problems but your mate will remain on your side in hour of need. You will take to Yoga, meditation and some form of light exercises.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
It is going to be an amazing week for you. Your destiny will have something good in store for you. Planets are favoring you a lot. Good news related to progress will be all around. You will be getting good job offers. You can also start a new business venture in collaboration or partnership. Good financial gains are indicated. You will also make plans to buy a new vehicle or property. Your life will be on right track. Peace and harmony will prevail in family ties. Students will focus on their goals. Concentration will be high. Results of competitive exams will come in your favor. Lovebirds will enjoy a wonderful time.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
It is going to be a very favorable week for you. You will be financially rewarded for your efforts. The placements of planets will strengthen the way for betterment. You will have more opportunities to rise in your work. You will be able to complete it for a long time. You will be blessed with good health and your spirits will be high. Enemies and opponents will try to dominate but they will not be able to succeed to harm you or spoil your work. Your financial position will remain strong and stable. You will be making new investments which will give you good benefits. There will be an increase in respect and recognition in society. People will respect and acknowledge you as an influential person. A feeling of spirituality and inclination towards religious work and offering will flare in the heart. There will be joy and cheer in family relations.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
You will have to face challenges at every step. But you will prove equal to the task. Financial struggle and adjustments will continue. Money will come in after putting lot of efforts. Take proper care of your health. You will defeat your enemies with your courage, wisdom and cleverness. Your work will start getting completed. You may sign some agreements to bring an element of newness in your work. The results of job related tests, departmental tests, competitive tests will favour you. Your family members will support you in the most demanding circumstances. You will enjoy a good time with them. Loved ones will come closer to each other.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
It is a very favorable time period. You will receive financial opportunities and there are chances of progress in your job/work. You will take your work seriously and also receive handsome rewards for it. You will use your capabilities and capacities to their fullest. You will also receive good news regarding progress of your children. The results of job related exams will be favorable. You will get success in competitions and contests. You will also be successful in your love relations. You will also receive the blessings of the elderly people. Your respect and dignity will increase. Your good deeds and acts will spread like wildfire. You will also take initial steps in the expansion of your work. And achieve maximum level of success. Your colleagues will help you in your work. You will receive blessings of your elders.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
You will be having lot of opportunities. You will rise fast in your work field. You will also have monetary gains and profits with the help of your intelligence and work potential. You will make a lot of money. There are chances of promotion or increment in your job. You will defeat your enemies with a lot of patience. Your boss will be happy and satisfied with your work. You may undertake a business trip. Your business will improve day by day. The pressure to achieve your targets will be in your job and you will come really close to your targets too. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. You will also receive good news related to the education, career or marriage of your child. You will take care of elders. Love birds will have a wonderful time. You may do some deed because of which your fame and popularity will spread far and wide.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
It is going to be a week full of accomplishments. If we talk about fate, it is a very favorable time period for you. You will take suitable and important decisions in business. Many new policies will get implemented. Money inflow will be continuous. There are chances of promotions in job/work. But hard work and diligence must be

put for the completion of tasks. Placements of Jupiter will help in children education and career. New romantic relations leading to marriage are indicated. There will be an increase in your respect, honour, reputation and prestige. You will also develop interest in religion and spirituality. You will be known as an influential person in the society. You will move forward using your intellectual abilities. You can expect cooperation from your relatives.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
It is a great time to fulfill your dreams. Conditions at work will be good. You will get opportunities to rise in your life. You will also face challenges at every step with confidence. You will work very hard and put in lot of efforts in business. You will get positive results too. You will also implement new plans and ideas for expansion of your work. You will have cordial relationship in your family. The couples will have better understanding and support for each other. You will get money from many sources. There are chances of purchasing land, house, vehicle flats etc. You will maintain a perfect balance between your personal and professional life. You will start taking your relationship seriously. You will also listen to views of others. There will be an increase in your fame and self-respect.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
You will see a major improvement in your fortunes. Your efforts will also start getting due results. The clouds of crisis will also dissipate. You will work very hard and get good results too. Money will come in large amount. You will have monetary gains. You will try new experiments in your business. To a large extent these experiments will prove effective and feasible too. In case of romantic ties, situations are turning in your favor. You could decide to get married to a person of your choice. Though few jealous people will try to harm you but you will not be affected by them. Work related to house building will pick up speed. There will be some plan and situation will be created for an important and auspicious work to take place. Students will perform well. The results of tests given for job, competitive exams and interview will also favor you a lot.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
It is a great time period for you. Your fortunes will raise sky high. Your boss and superiors will be satisfied with your work. Your colleagues will also help you in your work. You will reap monetary benefits. Students will focus on studies. Students who are pursuing career oriented courses will get success. You will be good at achieving your objectives. You will also have respect for religion and spirituality. Your emotional nature and kindness will be your biggest plus point. You will also spend time on reading knowledge enhancing book. Your relatives will stand by you in your difficult times. You will get support of your family members.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
You enjoy decisions in your favour when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. Love matters, finances, and social relationships are especially pleasing and satisfying. You are generally more cooperative, although occasional willfulness could be a downfall, if you succumb to it. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are in your forecast.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
You will make a new beginning in your life. You will work very hard in your business. There will be opportunities to rise in your professional world. You will get success with your hard work and dedication. Your financial position will also get better. You will get admission in your choice of educational institute. You will also move ahead under the guidance of experienced and responsible people. You will make effort to remove the obstacles in family relationship. There will be good bonding between husband and wife. Your enemies and foes will be active. You will be busy in spiritual, religious and special work.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
You will face challenges with ease. And basking in glory of your achievements. Your health will be a lot better and you will remain busy in your work. You will fulfill your objectives at work. Your colleagues will be jealous of you but it will not stop you from making progress. You will be able to increase your earnings. You will also be able to manage your finances well. You will be able to concentrate on your studies. You will also work towards your objective with total dedication. You will give preference to your career over your love-life. You will feel that even in adverse circumstances your entire family will be standing with you. Marital relations will be pleasant. Keep a watch on the health of elders and seniors in the family. Disputes regarding division of property will get resolved with patience and tact. It will make everyone happy and satisfied.

Career Option in Auditing

We are studying or working because we want to earn more money. Be it small amounts or large amounts, everyone is concerned about it and the same is with individuals or governments or corporations. Government spent money for the welfare of the people. Different ministries spend the money in various ways. Companies or corporations earn profit from their business and then they need to pay tax and other liabilities.

In the process it is important for us to know what is the amount being spent or how much we earn. In this case a common word that comes to our mind is Auditor.

An auditor has a big role in connection with finance. Auditing is a systematic process of objectively obtaining and evaluating the accounts or financial records of a government undertaking, department, private business, or other entity based on an established criteria.

In other words, Auditing involves the review, analysis and evaluation of processes, products, services, systems, organizations and employees. It is a specialized form of accounting for an organization's financial information, which includes systems, policies and records.

A person who is involved in the process of auditing is simply called an auditor. Auditors determine the efficiency, adequacy of the organization whether a government or private organization.

They also review the reliability and integrity of management. Major types of audits conducted by auditors include financial audit, operational or management audit and compliance audit.

A financial statement audit

examines financial statements, records, and related operations to ascertain adherence to generally accepted accounting principles.

TYPES OF AUDITORS

Internal auditors- Internal auditors are employed by individual corporations, government bodies or other entities. Internal auditors work for the organisation they audit. Their job is to make sure the organization runs efficiently and effectively. They perform financial, internal control, and compliance audits for the employer.

External auditors- External Auditors are also known as Independent Auditors or Professional accountants in public practice. An External Auditor audits financial statements for companies, and other organizations. They also give advice in preparing income tax returns and provide guidance in matters concerning compensation and healthcare benefits for employees.

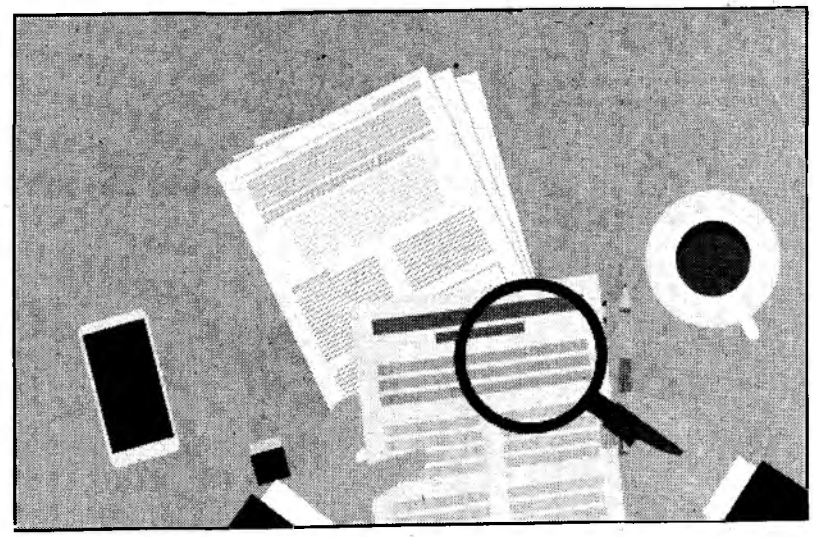
Government auditors- Government auditors work in the public sector; they are employed by local and state governments. Government auditors

maintain and examine the records of government agencies, and audit private businesses and individuals whose activities are subject to government regulations or taxation.

There are more scopes for auditors as the country is booming in many sectors. Financial matters can be dealt with by people who have knowledge on auditing.

Students can opt for a commerce stream after their senior secondary level. Being a student from a commerce background and having accounting as a subject is always helpful. One can go for courses like Chartered Accountancy to become a Chartered Accountant. There are advantages for students having mathematics as a subject as they get more opportunity in the field of auditing. There shall be more demands for auditors in coming years in different sectors like government, private, corporations, nongovernmental organizations, philanthropic organisations, charitable trusts, etc.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor cum skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkrnanjan@gmail.com for any career related queries)



"Either we shall find what it is we are seeking or at least we shall free ourselves from the persuasion that we know what we do not know."

— Plato

The Shillong Times

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Corrupt regional parties

FREE-wheeling political corruption knows no bounds. Several regional satraps and their political outfits are reaping a rich harvest in the age of coalition politics – and they do it from day-one, or the day after they become part of a coalition government. The age of coalition politics, both at the Centre and states in the past couple of decades, provided these uncouth sharks with the best opportunity. Similarly India's bureaucracy lorded over by these politicians too has turned venal. India is among the world's most corrupt countries today, and fresh testament comes from a senior Mumbai cop who wrote to Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray that his home minister was demanding of the police to collect a bribe of Rs 100 crore every month from bars, restaurants, hotels and the like in the western metropolis. The minister, Anil Deshmukh, is a leader of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) headed by Sharad Pawar; a party that PM Modi had termed as the Nationalist Corruption Party during his election campaign in 2014.

When such an expose comes from a senior IPS officer, who was recently transferred from the post of Mumbai Police Commissioner, the inference as also fact is that this scenario is not specific to Mumbai, but prevalent across cities and states, with a likely exception being Delhi ruled by anti-corruption activist Arvind Kejriwal. AAP too is a regional party but apparently has a different texture. Narendra Modi became the leader of the nation in 2014 with a promise to check corruption. Nothing goes to show he changed India for the better on this count in the seven years of his leadership and governance. He might not be personally corrupt but the huge sums the BJP spends for election campaigns is proof that all is not well with this party. Some top figures in the Modi government are known to be corrupt. The bureaucracy remains hugely corrupt. So much so, loads of money need to be pumped in to get a file moved from one table to another at central government offices including in Delhi. Modi as PM simply watched the scenario turning from bad to worse. It is widely acknowledged that he does not have a reformist mindset and is more of a status quo-ist. Nothing is likely to happen after the expose from the senior IPS officer. The nation is getting used to such situations. Corrupt political parties and their leaders are not only a huge curse on the society but a larger threat to the system of democracy itself in the long run.

Meghalaya – A debt-ridden State

By HH Mohrmen

It is good to know that Meghalaya is planning to celebrate with pomp and gaiety the golden jubilee of State next year. And because it also coincides with the country's 75 anniversary celebrations in 2022, the Government plans to organise a grand year-long celebration in the coming year. But the question that begs the answer is - what is it that we are going to celebrate. What is there to celebrate? What are the State's achievements so far? Or to be precise, is there really anything to celebrate?

Much to the public's dismay the Meghalaya Electricity Corporation Limited (MeECL) imbroglio brought to light the truth that the State owes the different electricity companies a huge amount of money. To be more specific MeECL owes North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited over Rs 700 crore; to ONGC Tripura Power Company Limited 166 crore and 510 crore to NTPC. In total the state owes the different power agencies a whopping 1,376 crore. The

The buildings are in a dilapidated condition and there are not enough teachers to teach in the schools. Not only that but the school buildings are in a decrepit condition now there are not enough teachers in the school. There are LP schools with a single teacher and sadly today there are also few LP schools without any teacher at all. In Muphlang since the teacher retired and the service of the adhoc teacher has been stopped, the school exists without a teacher and in Moosakhia the school is being manned by a single teacher for many years now. And it will amaze the readers of this column that this happens in the villages which are part of the Education Minister's constituency.

The only schools government with at least a good infrastructure or school buildings are the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan or (SSA) schools in the LP and UP section and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)

to the Nongtalang CHC. To his surprise the officer found that outpatient service in the CHC was not functional on the day he visited the CHC. But it is rather unfortunate to note that the CHC is run by a single MBBS doctor with few Ayush doctors. The CHC in Ummulong which was inaugurated just before the last election has remained the same since then. There is neither increase in manpower nor improvement of infrastructure of the health centre. Now the Chief Minister has laid a foundation stone for upgrading the Mawryngkneng PHC to CHC. This will again be another empty promise because the Government does not have enough medical doctors to man these PHCs and CHCs. In fact if one visits any Sub-Centre, PHC or CHC one will find that there is inadequate manpower and even the buildings are either inadequate or substandard.

Before the last election

development activities in the rural areas. But here too the question is how much loan has the state been taking from RIDF?

The State has availed support from Asian Development Bank for construction of school buildings and other development activities. The public have the right to know how much of the loan has been serviced and how much remains to be paid. Earlier IFAD supported the implementation of livelihood projects in state. The State Government has also availed loan from the World Bank for other development projects and now WB even supports the state in roads construction. The Japanese funding agency Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA) is also supporting Government on various projects including road construction and some of the support is in the form of loans. The question is how much of the financial support from these institutions are in the form of loans? What kind of loan is being provided and how much of the loan is yet to be repaid by the Govern-



people of the State have the right to question as to what are the factors that led to the Corporation reaching this embarrassing situation. But more importantly, how is the Government planning to free the state and its people from this quagmire.

The Government has also failed to run the Meghalaya Cherra Cement Limited as the company's health is in the red. And now in order to sustain the Company, the Government is proposing to enter into a joint venture with another business entity. But what the people of the State fail to understand is why has MCCL failed when other cement companies in the other parts of the state are doing very well and they are in fact expanding their businesses.

In the education front too, the state is not doing very well. Schools particularly the District Council Lower Primary Schools which the State has taken over from the Councils are in total disarray.

schools at the Secondary school level. Schools buildings of the schools established in the above mission are much better and some schools were able to have new school buildings because of the financial support from the Asian Development Bank. The problem is with the schools which depend solely on the State Government support which suffer the most.

Meghalaya's plans to establish not one but two Medical colleges in the state, one in Shillong and the other in Tura, continue to be non-starters. It seems like these two important projects have been kept in the backburner and it will be many decades before they see the light of the day.

The state is not doing any better in the health front either. The newly appointed SDO (Civil) Amlarem Civil Subdivision posted on the official Facebook page of the officer's recent visited

the government has also upgraded the Nartiang police outpost to Police station but three years have lapsed and nothing happened except that the name has changed. As the election is approaching the people of the State will see more foundation stones being laid which will ultimately become tombstones. The people must therefore gear-up for many more rounds of rhetoric and being taking for a ride by the politicians.

It is now as clear as daylight that Meghalaya is a State that is hugely in debt and sadly it seems like all the projects that the government is implementing now are with loans from different agencies. Different MLAs (particularly the MLAs who represent rural areas) are fighting for a bite of the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund cake sponsored by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development. The RIDF is a loan to states from NABARD for construction of roads, bridges and other

ment?

For so long the different activities of the State Government were supported with doles from the central government. Unfortunately now the fund flow from Delhi is not forthcoming as it used to. Hence loans from national and international agencies are the main source of support for the State. The question is how much in debt is the State now? The State Government has already taken so much loan so how much more loan can a small state like Meghalaya absorb. The state via MeECL already owes the different power companies about rupees one thousand four hundred crore but obviously this is just the tip of the iceberg. What are the different financial agencies which the state still owes money to and how much? The question is also whether the State can continue to operate in a similar fashion and for how long? Or is the way that the State Government's functioning sustainable?

Email hhmoehrmen67@gmail.com

Effects of green shoots in economy may get neutralised Covid resurgence coming at critical stage of demand curve

By K Raveendran

At a time when green shoots had begun showing up in the economy, the resurgence of Covid infection across the country is indeed bad news. According to the latest numbers released by the Union health ministry, the country has just recorded the highest single-day rise recorded in 111 days. The renewed intensity in infection has some of the state governments, particularly Maharashtra, actively considering enforcement of lockdown once again. The date for the reopening of educational institutions has again been changed to March 31, while restrictions in social gather-

ket, which is expected to see a real turnaround this year. The pickup in demand would be on account of replacement purchases as also new acquisitions, which is always a momentum growth area in India.

According to the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), the auto industry registered a 5.97 per cent sales growth in India last month as compared to January 2020. A total of 1.7 million units were sold last month as opposed to 1.6 million in January 2020.

As per SIAM, four-wheeler sales in January this year increased to 2.76



ings and entertainment venues have been reintroduced.

The economy's shift into the reverse gear is likely to retard the release of pent-up demand, which had started occurring in earnest as the Covid situation seemed to be getting under control. In fact, the big drop in the rate of new infection and the increased speed in the recovery of existing cases had led to a sense of complacency, which incidentally has contributed to the resurgence in infection.

The revival of demand, particularly in some key sectors, had revived optimism, with an upward revision in the overall annual GDP numbers, from a negative 24 per cent in the first quarter of the year to only 7 per cent less. Similarly, both Industrial

lakh units from 2.48 lakh units in the same period last year, marking a, 11.14 per cent growth. The most impressive performance was by the SUV segment, which increased by more than a third, although hatchbacks and sedans registered a small drop of a couple of percentages.

Management consultancy KPMG had last year forecast that the pandemic would lead to changes in the demand patterns in the automobile sector, induced by marked changes in consumer habits and behaviours. The consultancy forecast a shift away from shared mobility options as people prioritise social distancing and personal hygiene. This would effectively translate into a higher preference for affordable personal

The biggest improvement was, of course, predicted in the automobile sector, which had gone through a rough patch even before the pandemic set in. The passenger vehicle volume had dropped 18 percent in 2020 and was undergoing one of the longest protracted slowdowns in three decades, before the lockdown-related disruption further compressed the volumes.

Production (IIP) and Purchase Managers Index (PMI) indicated recovery, with a proportionate increase in the collection of GST. Although the retail sector did not yet show the desired momentum, there were signs of improvement as access to products and services became easier and restrictions in travel were off to a large extent.

The biggest improvement was, of course, predicted in the automobile sector, which had gone through a rough patch even before the pandemic set in. The passenger vehicle volume had dropped 18 per cent in 2020 and was undergoing one of the longest protracted slowdowns in three decades, before the lockdown-related disruption further compressed the volumes. Various consultancies have since forecast that the passenger vehicle sector will not only pick up steam, but record a 15-20 per cent improvement over the previous year. In fact, the Indian industry is supposed to outperform the global average, including the figure for the US mar-

ket, which could boost sales for auto manufacturers, especially in the entry-level vehicles category, it pointed out, citing a similar trend in China, where car ownership gained traction vis-a-vis car-hailing and sharing. The agency argued that this could help reverse the declining sales trend in the automotive sector in India. And that seems to have happened.

KPMG had stressed that the most damaging and lingering effect of the pandemic was the psychological impact and argued that the thrust to revive growth would have to come from government-driven expenditure as private investment, consumption-led demand and exports were all looking weak. While there could be two opinions about whether the government initiatives have succeeded to provide the required traction, some green shoots have started appearing in the economy, especially in terms of power generation and some core industrial activities. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Power cut woes & other issues

Editor,
I find it hard to believe that in the 21st century we in Meghalaya are going back to the dark ages. People are very fashionable and speak good English and they are also very active on social media but when it comes to fighting for the right causes there is absolute silence. What does silence in the face of mis-governance and miscarriage of the law mean? It means we are all complicit. It means we all are part of the corruption because citizenship demands that we make a noise for the right causes. I used to remember an organisation called ICARE whose President writes articles every once in a while. I thought an organisation like that would take on this ridiculously inept government whose Power Minister and Chief Minister keep assuring us citizens that power cuts will be reversed in the next

48 hours only to give us the citizens a brief respite and before long we are back at it again. I am not one of those who believe that government is capable of doing business. And managing the MeECL and its subsidiaries is the combined work of a management expert, a financial specialist and a human resources management professional, none of whom are currently available to the MeECL.

The MeECL is and should be a profit making corporation in order to survive and thrive. It needs to have a sustainable revenue model like every business. It has to have five or ten year projections on what it is capable of achieving; which areas require investment; where those investments will come from and capitalisation of assets of the Corporation. I am not sure that the MeECL knows exactly how much its properties are worth, including that lovely guest house in Umiam which is used by higher-ups to have their and their extended family's pri-

private parties. That guest house costs money for maintenance and generates nothing. It should be given away to a hotelier who will pay good money and add to the kitty of the MeECL.

Coming back to assets of the MeECL, these days on the way to Nongpoh at the Umiam Viewpoint one sees a number of eating joints being constructed just at the edge of the Umiam Lake. How can land adjacent and bordering the lake belong to some private party when the Umiam Lake is the property of the MeECL? Did the Corporation sell the land to private parties? The buildings are being constructed on a slope. Where is the space for a sanitary latrine and kitchen waste? It is obvious to anyone with brains that everything will flow into the Umiam Lake. Does the Government have eyes and ears to see all these indiscretions committed by the moneyed class of the State?

Another question that troubles me as a citizen is

that if Meghalaya is buying power from so many power producing companies (PPCs) then what is the MeECL actually producing? Can the MeECL answer for the sake of public knowledge as to how much is the total power requirement today in Meghalaya and what is its current production capacity? If we are relying so heavily on so many PPCs then isn't the MeECL a non-performing asset that should be disbanded? The State should engage a private company to look after the transmission, distribution and billing aspect.

Also if the MeECL is a power producing corporation why does it have to run a school? Is the school a self paying project or is the teachers' salary also managed by the Corporation. I am raising these questions which actually should be raised by the elected representatives in the Assembly. I hope the MeECL will answer my queries for the benefit of the public.

Yours etc.,
Wanjoplang Swer,
Via email

Education in dismal state

Editor,
The recent statement made by Lambokstar Marnagar, President Central Body of the KSU at a function in the State Central Library on the deteriorating education scenario is a fact. The lack of commitment by those who get elected for five years and are empowered to frame policies has actually led to the messy state of education in Meghalaya. The State has failed to provide a curriculum that will train students for alternative career choices and employment. The funds for implementing the parameters of Right to Education have not been used judiciously neither is the education system here going for a change to address the challenges ahead. The examples the KSU President cited shows that the state of education in Meghalaya especially in the rural areas is pathetic. Even those living in Shillong have to bear the brunt of high school and college fees. Many a times

such schools tend to bulldoze parents to pay the fees on time without any consideration of the parents' plight.

The other factor is, there are families that live from hand to mouth and struggle to educate their children. In such situations schools show little empathy. The situation leads to drop-outs and a growing sense of desperation, anger and resentment against those who deny them their right to free and valuable education. Today, education has become a business and if we call names like coal mafia, limestone mafia etc., these institutions can also be called 'educational business mafias'. The need for regulating school and college fees based on a set of parameters is an urgent matter lest we have more drop-out and a debilitating society.

Yours etc.
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong:

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

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."

— B. R. Ambedkar

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya's response to second Covid wave

THE Chief Secretary had at a public function stated that Meghalaya cannot let its guard down because the second wave of Covid infection is a reality that cannot be ignored. Covid is infectious and its spread can only be contained by observing all the protocols laid out when the country went into lockdown this time last year. It is unfortunate that just when the economy is set to take wings and small and big businesses have started to open up after a slump, Covid should return for the second time. Western countries have already gone into lockdown mode. In India interestingly, elections are scheduled in West Bengal and Assam and crowds are allowed to gather in the election campaigns where the Prime Minister and Home Minister are addressing election rallies. This sets a bad precedent as crowding violates the social distancing norms.

That said, it is important that individual states take their own precautions so that they suffer lesser adverse impacts from Covid on the health, economic and education fronts. Now schools and colleges in Meghalaya have started opening albeit after observing all Covid protocols such as staggered classes where students attend on alternate days to make space for social distancing. While such protocols are observed by educational institutions and students are asked to strictly wear masks, such is not the case outside the institutions. The busy market places have stopped observing Covid appropriate behaviour. Some vendors wear masks; others don't and there is no one to ensure compliance. Unless citizens themselves check one another, there is very little that Government can do. A casual observation shows that even students take off their masks once they are out of the school/college campuses. It is a common sight to see two students walking alongside and one wearing a mask while the other doesn't. Surely this is not a case of lack of awareness. By now even the young understand the seriousness of Covid19 and its potential to claim lives. The second wave is a reality because air and rail travel has started and people are travelling. It is possible that asymptomatic travellers are perhaps carrying the virus with them and spreading it unawares.

While the District Administration has cautioned the public against moving around without masks and also imposing a fine on those that violate this rule, the problem is of enforcement. Ultimately people themselves should take responsibility for enforcing masking in their respective localities. This would allow the law enforcers to strictly police the public spaces.

In defence of RAM

By Albert Thyrniang

Adelbert Nongrum raked up the issue of '9 Lad being a pick-up point for sex workers' again on the last day of the Budget session. Was it necessary? Was it not sufficient for the North Shillong legislator to work behind the scenes if there is a problem? The obsession with the subject which he had already raised during question hour on 10 March has further humiliated the sex workers and brought more stress on them though they have committed no crime.

Ever since featuring in the Assembly '9 Lad' has been talk of the town. The popular location called 'PB' has been in the news non-stop. This paper had two articles. We also witnessed the new development, that is, the coming to light called the Rot Association of Meghalaya (RAM) that bemused the public. In the meantime a pressure group filed an FIR against the association demanding arrest of its leaders. The police complaint is unprecedented. It smacks of intolerance and exposes a 'holier than thou' attitude. Just because we don't agree with someone or just because certain actions are unacceptable to us do we have to go to the police?

RAM, if it has not done anything illegal, has the right to exist. As stated in media one of the reasons for forming the Association is/was because of the abuse and violations members face, including from law keepers themselves. The Association came into being to spread awareness among the members on safety both from people and from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The leaders are quite informed and have attended state and national seminars on related issues. Therefore, it is presumed the Association was created in accordance with the law. It is also learnt that the Association has moral support from some prominent citizens of Shillong. Even if some might feel repugnant by existence of sex workers vilifying, defaming, degrading and judging them is inhuman. Branding them as 'ba iaid awria', 'thei awria' is repulsive emanating from a self-righteous mind set.

Those who have been shaken by the 'sudden' emergence of RAM may be informed that the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) India and the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) also exist. These are 'parent' organisations consisting of sex worker organizations or confederations

from different cities/states like AADHAR Bahuu deshya Sanstha, Jalgaon (Maharashtra), Jwala Shakti Samuh (JSS), Jharkhand, Karnataka Sex Workers Union (KSWU), Kerala Network of Sex Workers (KNSW), Kerala, Mahila Jagrut Sevabhavi Sanstha, Parbhavi (Maharashtra), Me and My World, Andhra Pradesh, Nirangal Federation, Tamil Nadu to name a few. It is only inferred that RAM networks with AINSW/or/and NNSW. Therefore, by extension should FIR be filed against AINSW or/and NNSW? From the reply of the Home Minister it is also certain that the central government and states government agencies coordinate and network with the sex worker associations. Moreover, WHO or the UN and International Sex Workers Associations are also associated with the Indian associations (as well as with organisations world-wide). So what would the FIR in Shillong mean? All these associations work for the rights and welfare of sex workers. They stand for human rights. RAM does not encourage prostitution per se. Just like the above organisations it works for the interest, dignity and respect of its members. If other sex workers' organisations in the country (in fact in the world) can contribute to the society, so too can RAM!

Legal perspectives could aid us to grasp the situation better. As pointed by others the Indian Penal Code does not prohibit prostitution per se. Activities like soliciting, running prostitution in hotels, owning a brothel and pimping are illegal. Trafficking of sex workers is also punishable under Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA). Minors, of course, cannot be sex workers. In 2016 a Supreme Court panel (formed in 2011) recommended that sex work be made legal in the country. In the same year the Apex Court judged that 'consenting' adult sex workers cannot be arrested even from a brothel as sex work is not illegal. An owner of a brothel may be arrested. In 2018 the Karnataka High Court ruled that there is 'no penalty' for a 'customer' who uses the services of a prostitute. In September last year, maintaining that 'prostitution is not a criminal offence' the Bombay HC ordered the release of three sex workers arrested in a hotel. So in short sex workers cannot be harassed if their activities fall

within the law.

Now a word on morality and legality! Morality can be subjective. What is immoral may not be illegal. For example adultery is immoral but it is not punishable in most countries. Abortion may be unethical but persons can't be taken to task if termination of pregnancy is legal. Prostitution may be considered immoral but it does not mean we 'punish' workers. It does not mean we insult, humiliate, condemn and judge them. Prostitution may not be appreciated but moral policing is also wrong. It is in fact illegal. Vigilantes can't beat up, apprehend and abuse sex workers. More so, in the first instance, the MLA approached the problem from the moral point of view sans the social and economic realities. The Home Minister, also the Education Minister, did not understand the question and hence gave a wrong answer. He took sex work for human trafficking.

Immorality is not narrowed down to sex work. Corruption and bribe are much more rampant than sex work. The latest is the Rs 233 crore scam in the MeCL Smart Meter Project as alleged by TUR, the result of which is the 11 hour unprecedented power cuts. However, there is no community guilt. No agitation. No pressure on the government for a credible probe. Few highlight it on social media. The organisation that has filed FIR against RAM has not done so against any corrupt politician or official. It is well known NGOs thrive on 'donations'. They demand 'protection' money from petrol pumps, companies, enterprises, shops and from individuals like contractors and business persons. Some organisations are formed to make a living. How do we explain the wealth of leaders of pressure groups? How do we explain when leaders contest and win elections? Where do they derive their cash from? It could be via fair means but how is it that there are hardly any anti-corruption crusader groups? How is it that most NGOs have not said a single word on corruption, illegal coal mining and transportation? No one has seconded the Lokayukta's recommendation for a CBI probe in the illegal activities. No one will raise a hue and cry even if the government decides to keep the CBI at bay. No one is alarmed that the corruption watch dog is rendered

toothless. All are eager to end prostitution not corruption.

Simple 'solutions' are on offer to end prostitution! One is a religious/spiritual answer - 'change your ways...trust in Jesus...'. This may work but there are individuals who don't believe in Jesus. Should they be excluded? Even for Christians it is a simplistic solution. The stories of anonymous sex workers confirm that the common cause is poverty. Abandoned by husbands, death of parents, death of husbands, alcoholic husbands are reasons. Despite their best efforts to find work in people's home (mostly washing clothes) or in tea stalls their earning is never sufficient for house rent, food for the family, education of their children and other requirements. Therefore, to just exhort to place one's hope in God in such cruel conditions is insensitive.

Another 'solution' is for Christian denominations who run schools, colleges and hostels. 'Give free education to the children of sex workers. Place them in identified hostels'. One is not a spokesperson for Church leaders. They could well accept the suggestion but the difficulty is that sex workers will not wish to reveal their profession. They are anonymous.

The socio-economic issue has no easy solution. Sex work has existed in all ages and in all societies. If there was a ready-made solution we need not battle it today. Sex work is there today, in rich and poor countries in all the seven continents and in all the countries. It is not new here in the 'Ri Tip Briew Tip Blei' too. It does not mean we don't do anything about it. We do it without being judgemental. We approach it not merely from the legal point of view. We may or may not be able to eradicate it. There may be individuals who find reasons to indulge in the 'oldest profession'. It does not mean 'ki Hynniewtrep' will crumble.

We once again refer to ourselves as being a 'Christian' state. There are Christian organisations working for sex workers. In Kolkata I once encountered members of a religious society going to a red light area carrying loads of contraceptives and condoms. Clearly they have no easy solution. The next best solution is to reduce the spread of HIV-AIDs and educate the children in the red light areas so that they need not continue the occupation of their mothers. So RAM is part of the solution not the problem.

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People politics

Women leading the way

By Dr Samhita Barooah

The new manifesto shared by women's groups in Assam is significant. Political assertion through women's collective efforts needs to be incorporated across diverse leadership agendas of social, cultural and political leadership in Assam. When women are discussed as sex objects on stage, pitted as battered persons in news, projected as mere cultural symbols of tradition and heritage during events and defeated as useless leaders in crucial decision making institutions and organisations, women need to assert

working from and at home shuttling between multiple roles. Mobility of women got restricted, migrant workers who happened to be women started begging on the streets. Elderly farmer women joined the farmers' protests to be able to break away from multiple pressures of agrarian market pressures and new economic reforms. Women on the streets of protests upholding constitutional values challenged the cleavages of systemic and structural exploitation.

Does a woman choose to



their presence, participation and perspectives.

Sometimes one realises when March 8 is celebrated across the world to endorse vaginal solidarity there is meaning to the cause. With the pandemic times, such solidarity enabled, strengthened, positioned and transformed many disgruntled situations. This year's theme #choosetochallenge provides huge scope to restructure, restore and rejuvenate pluriversal struggles to survive and sustain together. Fostering leadership across gender diverse identities is another #choosetochallenge the heteronormativity within genders. We feel that we have to challenge the norms which

challenge the body shaming she faces every day? Do queer women choose to challenge the hate crimes they bear every day? Do transgender persons choose to challenge the public ridicule they withstand while working for their livelihoods? Do the young married women choose to challenge the marital rape they have to deal with in the name of binding or enlarging the family? Do the women homemakers choose to challenge their inability to find financial freedom and own inheritance and family property? Do mothers at any age choose to challenge the gender stereotyped motherhood roles? Does the underpaid female domestic

Letters to the Editor

Domestic violence; the bitter truth of today

Editor,

Looking at the scenario of the present society, the structure and values of the family have degenerated due to the growing number of separated families. Abuse based on gender has never been a stranger to us and has been better identified with the victims being isolated. Previously, domestic violence was a private family affair, but is now viewed as a social issue due to the increasing number of cases that have been recorded. Domestic violence has often been studied as an abusive expression triggered by financial stress, mental stress and fear which has given rise to cases of financial abuse and sometimes even murder.

According to the National Family Health Survey, Meghalaya has the highest rate of domestic violence in the North Eastern region of India. Countering the notion that violence against women was not an issue in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, Angela Rangad, a member of the Freedom Project, said that the state had the highest rate of domestic violence in the region, where 32% of married women interviewed admitted to have been beaten or physically maltreated. In addition, studies have also shown that one in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime.

The risk of domestic violence affects not only victims but also their families and children, as children are exposed to violence and are eyewitnesses to abuse.

Domestic violence is not easy to identify at first; abuse often begins subtly and gets worse over time. It is extremely difficult to detect and prove domestic violence, as most victims cannot share or open up because they are under threat. Domestic violence is identified when the abusers believe that they have every right to control their partners for every detail and also their movements. The main objective of the abusers is to exercise control over their partners. So how can the victim get help? When one encounters or experiences violence, one should seek help, as there are counselling centres and support groups in different communities for women in abusive relationships.

In the last two to three years, the Family Counselling Centre has recorded quite a number of cases of domestic violence, and it seemed to be increasing with each passing year. Although women in Meghalaya enjoy a little more mobility and visibility than their counterparts in the rest of the country, their lives are not free from violence, as counsellors have come across women who have experienced violence at home. After a long conversation, the woman expresses feelings of shame, worry, frustration, embarrassment, and it takes her a long time to say what she had gone

through. She is supposed to carry this burden with her until she can no longer tolerate the abuse. Only then she decides to seek professional assistance."

The Women's Security Policies that we have already put in place have had little impact. While most of the reforms are underway, there are a number of issues, such as micro-aggressions, marital rape, which do not even have separate provisions to be addressed. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 reached out to some women, but was largely flawed by an exhausting procedure and a non-uniform protocol for service providers that the victim has to go through. Due to this lack of seriousness, the majority of systemic measures related to gender-based discrimination has received little attention.

While the more overlooked aspects are still at issue, the Bosco Integrated Development Society has set up a Family Counselling Centre, sponsored by the Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi under the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development and currently monitored by the Meghalaya State Social Welfare Board to combat violence and trauma through counselling to individuals who have experienced it so that they can reach out until the problem is resolved. In addition to providing guidance, the Centre also serves as a service provider under the Domestic Violence Act, 2005 to resolve

family disputes and restore conjugal life through mutual understanding, as well as to serve all women victims of atrocities.

Since its inception, the Family Counselling Centre has been able to meet the needs of women by providing counselling assistance to victims of domestic violence, or to any individual facing family disputes, with a marital maladjustment problem. By providing guidance, the centre is able to help the individual cope with their problems and bring about positive changes in their lives.

Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request, Shillong

Mamata's injured ankle

Editor,

On Wednesday, March 10 after filing nomination for contesting the Assembly election from Nandigram on her way back to Kolkata Mamata Banerjee met with an accident. In a statement she said that she made a short stop-over at Birulia Bazar, Nandigram for interacting with the local villagers but she was 'heckled' by goons and suffered severe left leg injuries while getting into her car after her public interaction. Her security guards rushed to help her get into the back seat of her vehicle. Banerjee informed her guards that she suffered severe leg injury and also complained of chest pain. She further claimed that the attack was a premedi-

tated and a well-hatched conspiracy to kill her. She complained that there were no policemen around her and a couple of men from the crowd pushed the door of her car and left her badly injured.

Later Banerjee changed her statement from PG hospital. She said her leg was caught between the swing door and the body of the car while hurriedly closing the door. There was no CCTV coverage to prove that miscreants attacked her. Eye witnesses also denied any such attack. They confirmed that her car hit an electric post when the incident occurred inflicting injury to her ankle.

The incident has raised serious questions about the safety of Banerjee. It also raises doubts as to how the crowd came so close to her and why police failed to control the crowd. It is also unclear why Banerjee occupies the front seat of the vehicle on her outstation tours thereby breaching protocols expected to be strictly maintained by a VVIP. Also what made her stop at an unscheduled location? No VVIP with Z+ security has a record of ever breaching protocol as Banerjee does. In the preliminary investigation report the police and state administration discounted the attack theory and termed the incident an accident.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) took stern action and suspended the top cops in-charge of Banerjee's security. The ECI

also dismissed the allegation of attack on her. Thereafter the state administration had to toe the same line. In fact this is also a glaring failure of Mamata Banerjee as the Home Minister of West Bengal.

Prashant Kishore, appointed by the TMC as an election strategist to help the Party win the 2021 West Bengal Assembly polls. Kishore had earlier scripted a similar plot for Jagan Mohan Reddy in the last Assembly Election of Andhra Pradesh. As directed by Kishore, Jagan Reddy played his role perfectly, inflicted a leg injury, was hospitalized and discharged with a bandaged-foot. He campaigned in a wheel-chair and received huge publicity. Mamata is emulating the same script as prescribed by Prashant Kishore to win the polls!

But history repeats itself. The anti-land acquisition movement led by Suwendu in Nandigram in 2007 had catapulted Mamata Banerjee to power in 2011 by defeating the longest-serving democratically elected communist regime of the world. This time a battle of titans is on the cards as Mamata takes on Suwendu in Nandigram. As an incident and not an attack on Mamata Banerjee. Time will tell whether Mamata's injured ankle would prove to be Suwendu Adhikari's "Achilles heel" in the elections after a dramatic "wheel-chair" campaign!

Yours etc., Samares Bandyopadhyay, Via email

"Sometimes one realises when March 8 is celebrated across the world to endorse vaginal solidarity there is meaning to the cause. With the pandemic times, such solidarity enabled, strengthened, positioned and transformed many disgruntled situations. This year's theme #choosetochallenge provides huge scope to restructure, restore and rejuvenate pluriversal struggles to survive and sustain together."

stifle. We have ageist norms, able bodied norms, productive male norms, married motherhood norms, caste, tribe, religion and education specific society, driven intimate alliance norms, customary norms which may bring out the worst in human beings. Body shaming is something which every woman, queer and man face whenever they deviate from the norms.

Being agender is becoming a priority these days. When it comes to leadership during a crisis anybody with a vagina is not considered at all. During Covid19 pandemic also women particularly held the fort from the kitchen to the ICUs. Within homes also women's emancipation was limited with additional drudgery of the household and free care for the young and the old. Women struggled between online modes, keeping jobs,

worker choose to challenge the lack of social security in her job? Does the CIS female sex worker choose to challenge the client for not following health specific safety measures? Does the female head of an institution choose to challenge the angularity of subordinate colleagues? Do women in leadership positions choose to challenge the misogyny and gender bias which exists in every layer of workplaces, public spaces and political spaces? Are women sold out to vote banks, pre-election gimmicks, jewellery, clothes, scooty rides, peanut cash transfers or are they using their agency to choose to challenge all glass boundaries restricting them in all walks of life.

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"Incompetence is a better explanation than conspiracy in most human activity."

— Peter Bergen

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Is MDA imploding?

STRANGE things are happening in the MDA coalition. Earlier the coalition partners, mainly the UDP had sought the removal of NPP MLA, James Sangma from the Home Ministry following exposes of the illegal coal mining and transportation and names of his close aides featuring in the public domain as being facilitators of the transactions. James Sangma was replaced by UDP MLA, Lakhmen Rymbui as Home Minister. But the illegal coal mining and transportation carries on unabated even today. And the UDP and other coalition partners are silent on the issue. Now that the MeECL is in a holy mess and electricity is being rationed to just 13 hours a day, the UDP is back to what it does best — seek the removal of the Power Minister who coincidentally happens to be the same James Sangma. This time the UDP also wants the CMD, MeECL, IAS officer, Arun Kembhavi removed. The Party attributes the entire mess to the duo and believes a change of guard in the Power Department might help redeem the Power Supply Corporation.

Earlier the BJP had also been calling out at the corruption perpetrated by the NPP in the Garo Hills District Council. At that time the UDP had castigated the BJP for publicly exposing corruption outside the MDA instead of sorting matters out within the coalition. The UDP even taunted the BJP to withdraw its MLAs from the Government. The same can be said of the UDP today which is pointing fingers at their coalition partner the NPP. The UDP is only playing a political game. It wants to be seen as the 'holier than thou' partner in the MDA. Come elections and the UDP will take a pious stand that although it was part of the coalition its MLAs/ministers had no hand in the alleged corruption in the MeECL. This is too easy an alibi. A coalition by definition is a conglomerate of political parties forming the government and having collective responsibility. Blame or praise is shared equally.

The HSPDP and PDF have had more deference for the coalition dharma. They have decided to remain silent and sail along for the remaining term of the MDA government. Even in the Assembly the PDF MLAs/ministers prefer to remain silent and allow the Chief Minister to field all questions on their behalf. That's more honourable than sharing power and also deflecting the blame at another partner. The only face saving action for the UDP is to leave the coalition. But why would they do that? After all, power is addictive.

When the police plant bombs

By Jagdish Rattanani

That old adage says when thieves fall out, honest men come by their own. In Mumbai, there is nothing honest in the air as yet with allegations, wild and otherwise, flying thick in the wake of the scare caused by the discovery of dynamite sticks near the skyscraper home of Mukesh Ambani.

The dramatic disclosures in the case should put all of India on notice, and bring to attention the huge risks when police forces that must control crime and maintain law & order are allowed to run amok and use unconventional and illegal means to deliver what the law requires them to do by the rule book. What we see today is at least in part the continued fallout from the time Mumbai police went on a trigger-happy spree with the so-called "encounter" killings that led to the force becoming split between two gangs. This was an arrangement under which gangs were being ostensibly eliminated but what it delivered was something very different as gangsters outsourced the killing of their rivals to the police. Soon, the gangs outside were mirrored with gangs inside the force, each police "encounter" team known for its loyalties, information sources and the price at which rivals could be bumped off. This kind of failure at the political and professional level led to loss of control and the injection of a new level of murkiness in a system that has always been on the edge of murky and submerged in corruption.

It is not a coincidence that the man who had a hand in planting the explosives near Ambani's home this time is an old timer from those days of disgrace and shame for the Mumbai police. He is himself a disgraced, low ranked police officer, making this an inside job that in itself reveals the kind of rot that runs through a police force that years ago took pride in being called the Scotland Yard of India. There is also no doubt that this disgraced officer, an Assistant Police Inspector named Sachin Waze, has in the past worked as the 'A' team of the man who now headed the force, the Commissioner of Police, Parambir Singh. This was in the 1990s, when Singh as Deputy Commissioner had Waze in his team as an "encounter specialist".

Singh has since been shunted out, but he has hit back saying the State Home Minister, Anil Deshmukh of the NCP, had asked Waze to collect Rs. 100 crore from bars, and assorted businesses in Mumbai. Singh, of course, cries foul now but was silent all along, which in itself raises its own questions about his conduct, given that there is political rivalry also at play between the BJP-led Centre and the Shiv Sena-led State. The Commissioner's "revelations" therefore take on a colour of someone speaking out against one party to stand for or seek cover from another. Waze has been ar-

machinery moving. There is another death that could be traced to Singh and Waze's hands now — one of the cars used in the Ambani case was allegedly being parked at the Police Commissioner's office; the precise car carrying the dynamite belonged to a little-known businessman who has since died in mysterious circumstances.

The truth will for long remain concealed behind a flood of allegations, innuendoes and surmises. Whatever the picture may be, there is no doubt that the Mumbai Police will not command respect. It may well embolden other members of the force



rested by the NIA, a little over one year after he was reinstated in service in a rather odd move, after being suspended and then resigning from the police force way back in 2007.

And who reinstated him? Singh headed the committee that did the deed, though Waze was being prosecuted for the death in custody of Khwaja Yunus, a 27-year-old computer engineer, in a case now pending in the courts. The reason cited for the urgent reinstatement was the need to hire more police staff in times of a pandemic! From the top to the bottom, the rot runs deep and won't be easy to clean since it is now so much a part of the system that it has created its own efficiencies, paybacks and a way of working that keeps the

to test boundaries and further lower standards.

Controlling this slide will require a huge effort. But what looks like a problem of the police in Mumbai is a problem that we see across the nation, where encounters have become the preferred way to eliminate gangsters, cut short the legal process of prosecution and take cover under the plea that the people of India support the killing of gangsters. What this simplistic analysis refuses to see or learn is that due process is not a hurdle to be crossed but the only way in which the forces can be kept honest, can be made to deliver on their legal mandate and to be able to truly control crime and conduct investigations bringing those truly guilty to justice.

Any approach that short-changes due process is an invitation to disaster, as we see happening in Mumbai. Consider that if the so-called "encounters" were investigated, if Waze and his senior Singh were held to account for their actions, this team of two would not have had the capacity to rise to the levels they have and sabotage the system in the way they have today. This writer is personally a witness to how these "encounter" specialists have gone about their work, almost all of it illegal, almost a private den that is sometimes dirtier than the code with which gangs may operate. More than two decades ago, one of these "specialists" in a private conversation revealed that he had the power to listen in to any mobile conversation without due process, kept a set of guns in his locker in the office which he displayed and made no bones about admitting that he was not clean and that his team was known for being the one that made money — which was a cause of jealousy among many others!

What is the influence of all of this on young police officers who join and take up routine city policing? A retired DGP remarked that the shootout at Lokhandwala, the one which has a Bollywood movie to its credit, in which two police teams fought to claim the encounter, wasn't the best introduction to the way the police operated in Mumbai. Mumbai, and the nation, needs to put a stop to short termism when it comes to daily policing. There is only one way to control crime, maintain law & order and build confidence among the citizenry. It's the old-fashioned way of getting this right. It takes time, effort, skill and involves support for the men who live up to the pledge of the uniform. It demands exemplary punishment for those who break the rules. This is called due process, in letter and in spirit, and is the only way. Whenever it is violated, we will get the murkiness that shames the Mumbai police today. Whenever it is followed, we will get a force that makes the city proud of its work and commitment.

(The writer is a journalist and a faculty member at Bhavan's SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

The traffic impasse of Shillong

By Barnes Mawrie

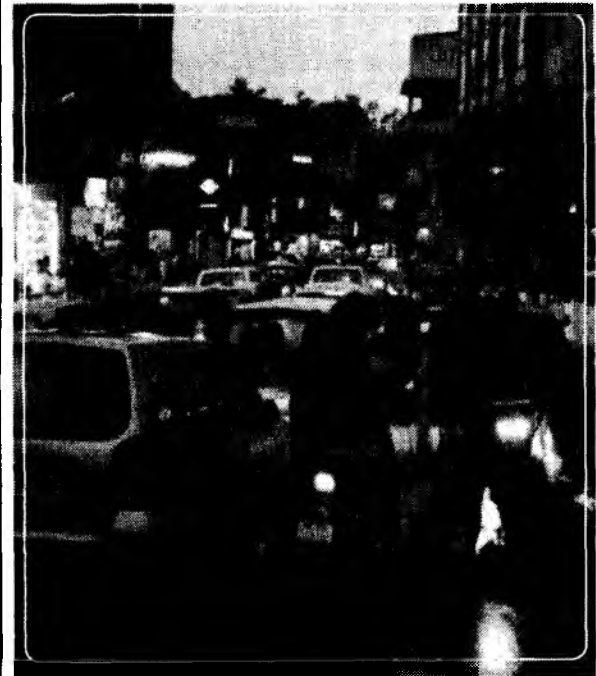
First of all I am full of admiration for the traffic police of Shillong. Their perseverance and patience is something worth mentioning. How diligently they stand at their specified posts in order to control the daily insurmountable traffic which in fact keeps increasing with every passing day. How patiently they keep repeating the boring task of placing and removing road dividers and no parking kiosks all over the city. It is not an easy task to keep blowing the whistle and keep waving your hands throughout the day. With the indiscipline kind of drivers we have in the city, the task is rendered more challenging. Kudos to our traffic police and indeed they deserve a pat on the back.

However, the question is: how long will our traffic police continue with this hapless task? They are also human beings with the possibility of reaching their patience limit. In the present situation, there is a real traffic impasse in Shillong. Our traffic police are functioning at an impasse for we see them trying out every possible combination in the traffic puzzle. Unlike any other puzzle which has a solution on repeated trials, the traffic puzzle of our city does not seem to have any solution at all. Changing routes, putting and removing no parking kiosks every now and then many times only confuses the drivers. We cannot blame these civil servants for they

of course does not serve our purpose.

We have heard of talks and debates on this issue at every level of society, but they have just remained empty talks. Government after government has wooed the public with false promises on this issue. So far nothing concrete has been done. All our governments so far lack far-sightedness and vision. Take for example, the present road project from Itshyrawat to Mawpdang is only a two-lane highway. Five years from now, this particular region would become an extended part of the city and would be buzzing with life and economic activities. Traffic is going to increase by a huge volume as it is being seen already. This project should have been a four-lane project keeping in mind the future growth of the area. Unfortunately, our government does not learn from experience and we will be caught up again and again in the same mess. Now it would have been easier for the government to acquire land for the four-lane project as not many buildings have come up. A few years from now, the government would have to pay through the nose to get an inch of land. It is true that the State is going through a financial crunch, but it takes good leadership to negotiate with the central government to get fund allocations for road projects and in this perhaps the State has failed miserably.

In conclusion I would



Letters to the Editor

When should leaders apologize and when not?

Editor,
When we wrong someone we know, even unintentionally, we are generally expected to apologize. The person we hurt feels entitled to an admission of error and an expression of regret. We, in turn, try to ameliorate the situation by saying, "I'm sorry," and perhaps making restitution. But when we're leaders or acting as leaders, the circumstances are different. Leaders are responsible not only for their own behavior but also for that of their members and followers, who (in our case) might number in the hundreds. The first question, then, is who exactly is the guilty party here? The degree of damage is an issue as well. When a leader feels obliged to apologize, especially for an inappropriate trespass into civilized society in which its followers were involved, the harm inflicted was likely serious, widespread, and enduring.

So, after denying and procrastinating for a few days, we've realised that if we wanted to get back on the task of demanding for our rights the right way, we have no choice but to offer an abject apology — and a printed one, at that — for having had an inappropriate and controversial entry into the Ri Tip-Briew Tip-Blei of Meghalaya.

Well first and foremost, we'll begin by apologizing for illegally keeping a temporary headquarter at a rented house of one of our members (Publicity Secretary, D. Mawlong) without receiving any notice from the Headman or the knowledge of Nongmynsong locality representatives or even the landlord. We only did it since our permanent headquarter at Mawlong Rim had been busted a few months back. We also apologize for revealing the good name of Nongmynsong locality thereby tarnishing its clean image. It was wrong and we deeply regret it. We apologize to the respectable MLA of Pynthor Umkrah, the local Headman and locality representatives as well. We also apologize to all the moral police NGOs who are disgusted by our very presence in society.

We also apologize for the obscene viral video that was posted on our Telegram group (@RotAssociationOfMeghalaya) featuring a nephew of respectable MLA from Mawlat, which according to social media reports, is also the main reason for the death of the Lopalang girl found inside a car at Mawpat a few weeks back. We apologize even though we have nothing to do with it — the public group was created simply to receive and tend to grievances of fellow sex workers. And finally, we would also like to apologize for forming and illegally running an Association without any legal permission from

state authorities. Our motive was never to defame but only to get the government's attention, our voices heard and problems solved too. Our motive was simply to demand for our rights.

Since leaders speak for, as well as to their followers, their apologies have broad implications. The act of apology is carried out not merely at the level of the individual but also at the level of the association. It is not only personal but also public. It is a performance in which every expression matters and every word becomes part of the public record. So once again, we apologize!

Yours etc.,
P Mylliemngap
General Secretary, Rot
Association Of Meghalaya

Meghalaya in the doldrums

Editor,
A democratically elected Government is by the people, of the people and for the people. But in Meghalaya it is quite different because although it is by the people and of the people it is not for the people which is evident as load shedding is going on for nearly a month with empty promises made by the Govt. What welfare can a citizen expect from the Govt. Which in spite of availing loans from the Centre and other sources is unable to pay its dues to power supply agencies like NTPC, NEEPCO etc? A small state like Tripura is selling power

and our state owes them also. How and where the money received is going that the public has to bear the brunt of the Govt's inefficiency?

What ails the Govt is a total failure in planning their projects. Many projects taken up by the Govt. and assisted by the Centre remain incomplete and these are reflected in the CAG report. Why is there is no budget for the MeECL towards receipt and expenditure? How much arrears are due from the Govt. departments which consume maximum power? In spite of Centre's loan for payment to the power supply agencies, to tide over the present crisis, no payments have yet been made to them. Why should the public be penalized for no fault of theirs? In Meghalaya no project is completed. This results in time and the cost overruns and the Govt. goes to the centre with a begging bowl for loans. It is high time that the name of Meghalaya (abode of clouds) be renamed as "Loanalaya" (abode of loans). Will the Govt. be sincere in their efforts to come out with concrete plans for the most urgent projects rather than the projects that are less important? It appears that the Govt. is not at all concerned about the corruption which is ailing its departments. If proper steps are not taken up immediately the good name of the state will be tarnished and it will be difficult to bring it on track.

Yours etc.,
S.L. Singhanian
President, Police Bazar
Welfare Society

On extending age limit

Editor,
Apropos the news item which appeared in your esteemed daily on March 20, 2021 under the heading, "MLA wants age limit for job-seekers upped". Many would agree that Mr. Nongrum's request to the state government to raise the upper age limit to apply for government jobs is a legitimate one based on reasons elaborated by him on the floor of the Assembly. But Nongrum's is a lone voice in the wilderness having had no support from fellow legislators as if these legislators have no unemployed youth in their constituencies.

The Chief Minister who expressed his personal reservations about the proposal of increasing the age limit is requested to instruct the relevant department to study and learn from Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Jharkhand, Punjab and other states which found no hurdles in increasing the age limit for their tribals. Surely, the Chief Minister does not think that these states have done wrong. Contrary to the CM's view that fresh graduates will be discouraged if the age limit is increased, I think these young people will be encouraged knowing that they will be having several more opportunities to crack the job exams.

Regarding those persons

who would join government service at an older age (in case the age limit is enhanced) and would therefore have less avenues for promotion and also less pension benefits, the government need not be paternalistic about them for these people would be adults and would know how to plan for their old age. The Chief Minister has a point though in respect of uniformed services, the members of which need to be in peak physical condition. Hence, this category of service may be exempted from any age hike.

As done by other states mentioned above, our government could start by enhancing the age limit for Group 'B' (non-gazetted), Group 'C' and Group 'D' categories of posts. After all, our government has already increased the eligible age limit for teachers to 37 years.

Also the KSU chief expressing concern about the plight of job seekers during the swearing in ceremony of new office bearers of this organization is hopefully not just tokenism. Will the KSU finally take up the genuine issues of young people whose interests it professes to be fighting for?

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2

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"Your hardest times often lead to the greatest moments of your life. Keep going. Tough situations build strong people in the end."

— Roy T. Bennett

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 217 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2021

Targeting Kejriwal

THE fight between the BJP-ruled central government and the AAP-ruled Delhi state is ongoing ever since the regional party swept the polls in 2015 and has ruled the state ever for two straight terms. A new legislation was brought forward by the Modi government to curtail the powers of the state via a bill on Tuesday. With the Lok Sabha passing the bill, it moved to Rajya Sabha for passage. Considering the new strength of the BJP and its allies in the upper house too, its passage was a foregone conclusion. The new legislation is seen as a move to facilitate the Centre to call the shots in Delhi state through the office of the Lt Governor, who is a nominee of the Centre. Previous and present Lt Governors in Delhi have rubbed the Kejriwal government the wrong way. With the new law in the making, Kejriwal's cup of woes will be full. The new law makes it obligatory on the part of the Delhi government to consult the Lt Governor and take decisions, whereas a Supreme Court ruling some time ago had said the Lt Governor, under the existing law, should act as per the advice of the state council of ministers.

The BJP, it is well-known, had tried its best to grab power in Delhi and this was a matter of prestige for it. Kejriwal, with his direct touch with the masses, outwitted the BJP and won hugely in both the past assembly polls. Now, his AAP has 62 members in a house of 70, and the Congress got no seat. The BJP's attempt in 2015 to wrest power failed and there started the fight between the AAP and the BJP. The Delhi government already has less powers compared to the powers enjoyed by other state governments. The police in Delhi is under the control of the central government, which remains a major handicap for the state apparatus. Now, the state will be further tied to the whims of the Centre. Centre-state relations must be maintained at all costs in a federal structure. Both the Centre and the states have a responsibility to keep up the good relations. It is often alleged that the Modi government tries to impose its writ on states. Such allegations had been raised during the UPA period too. Now, the scenario is noticeably worse as is also evident from the unleashing of central investigative agencies on opposition-ruled states even in situations that might not warrant such over-reach. This is not a good trend either.

Vaccination drive

COVID-19 second threat

By Dr. S. Saraswathi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Chief Ministers that rise in COVID cases in some States could "lead to a national outbreak of the disease and quick and decisive steps are needed to prevent an emerging second wave of the infection". He pointed to the possibility of spread of the disease to villages from Tier II and III cities where it seemed to have spread, and said that controlling the disease in villages would pose a big challenge to health

indications of possible second wave despite timely precautionary measures point to inadequacies and lapses somewhere in the line. Neither the governments, nor the administration can be blamed as the pandemic is all powerful and unpredictable. Medical and health personnel are doing their best at great personal risks and need to be rewarded, not blamed.

tority agency on 3 January and healthcare professionals were chosen as the top priority category for taking the vaccine followed by those in essential services. The second phase began on 1 March for the elderly.

Vaccination coverage is a technical issue and purposive, and does not adhere strictly to definite criteria like age, sex, etc. Questions

advised not to relax the essential precautions of wearing the mask, maintaining social distance, and washing hands frequently and avoiding touching one's face. This perhaps acts as a disincentive in operation vaccination.

For, it raises a crucial question in everybody's mind regarding the purpose of vaccination programme. The authorities have to come up with easily understandable explanation for the massive vaccination programme that



infrastructure.

Daily cases of COVID-19 crossed 40,000 for the first time after 111 days on 18 March. Active cases were over 19,000 that day raising rumours of return to lockdown regime and strict enforcement of official regulations.

The 7-day average rose by more than 5% for 6 days at a stretch, which was said to be the highest rise since the outbreak of the pandemic. In the week 15-21 March, the surge was still worse at 75% of the number recorded in the month of February which confirms the re-emergence of the virus and portends bad days ahead. The second wave is not confirmed yet directly, but often mentioned by concerned experts as imminent.

Five States - Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala, Karnataka, and Gujarat are identified as the chief contributors to the threat of second wave of COVID-19 - not unbelievable as Europe is facing a third wave. According to data in the Union Health Ministry, 70 districts in 16 States registered over 150% increase in cases in the first fortnight of March and infection is increasing at 100-150% in 55 districts in 17 States. Maharashtra's second COVID wave is reported to be mild, but spreading fast. It reported over 27,000 cases on 20 March. In 15 other States also, daily number which lessened in the last 3-4 months shows sudden increase. With approaching summer, chances of further spread of the virus is feared as people start using ACs and room coolers.

The main reason for resurgence of the virus is suspected to be blatantly indifferent attitude of people in following norms. Most people do not wear masks despite announcement of spot fines and those who wear, also do not wear it properly. Social distancing is hardly followed and with the opening of temples, theatres, malls and restaurants in many places, cannot be enforced without stern action. Social gatherings in marriages and other celebrations go on as special occasions in one's life. Less said about political meetings, the better.

Relaxations in lockdown are misunderstood as weakening of the virus. A Union Health Ministry team has reported that 10 to 20 pilgrims and equal number of locals test positive for Coronavirus in the ongoing Kumbh Mela in Uttarakhand. Still, the anxiety of the authorities seems to centre on conducting the festival allowing free movement of pilgrims and not on enforcing pandemic norms to prevent the second wave that is waiting at our doorsteps.

Vaccination is universally believed to be a powerful intervention in the present pandemic emergency to arrest its uncontrolled escalation, but not a remedy against the outbreak of the disease in future.

Both Vaccines used in India - Covaxin and Covishield - are said to be equally effective and no complaints have been received against their use. Emergency use of the two COVID-19 vaccines was authorized by the regula-

of equality are irrelevant. From healthcare angle, vaccination aims at preventing mortality and severe attack of the virus causing serious health problems. From public health perspective, it is intended to put a break in the chain of the disease to control its spread which will help restoration and continuation of normal life and activities. Both objectives are equally important and the ultimate target is to cover the entire "eligible" population - eligible in the medical sense.

Therefore, vaccination programme needs a logical time schedule to be determined by administrative authority in consultation with medical and public health experts and not a matter for political debates and exchanges.

Further, it is repeated again and again that vaccination is not a final solution for anybody to permanently escape COVID-19. Not only does it take time to build immunity after the first and second doses of the vaccine, it is now said that the vaccine effect may stay for about 10 months which means that it is introduced as an immediate requirement to counter current emergency.

Under-utilisation of vaccination facilities is often mentioned as a problem in India, a reputed vaccine producer in the world, creating problems of vaccine wastage that world can ill-afford. India is able to supply vaccines to many countries, but at home has faced challenges in vaccination drive including positive opposition. Those who are vaccinated are repeatedly

will answer all doubts of people. Advice and stress on vaccination, assertion of the safety of the vaccines, expansion of vaccination centres, and concessions and incentives to get vaccinated are necessary, but must be accompanied with educational programmes to convince people of the purpose and effect of vaccination. The need for that education increases with increase in the propaganda made to take vaccination.

Several television channels are conducting interviews with medical experts to impart vaccination education that is very much needed in the country. But, how much of it is actually accessed by people is a big question. More official information directly addressing people is needed, but of course with no exaggerated claims. It is a difficult responsibility in view of the tendency growing in the country to politicise every issue.

Those likely to face problems in taking allopathic medicines and injections want more detailed information regarding possible reaction to the vaccine and facilities for treatment for them. It is partly the fear of side-effects and reaction of the body to the medicine that is hindering progress of the vaccination schedule. People who think that they can avoid catching and carrying COVID virus by scrupulously following COVID norms rather than subject themselves to the unknown reaction to the vaccine have to be addressed. In our country, such people are not a negligible section. —INFA (The writer is former Director, ICSSR, New Delhi)

Deprivation in the face of privatisation

By T S Haokip

When Angam of Molnom village in the North-Eastern state of Manipur joined a public sector bank in 2008, he was not only ecstatic but relieved to finally land a job in the public sector. His entire village was happy for him. In fact, he was the first to crack a Bank PO exam from his village. That the Indian Government has announced in its budget 2021 about the privatisation of Public Sector Banks and the subsequent announcement of the probable banks to be privatised, which included his Bank, has left him insecure and depressed. He cannot believe that all his efforts then, when preparing for the Bank PO exam, were for him to become a private employee now.

concerns of the employees. But it is not clear to what extent and how long the Government can interfere in matters as internal as pay and promotion of a private corporation. Notably, many intellectuals and experts are against the privatisation of public sector banks. Former RBI Governor said in an interview with PTI on March 15, 2021, "I think it would be a colossal mistake to sell the banks to industrial houses." Some however feel privatisation of PSBs is necessary considering the alarming number of NPAs in PSBs. What is important though is that the largest contributor to the NPAs of PSBs is in fact wilful-defaulter corporates. As witnessed earlier in other instances like the Bank



Employees of public sector banks, upon joining their organisation have to sign an agreement with the organisation. It goes without saying that, the employees believe that their service condition is an agreement between them and the organisation which has majority shares owned by the Government. They felt that job security is given in a public sector and hence decided to settle with the job without venturing for more employment opportunities.

With privatisation, the ownership of the Bank will be relinquished from the Government and the service rules governing the employees would then be open for modifications as per the owners' liking and requirements. Though job security

Unions' opposition to the merger of banks, the Government could be tempted to move ahead with their plans to privatise PSBs, but the ensuing scenario will certainly see a disruption of the financial systems as the Bank employees Union are hell-bent on resisting the move. Also interesting is the concern felt by many that the present protest against privatisation goes beyond the PSBs; they believe that privatisation of PSBs will pave way for further change in ownership of many other public sector undertakings. The Railway Minister's assurance that Railways will not be privatised could not deter many employees of PSUs from feeling the heat. Evidently, it is not just the

After the two days strike, AIBEA General Secretary C H Venkatchalam told PTI on the March 16, 2021, "We got support from all trade unions, some farmer organisations and several political parties have supported us."

Letters to the Editor

Rome was not built in a day

Editor,

As the popular saying goes, "Rome was not built in a day," so also the mismanagement of the affairs of MeSEB, now MeECL, had been there for some decades after it was bifurcated from the erstwhile Assam State Electricity Board (ASEB). With the inheritance of Umiam Dam which served the cheapest raw material i.e. water, for generation of electricity at the Stage-I and Stage-II Power Houses including Umtru Power House, which later on added Stage-III and Stage-IV Power Houses, the citizens of Meghalaya, particularly the employees of MeECL, proudly claimed that in the whole North East region of India, Meghalaya is the only State to have surplus power. As a matter of fact, electricity was supplied to Assam State Electricity Board (ASEB) till the Bymihat Industries, small and large, were established. The defective MOU between the industries MeECL for uninterrupted power supply at a rate that is lower rate than the actual cost of power

generation is at the heart of the matter. It necessitated that MeECL supply power to industries by even purchasing power from outside at higher rates.

As the rules and laws are made by man and nothing in this world is unchangeable, this arrangement could have been reviewed and renewed to maintain a balance between both parties- supplier and consumer. The sordid state of affairs of the MeECL in power supply sector and revenue earning sector which are two sides of the same coin, started declining when the Government of Meghalaya could not spare the services of experienced bureaucrats as full-time Chairman/CMD to run the MeECL which is the largest autonomous public sector undertaking in the State be it as a Board or Corporation in terms of business volume, number of employees and most importantly the value of essential commodity - electricity - the importance of which is second to none for the daily needs of human activities and which is integral to the running of all industries.

As to what prompted a political partner in the Government to demand ouster of the Power Minister is best

known to them. I prefer not to comment on this matter. However, the demand for transfer of the present incumbent CMD, Arunkumar Kembhavi, IAS, from the MeECL needs to be properly examined. The employees of the MeECL and even the pensioners are expecting lots of improvement in this most important Public Sector Undertaking (PSU). His relentless efforts would need some time more to prove that the MeECL is on the right track of recovery from its long sickness.

Coming to the installation of smart meters it is not the right time to do so now when the MeECL is struggling to pay salaries and pensions on time. The services of the 3000+ employees could be utilized to bring change in the work culture, promoting integrity and sense of belonging to the Organization that feeds them not only while in service but after retirement and beyond to the family members of the deceased pensioner. Human asset is more important than all the other equipments. The management could think of judicious transfers and postings of the employees in the two main sectors of power supply and revenue earnings after proper analysis.

The affairs of the MeECL are mainly run by a team of Directors/Members appointed by the Management and the Government. No single superman is responsible for the mess in the MeECL. In fact, every individual employee has a responsibility to discharge his/her duties with a sense of belonging to the Organization.

Yours etc
Thrumen Sangma,
Shillong

Bhagat Singh: A forgotten hero!

Editor,

Bhagat Singh, Shivaram Rajguru, and Sukhdev Thapar, the bravest heroes and true patriots, were hanged on March 23, several decades back. They are icons of India's freedom movement, and had inspired a generation of youths to fight for India's independence from British rule. The date of their death is recognized as Martyr's Day that is March 23 every year!

However, of late we the people, and the governments, have totally forgotten these revolutionary leaders.

This year, there was practically no mention of these patriots in the public forums. It is a sad commentary on the people in general and the governments, at the Centre and the States, that we have forgotten the true patriots. At this rate, Subhas Chandra Bose, Swami Vivekananda would also soon be erased from our memories

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia
Guwahati - 24

On being called 'dkhar'

Editor,

I am a person whose ancestors were born in Shillong. I have always respected people for their character and not their race or religion but I don't understand the hypocrisy of the society here. When a tribal person is insulted in any part of India it becomes national news. This also shows that people are against such behavior but what about non-tribals in Meghalaya who are insulted by repeatedly being called 'Dkhar,' 'Kharbang,' 'Khardai,' etc? I have a name and dignity and should be addressed by my name. The murder of a non-tribal

is just news which no one is concerned about. Never has anyone been punished for such crimes. Why this double standard even when there is plenty of evidence and witnesses? What crime has one committed to put up with such humiliation and injustice? A non-tribal person being beaten without any rhyme or reason is the usual scene. This gives more courage to the aggressor. Can they beat the same person outside Shillong? So much for courage! I believe we live in a planet called earth, all are humans and everyone feels equal pain. So I request all right-thinking people to take a step back and let the national media also know that there are criminal elements who need to be punished whether in Delhi or in Shillong or any other North Eastern capital. There should be equal voice for justice for the innocent.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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is one factor the Government ensures its employees, it is not a priority for corporates who are purely driven by profit-making decisions.

Still, one of the most important factors which many public sector bank employees feel is the pride and satisfaction of having contributed to the welfare of society by implementing the Government's flagship programmes and being part of the financial inclusion movement, which many development experts believe is a key tool for poverty alleviation. As per the Ministry of Finance reports, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana has more than 40 crore bank accounts opened by public sector banks, out of the total 41.7 crore accounts opened. Thus, handing over banks' ownership to the corporates will not only rob employees of their job security but the all-important commitment and reason for them to put in extra efforts and their belief of doing something good for the society will fade away in the new environment.

The Honourable Finance Minister in her speech, on March 16, 2021, amidst the two days Bank strike called by the United Forum of Bank Unions in protest against the Government's privatisation move, has assured to look into the salaries, scales, and

bank employees the Government has to worry about if it plans to go ahead with their PSBs privatisation plans

After the two days strike, AIBEA General Secretary C H Venkatchalam told PTI on the March 16, 2021, "We got support from all trade unions, some farmer organisations and several political parties have supported us." He also warned that more strikes will happen if the Government is not ready to listen and goes ahead with its decision to privatise PSBs. Whatever be the circumstances, the privatisation of Banks was undertaken with the main intent of using banks as a vehicle to usher in development with the element of deliberating social welfare concerns well-imbibed in the decisions and policies of the Bank. Thus judging public sector banks from the angle of profitability alone could portray the wrong picture. For a country that still has issues like unemployment, poverty and job insecurity, privatisation of public sector banks could bring more misgivings. And employees of the PSBs like Angam are well within their rights and actually right to oppose privatisation of public sector banks.

(The writer is an author and freelance writer)

"Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."

— Barry Goldwater

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.218 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 2021

Covid on rebound

THE Covid-19 scare is on a rebound precisely a year after it raised its head. After the weeks-long vaccination drive worldwide, hopes were that the Chinese-induced pandemic will be turned on its head and people would sooner than later heave a sigh of relief. But, fact is that we are faced with a second wave with projections being that it could peak by mid-April. The deaths are fewer, though, but fear is that the fatalities could be higher if the scenario turns worse.

In a rare moment, this was time for India to show to the world that it mattered. Thanks to the achievements of the private sector Indian pharmaceutical firms over the recent years, several nations across the world looked up to India for support and generous supplies of the vaccine. Prime Minister Modi turned it into a PR exercise and offered an olive branch even to hostile Pakistan. This was time for the country to make some earnings too via foreign exchange. It turned out that this led to a shortage in the domestic market.

But, the vaccination programme is more or less carried on as per schedule except for some disruptions. The export of the vials has been withheld for now to stabilize the domestic market situation. Appreciably, the vaccination programme has been carried forward in a systematic manner, set against the usual bureaucratic drag and apathy. Health, for sure, is important.

The night curfews are back in some major cities a year after the Centre ordered a Janata Curfew in March last, followed by the series of lockdowns, first at the national level and then localized. Holi celebrations will be low-key this time and there have been major restrictions on the Haridwar Kumbh Mela; its duration having been curtailed to a month. It will take time for normalcy to return. This year too could be a washout in several respects. The economy, though, is regaining momentum both here and across the world.

Several states have reported fresh surge in cases, the daily national tally now is of the order of nearly 50,000. Faced with a worsening scene, Madhya Pradesh has extended Sundays' lockdown to four districts and Mumbai is limping too. Restrictions are in place on public events in all cities where daily Covid count is more than 20. Deaths, though, are fewer now, the total in India so far being around 1,60,000. New strains of Covid-19 are a worry too. Despite the reigning scare, election campaigns are seeing huge mass presence in state after state and how this too will impact on the overall figure remains to be seen.

Chief minister Nitish Kumar has to own the final responsibility

NDA ministers have blackened the face of democracy in Bihar assembly

By Arun Srivastava

Even a hardened JD(U) supporter will be ashamed at what chief minister Nitish Kumar did on Tuesday in the Bihar assembly. It is beyond imagination how he could defend the entry of the Bihar police inside the assembly precinct and thrash the opposition legislators.

Opposition members squatting or sitting on dharna at the doorstep of the office of the speaker is not an unusual development. In such a situation, the leader of the House takes the initiative and resolves the issue. But on March 23, Nitish instead of talking to the opposition members summoned the Bihar police personnel to teach lessons of parliamentary procedure.

The opposition was agitating against introduction of the Bihar Special Armed Police Bill, 2021, by Nitish Kumar to give the state police more teeth. The opposition claimed that the existing law was sufficient to tackle law and order in the state. But the Nitish government claimed it was necessary in view of the increasingly complex security needs of the state. The opposition members were against insertion of a line "if the police presumes that something is wrong" it can arrest and prosecute the person. The line utterly lacked clarity.

The Opposition, however, termed it a "black" legislation, taking strong exception to provisions that empower the Special Armed Police, previously known as the Bihar Military Police. The new law will empower police to apprehend people without a specific warrant issued by competent courts and will give power to conduct search without a warrant.

Some women legislators protesting the introduction of the bill rushed to the podium of the speaker and prevented him from occupying his chair. By this time some male members had also rushed to the well of the house. After the speaker came back to his chamber some opposition also reached to the doorstep and started squatting.

While the members were squatting Patna DM Chandrashekar Singh and SSP Upendra Kumar Sharma, followed by a huge contingent of around 100 policemen descended to the house. The police moved inside the house and started forcibly removing the members. They also removed the legislators who were sitting outside the

speaker's chamber. Kiran Devi, RJD legislator said, "The administration has beaten several Opposition legislators inside the House. Male and female legislators have been beaten by the police."

After reaching the assembly the police swung into action and started brutally assaulting the opposition members. MLAs were even pulled by the hair and kicked, in disturbing images circulating on social media. Tejashwi Yadav shared photos of one of his MLAs being carried on a stretcher from the assembly.

Anita Devi was one of over a dozen opposition women MLAs who were allegedly assaulted and dragged outside the premises of the Assembly by policewomen. CPI (ML) MLA Mahboob Alam said hundreds of Bihar Police personnel have been deployed inside the Assembly with bamboo sticks in their hands and that opposition members were afraid to enter the assembly in view of what happened on Tuesday. "It was unprecedented as the anti-riot police force was al-

rupts the watch and ward personnel lift the members and move them out of the house. They never thrashes or assault the members. But yesterday the Bihar police in complete violation of the rules and procedures of the parliamentary practise and showing utter contempt to the Constitution entered into the house while the members were protesting against the police bill. The members were thrashed and beaten by the police.

The video tape which is already viral makes it explicit that the personnel of Bihar police and even some personal security guards of the members of the ruling party and ministers assaulted the opposition members. One police officer hit a RJD MLA in his chest and abdomen with his boot.

Speaker of the Bihar assembly is the right authority to summon the state police. But he has to get the consent of the leader of the house. Obviously speaker had got the permission of Nitish which is why the police

"Nitish loses cool the moment Tejashwi confronts him inside the house and puts some question. In the last assembly session too he was quite aggressive towards Tejashwi and even dragged the name of his father Lalu Prasad to insult him."

lowed to enter the Assembly, beat up opposition MLAs and physically lift them out. Two MLAs fainted and dozens received injuries during police action. Such an incident has never occurred inside the assembly before," he added.

Some RJD MLAs and its ally CPI(M) were seen lying on the ground outside the assembly after being carried out by security personnel, apparently unconscious. They alleged later that they were "severely beaten up". Another RJD MLA appeared before the camera with his hand in a cast and declared that "members of the ruling coalition broke my arm in presence of the Chief Minister (Nitish Kumar) who chose to look away".

Under the parliamentary rules and practices, the watch and ward staff of the assembly is the competent authority to take action and maintain peace. In case the bedlam

entered into the house. It is really deplorable how could a person who boasts of being secular and socialist stoop so low. Nevertheless of late he is often seen losing his peace and patience. He is drifting away from rationalism.

What is a bad omen for him is Tejashwi appears to have turned the red rag for him. Nitish loses cool the moment Tejashwi confronts him inside the house and puts some question. In the last assembly session too he was quite aggressive towards Tejashwi and even dragged the name of his father Lalu Prasad to insult him.

In protest against anti-riot police personnel and the Rapid Action Force entering the Bihar Assembly, misbehaving, beating and forcefully ejecting opposition MLAs who were opposing the passage of the Police Bill, opposition members on Wednesday refused to go

inside the assembly and take part in proceedings.

Meanwhile RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav described Nitish Kumar "Nirlajj Kumar", and said the entire opposition will boycott the state assembly for the next five years if action was not taken against police officials. "I and all opposition members have decided to boycott the assembly if action is not taken against police officials for beating MLAs and if Nitish Kumar does not tender a public apology for it. I will never forget the abuse, misbehaviour and beating of women MLAs inside the assembly," he added. Tejashwi also tweeted: "Nitish Kumar, if you are indeed a man, get us shot instead of getting us beaten up".

Showing solidarity Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said "It is clear from the shameful events in Bihar Assembly that the chief minister is firmly under the influence of BJP and RSS. "Those stripping democracy have no right to call themselves a government "Gandhi said in a tweet in Hindi.

Nevertheless the Bill was passed by the assembly late Tuesday evening, amid a "walkout" by opposition protesting the manner in which they were ousted from the hall by the men in uniform. Meanwhile, in a press conference on Wednesday, a group of senior RJD leaders including Jagdanand Singh and Abdul Bari Siddiqui attacked the CM and questioned the role of Speaker Vijay Kumar Sinha, a senior BJP leader, in the police action against opposition members inside the assembly.

Incidentally Nitish was not bothered of what happened in the assembly. Instead said; "There seem to be many new legislators that need to be trained in parliamentary behaviour. Had the opposition allowed the House to run, the government would have addressed its concerns. But, that opportunity was frittered away". Though Nitish was angry with Tejashwi, the left members, particularly of the CPI(ML) were at his target.

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) general secretary Deepankar Bhat-tacharya called the developments in the assembly "complete murder of democracy and Constitution". "This is what has happened in Uttar Pradesh also. It is all a blueprint of the RSS to make an autocratic state. But Bihar will never accept it." (IPA Service)

CJI has a historic responsibility to stay issue of electoral bonds

Important facts to consider before giving orders

By Nitya Chakraborty

The Supreme Court in its hearing on electoral bonds petition on Wednesday expressed right concerns about the misuse of electoral bonds but the important point which the learned judges, especially the CJI SA Bobde should know is that this electoral bond issue is just a small part of the BJP government's systematic efforts since its coming to power in 2014 to steamroll the opposition parties through financial muscle power and thereby ensure its stability through funding by the big corporates. In the process a unique system of quid pro quo has been institutionalised in the Indian business world which was never in existence in this country's history since Indian independence.

be purchased by the corporates but the names will be known to only issuer meaning State Bank of India and not the Election Commission. This means the names will be known to the centre and as the present government is known, the few people who dared to donate some funds to some opposition parties, will be blacklisted. The big houses are generally dominated by businessmen with Hindu faith, they have general sympathy for the BJP and that has grown in the last two decades, but many of them also sense democratic values and they are interested in giving some donations to other non-BJP parties. Even they are scared.

Anyone of the business



The Supreme Court has reserved the order on the petition appealing for staying of the next issue of the bonds scheduled to start from April 1 in the course of the current assembly elections which start from March 27 and end on April 29. The learned judges must have observed through the media reports how the defections are going on in Bengal on the eve of the poll and there are talks of hundreds of crores being spent by the BJP for coming to power in Bengal after May 2. There are reports going around in Kolkata that some of the stars of Tollygunge have been offered Rs. 10 to Rs. 20 crores for defecting to BJP.

The functioning of democracy in the states in India is under threat due to this money power. The level playing field has been lost for the non-BJP parties and all these have been possible due to the huge resources mobilised by the BJP through corporate donations, active support of the big traders and the big funds supply by the overseas Indians close to BJP as also the VHP dominated overseas religious bodies.

There is nothing wrong in the BJP in collecting funds from its supporters. It is entitled to do so as any other political party. But the problem is when it tweaks the laws in its favour in a partisan way through its hold over the government and makes use of the central agencies in hounding the moneyed people who, in some way fund the opposition parties. The use of the central agencies like ED, CBI and the IT department has been so blatant that no corporate takes any risk to be involved with the Congress Party which is still the main opposition in the country.

As a result, the coffers of the Congress have reached an all time low and in many states which are going for assembly polls, the state units are desperately clamouring for more funds but they are not getting.

The electoral bonds can world in India will talk in confidence that they can not run business by ignoring any request from the ruling party. Those who are very close to the BJP, are prospering and this gives a signal to the others which path to follow. It is a precarious situation now. Many of the young scions, alumni of Harvard or Yale who have ideals and who care for real democracy to thrive in India, are becoming unhappy at the present trend, but they love their business, they look for expansion and they have to fall in line. Who can take a big risk of annoying ruling dispensation at this time of pandemic when every corporate is struggling to survive and sustain.

The Attorney General K. K. Venugopal has totally presented a confused picture in reply to the CJI query when he said in the hearing that the bonds have ensured white money, not black money through cash. The issue is really not that, the issue is transparency. Why the Government and through that the ruling party will know who has bought the bonds and in whose favour? Further, this bond can be repurchased which opens up the possibility of dubious transactions. It is a double benefit for the ruling party. Since these days, no one will take the risk of doing such transactions in favour of any opposition party. If it is done for the BJP, the concerned party will be safe. There will be no raid.

The CJI must assess what is the percentage of the electoral bonds benefiting the BJP till now and how disproportionate this is. The next tranche of bonds is scheduled from April 1 to April 10. The CJI Mr. Bobde will be doing a great service to Indian democracy and the Constitution if he stays the next issuance of electoral bonds in his reserved order which is expected before April 1. That will be our CJI's best contribution before his retirement during the present phase of assembly elections. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why target only the Power Dept?

Editor,

Much has been said about the Power Department, be it in the Budget Session of the Assembly, social media and the print media. This issue became the 'center of attraction' for all the people questioning why this department is suffering and why it is under-performing.

I, however am appalled by how many of us overlook the other sectors and departments in the State. We have the education department, health and family welfare department, amongst many others. Why are they not brought into the limelight as well? Yes, the Power Department has its own ailments that are crippling it. But is this the only department which is ailing in our State? I am very sure that is not the case. Why then is the Power Dept the only target?

In the recently concluded Budget Session, Education and Health were very scantily discussed. Are these departments and sectors not of equal importance? We all know of the roles that education and health play in our lives - not just physically but economically as well. Let us take the health department. People cannot survive without proper health care. If that is the case, then why is this sector not also taken into consideration when issues are raised? As far as we know, the health sector also has not been functioning well; in fact it is crippled. Just recently a report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) said that there is a dearth of doctors in government hospitals including shortage of health centres. It was also mentioned that the government had failed to implement the bonds with MBBS doctors under state quota. The Health Minister however made light of the CAG report and rejected its observations. There is also a shortage of PHCs and CHCs in the rural areas and even if they are present, there is a lack of basic health facilities that prompts citizens including pregnant women to travel several miles long to come to the city in search of a hospital. Surprisingly, the Health Minister has rejected the CAG's observations.

We also know that the Education Department is not performing well. There is a lack of qualified teachers. There is an ongoing teachers strike for various issues such as pending salaries. The quality of education itself is questionable. We also know that because of the MTET, there are now schools without teachers.

The Meghalaya Teacher Eligibility Test (MTET) has been made mandatory for all teachers. However, the recently declared results left hundreds of teachers without jobs since most had failed to clear the test. This has led to serious problems with schools now re-opening after a year-long break because of the pandemic.

So why is it then that the Congress legislators being the opposition as well as other leaders (regional) not rake up these issues too? These are also issues affecting the State and the citizens at large. These issues need to be voiced out as well. They need to be given as much importance as the Power Department which has been the talk of the town. This is something that makes me wonder and also question as to why don't we as the public put these questions out in the open to our legislators who have been mudslinging and targeting a single department. As an educated citizen of the State, I would very much appreciate having the press fraternity also raise such questions. Why overlook the other departments in the State and lambast one department when there are many other issues plaguing Meghalaya!

Yours etc.,
Natasha Pariat
Shillong - 3

The success was achieved by the policies imposed by governments and peoples' compliance. Personal liberty and privacy of personal information are essential aspects of North Atlantic culture. It has proved to be an obstacle to successful controlling of the pandemic.

India must learn lessons from this. The Centre must formulate policies and the States must implement them. The success of implementation is dependent on the administrative efficiency of the states and the political culture that prevails there. Take the examples of Kerala and Maharashtra. Initially, Kerala was successful in controlling the infection. However, when rules of personal behaviour were relaxed and neglected, it caused a surge in infection cases. Even though Maharashtra has good administrative abilities, an intense second wave is surging through the state. What went wrong here is that the state that has a professional work culture went at full speed in getting back to work.

Tackling second Covid wave

Editor,

In view of the fact that the second wave of COVID-19 is surging through India, it is of paramount importance to formulate a policy to combat the pandemic. As lockdowns will once again destroy livelihoods and damage the economy, India cannot afford to repeat what was done last year. It was, in many ways, counter-productive.

As the world has learned a lot since the outbreak of COVID-19, it is important to appraise the policies and practices that have worked out or failed across the world. Although the Asia-Pacific region has been successful in controlling infection, it did not impact economic growth. On the other hand, the Indian economy contracted hugely last year. Active intervention in the form of test, trace, quarantine and personal hygiene like wearing masks and hand washing brought success.

The Asia-Pacific achieved success in combating the pandemic while the North Atlantic region failed miserably in com-

bating it. The success was achieved by the policies imposed by governments and peoples' compliance. Personal liberty and privacy of personal information are essential aspects of North Atlantic culture. It has proved to be an obstacle to successful controlling of the pandemic.

India must learn lessons from this. The Centre must formulate policies and the States must implement them. The success of implementation is dependent on the administrative efficiency of the states and the political culture that prevails there. Take the examples of Kerala and Maharashtra. Initially, Kerala was successful in controlling the infection. However, when rules of personal behaviour were relaxed and neglected, it caused a surge in infection cases. Even though Maharashtra has good administrative abilities, an intense second wave is surging through the state. What went wrong here is that the state that has a professional work culture went at full speed in getting back to work.

Most importantly, it is not reasonable to entrust the police with the task of imposing mask wearing and social distancing rules in public places. Instead of

assigning this task to the police, political workers must be deputed to do it. They can employ strategies of persuasion and firmness in implementing it. Young people must be chosen for this and they must be provided with badges as part of identity. If all important parties take it seriously, the task could be carried out easily.

This is a crucial time and vaccination won't be of much help at this juncture. In view of the fact that only a few crores of people have been given one shot of vaccine so far, a considerable time is required to give the first shot to most people. Herd immunity cannot be achieved unless at least 60% of the population is vaccinated. As a long term goal, extensive vaccination is required. Only then can we expect to beat the virus. In order to achieve this, the vaccination rate must be speeded up. The state governments must take responsibility for implementing this.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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“The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.”
— Ayn Rand

The Shillong Times

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Victory for free speech

EVERY once in a while the Supreme Court delivers an enlightened judgment that restores the peoples' faith in the judiciary. Each time a judgment that upholds the cherished principles of the Constitution is delivered, democracy gets a boost. At a time when the democracy index of this country is on a downslide, this ruling has set a precedent that the judiciary is seized of this country's predicament and is determined to stem the rot. By quashing a criminal case registered against the editor of this newspaper in connection with a Facebook post of July last year decrying the systemic violence against non-tribals in Meghalaya, the apex Court has given a strong message that those who critique the government and police for their failure to uphold the rule of law cannot be considered to have committed a criminal offence. The apex court observed that the Facebook post was directed against the apathy shown by the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, the Director General of Police and the Dorbar Shnong of the area in not taking any action against the culprits who attacked the non-tribals youngsters inside a basket ball court.

The Facebook post, the apex court further observed is an attempt to highlight the discrimination against non tribals in the State of Meghalaya. The Court took cognisance of the fact that the Facebook post had made it abundantly clear that criminal elements have no community and immediate action has to be taken against persons who had indulged in the brutal attack on non-tribal youngsters playing basketball. Perhaps it is for the first time in the history of Meghalaya that the Supreme Court was given an idea of the real situation obtaining in the State. Hence the Court further observed that the Facebook post read in its entirety pleads for equality of non-tribals in the State of Meghalaya. The Court ruled out any attempt by “the appellant to promote class/community hatred,” which the FIR filed by the Dorbar Shnong, Lawsohtun had claimed. The apex Court termed that allegation a ‘figment of imagination.’

Another important observation of the apex court was that disapprobation of governmental inaction cannot be branded as an attempt to promote hatred between different communities. This is a stinging indictment on the ruling of the Meghalaya High Court which had refused to quash the FIR against the editor. The crux of the ruling is the parting remark of the Supreme Court that ‘free speech of the citizens of this country cannot be stifled by implicating them in criminal cases, unless such speech has the tendency to affect public order.’

This landmark ruling has upheld the right to freedom of expression upon which hinges media freedom in a democracy.

Community seed banks & community seed fairs

Reaffirming seed sovereignty

By Gratia E Dkhar and Bhogtoram Mawroh

At the height of the pandemic, in 2020, members of the Madantriang Agroecology Learning Circle (ALC) looked up to two of their elder members, Shildamon Lamare and Wing Lamare to help them document and preserve the local seed varieties in their community. “Most young farmers”, they said, “are losing the knowledge of the crop diversity in their community.” Hence the need for a collective effort to safeguard the traditional seeds was felt. Madantriang became one of the ten communities across Meghalaya and Nagaland to take part in the initiative to conserve and promote traditional seeds under the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) supported project “No One Shall be Left Behind Initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Energy Security, Meghalaya and Nagaland”. This initiative is the Community Seed Bank which according to Pitambar Shrestha, Ronnie Vernooy and Pashupati Chaudhary in their 2012 book “Community Seed Banks in Nepal” is an example of local level institutions created to address issues of seed conservation, particularly of farmer varieties which includes seed selection, production, improvement and marketing.

Indigenous people across the world have long preserved seeds and have in depth traditional knowledge about the locally adapted varieties. In many such communities women have played a prominent role in the saving and collecting of the seeds of traditional crops. Such seeds are stored by individual households and there are wide variations in the diversity and quantity of seeds and planting materials saved by the family. The choice of seeds to save is influenced by preference for consumption, market, suitability to climate and cultural factors. This is supported by seed sharing and seed exchanges, an important practise in these informal seed system that ensures the seed diversity in a community. The diversity documented by NESFAS during its participatory mapping revealed that there is an average of 200 food plants found in a single village. Most of these are from the traditional varieties which have been saved by the community for many generations. The Community Seed Banks are meant to be storehouse of such traditional varieties, especially of the ones that are under severe threat. In recent years, the lo-

cal seed systems in most of the local communities have come under threat from economic, environmental and socio-political factors that have resulted in narrowing down of the genetic diversity in the community. This has put to risk the food and seed sovereignty essential for maintaining resilient local agro-ecosystems. Furthermore, Unfavourable policy initiatives can exacerbate the problems, while favourable ones can strengthen it. The Draft Seeds Bill, 2019 falls in the former category.

Matters of seeds in India are governed by several legislative and policy frameworks such as Seed Act (1966), Seed Rules (1968), Seed (Control) Order (1983), New Policy on Seed Development (1988), Plants, Fruits and Seeds (Regulation of Import into India) Order (1989), Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Right Act (2001) and the Essential Commodities Act (now amended) (1955) including Seeds (1955), National Seed Policy (2002) and Seed Bill (2004). The last one was meant to replace the Seed Act (1966) while the 2019 draft attempted to overcome the drawbacks of the 2004 Bill. However, there have been resistance from many quarters who feel that the latest Bill is meant to benefit the MNCs (Multi National Corporations) rather than the local farmers. A look at some of the provisions seems to justify that fear.

In the new Bill the definition of a “farmer” has been changed from one “who cultivates crops either by cultivating the land himself (or herself) or through any other person but does not include any individual, company, trader or dealer who engages in the procurement and sale of seeds on a commercial basis” to now denote “any person who owns cultivable land or any other category of farmers who are doing agricultural work as may be notified by the Central/State Governments.” What the change in definition has done is brought the corporations under the definition of a “farmer” creating an asymmetry of power relations which will lead to the marginalisation of especially small and marginal farmers who constitute more than 2/3rd of the farmers in India and Meghalaya.

Some other indications that the Draft Bill is looking to bring the corporate sector especially MNCs into farm-

ing is in the section titled: Powers of Committee to specify minimum limits of germination, purity, seed health, etc. The term transgenic seeds, i.e., GM (Genetically Modified) seeds have been inserted which was not there in the past. Some may argue that this is because of the technological changes that have taken place in seeds development and therefore it was important to include new terms. But the fact that this is the domain of the MNCs and over half of the world's seed market is controlled by only four companies viz., Monsanto (US), DuPont (US), Syngenta (Switzerland) and Group Limagrain (France) makes one wonder if that is the only cause. In India the figure is more than 60%. Such monopolistic tendencies are not very reassuring for small and marginal farmers.

What is important to remember is that the debate over GM crops is still quite contested in the country. Of the GM crops awaiting permission for large scale field trials and seed production in India, brinjal is the first one to get the approval of the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee. The other one is Bt Cotton. Environmentalists argue that the long-lasting effect of GM crops is yet to be completely understood and they can bring great harm to humans and the environment in the long run. By including GM seeds under the Draft Bill an indication has been given as to who the State thinks is the winner in this debate. Most worryingly, the fact that the companies are all based in the First World has the potential to create a neo-colonial circuit of appropriation of the resources of the third country like India and dismantle its Seed Sovereignty in the process.

On its parts, in an effort to address the alarming situation of loss of Seed Sovereignty, NESFAS has used the Community Seed Fairs as an approach to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to enable the access to and use of diverse and farmer managed local seeds to promote local seed security. The Community Seed Fairs are managed and organised by farmers, supported by NESFAS. The PGS farmers of Nongtraw, Umsawwar and Agroecology Learning Circle (ALC) farmers of Pahamshiken hosted community seeds fairs on December 2020, January 2021

and February 2021 which was attended by communities from Sohra, Mawkyntaw and Umting clusters respectively. In these seed fairs, more than 50 types of seed varieties were displayed and communities who maintained the highest diversities were acknowledged. These seed fairs have made it possible to evaluate the level of diversity within the area and provide opportunity to exchange experiences on crops grown, level of seed production capacities, exchange and sharing of planting material and creation of market linkages. Many communities have managed to recover varieties of crops such as millet, heirloom tomatoes, rice bean etc through these informal seed exchanges. Bibiana Ranee, a custodian farmer from Nongtraw notes that “seed fairs have provided a space for us to interact with fellow farmers and discuss on strengthening our food system.” Such fairs showcase the capabilities of farmers to build social interaction and strengthen their seed system.

The Community Seed Fairs efforts have been well received by government officials who are increasingly recognising the role of farmers in securing diverse crop that would be critical to addressing the risk of food insecurity due to climate change and conflict. Mr. Gavin M. Mylliengap, the MLA Sohra Constituency applauded the communities and NESFAS for “enhancing the farming systems by going back to the traditional methods” and reducing the environmental impact of Green Revolution.

Community Seed Banks and Community Seed Fairs are measures that NESFAS is taking in order to counter the threats to the traditional seeds which are under severe threat from many quarters. Some of the proposed policies like the Draft Seed Bill 2019 have the potential to worsen the situation. What the initiatives hope to accomplish is to combat the aforementioned threats and help indigenous farmers in Meghalaya to protect and sustain their Seed Sovereignty. This is not just an important struggle for the farmers of Meghalaya but the country as a whole.

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People have big responsibility in meeting norms to fight corona virus Vaccine hesitancy among citizens must be fiercely combated

By Sushil Kutty

The new word that's getting usage despite not being in the dictionary is 'vaxtard' which is a name for followers of the vaccine cult, basically people who have set themselves up or have been set up for “mass suicide.” According to propounders of this theory, before the next two to three years are history, the human race is due for a culling. Earth's human population will be cut to size, from 7 billion to just about 4 billion.

There's a mistake in the theory, though. Vaxtards are outnumbered by those who haven't the time of the day for the vaccine. Unlike in the United States, where President Joe Biden says he was elected to beat the pandemic, the pace of vaccination hasn't picked up in India, as evidenced by the

away. Newly selected Uttarakhanda Chief Minister Thirath Singh Rawat thought so, and now he's quarantined with Covid-19. It might have got in through the ripped jeans that's so much in Rawat's mind these days. But let's keep our jaundiced eyes on Maharashtra which reported 35,952 new coronavirus cases on March 25, along with 111 deaths. Mumbai logged 5,504 new infections, a new single-day high. Infections in Mumbai are doubling every 75 days. The Mumbai's romance with the coronavirus is a successful wholesale enterprise. It's impossible to keep people away from workplaces, shops and malls; airports and railway stations. There's no fun in isolation. Burn that on the chest and don't ever forget it.



fact that you don't see insane numbers of Indians thronging vaccination centres. Not all Indians are keen on being hailed as “vaxtards”. That's an American concoction, Starbucks not Coffee Day!

A soldier who took VRS says he wouldn't Vax himself no matter what happens. He doesn't have confidence in the vaccines. And he has even less trust in the Central government, specifically in Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who a year ago thought a combined banging of pans from balconies would keep the coronavirus away. The sad fact is Covid-19 has already killed tens of thousands of Indians. And that comes with a daily rise in coronavirus positive cases.

In Maharashtra alone, almost 36,000 new Covid cases are reported daily. Mumbai reports above 5,000 per day. The second coming of the coronavirus is making a respectable comeback. Cases have boomeranged in several states, many of which were celebrating too early by half the near-total annihilation of the death-dealing novel coronavirus. Some dreams do not wake you up, they take the shape of nightmares.

The reasons for the surge in caseloads across India were not hard to pin down. The opening up of the economy, and people disregarding the mask rule and the social-distancing mandate. It was as if Kindergarten kids had been given the keys to the playground. Humankind's always placidly unworried about consequences, till the whack on the butt comes. A look at what's happening at the Prayagraj Kumbh is a lesson. But are PM Modi and PM in waiting Yogi Adityanath attending the tutorial?

Nope. Politicians, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of humdrum politicking, are ingloriously unaware of the consequences of overcrowding in packed enclosures, with Modi shouting, asking the assembled to chant after him ‘Vande’ thrice in succession, just so that he can return to his government-allotted pad in New Delhi to feed the peacock, knowing not and caring not what havoc the coronavirus could do in cheek-by-jowl situations.

That's politics, the kind which's being played in West Bengal. In Kerala, there's Rahul Gandhi maskless at the podium. Both Rahul Gandhi and PM Modi perhaps believe hi-fi security will keep the coronavirus

So, we return to the topic we began with: Vaccination. Ask a Modi Government bot and he'll swear vaccination is hurrying along at breakneck speed. But is that so? How many Indians have so far had the jab? Health ministry figures put the total at 4.72 crores, as of March 25, out of the total Indian population of 135 crores. A drop in the Pacific! At this pace vaccinations would still be on when Prime Minister Narendra Modi gets his comeuppance in 2024!

Maharashtra is reeling. And it's not just because of Vazegate and Vasuli-at-large. Millions have returned to work, in offices and factories, and there's lots of high-fives and handshaking. The Udhav Thackeray Government has got one eye on the coronavirus, the other on the political virus that's got its eye on political overthrow. Meantime, local administrations have been instructed to impose localized lockdowns.

To add to the chaos in the bathroom, there's a new variant of the virus in Maharashtra called the “double mutant.” The question being asked is, would Covishield and Covaxin be effective on this double jeopardy. The Astra Zeneca is facing flak in a dozen countries. And Covishield is the Oxford-AstraZeneca. So far, most Indian media have maintained distance from reporting on what vaccinations are doing to Indians, but there's some disquieting news that ought to be reported.

Isn't it telling that the Modi Government is not making a blitzkrieg of asking, persuading the general population to go take the Covid-19 jab? The decision's been left to individual judgement. You want to take it, go ahead. You don't want, stick around in the basement. The hard truth is that lots of people don't have trust in the vaccine. They believe like the no-Vaxers in the USA that the Covid-19 package is a Vaxtard conspiracy to cull the population to half.

So far, India's overall death tally is 1,60,692. But the number, as long as it stands in the background, doesn't alarm. The majority of Indians are not Vaxtards. They don't want to be Vaxtards. They want the government to open up the economy before the festival of Holi, lift all restrictions so that large crowds can throng shopping areas in gay abandon. It's as if Covid-19 can be persuaded with large numbers to stay out of trouble! (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Welcome Supreme Court Verdict

Editor,
The FIR filed against Patricia Mukhim and the order of the Meghalaya High Court, was firmly quashed by the Supreme Court (Shillong Times, Mar 26, 2021). This is a victory for social justice, freedom of speech, and the upholding of law and order. A perusal of the 14-page order of the apex court makes reassuring reading. Several passages are worth quoting. Firstly, “Free speech of the citizens of this country cannot be stifled by implicating them in criminal cases”. India's ranking in the World Press Freedom Ranking has fallen from a high of 80 in 2002 to a dismal 142 in 2020. Our country trails behind even totalitarian regimes in the Gulf and dictatorships in Africa. Fortunately, the Supreme Court has upheld freedom of speech in this landmark ruling. A second quote, “criminal elements have no community”. This observation makes it clear that once a criminal act is committed, no amount of justification for the protection of that com-

munity can be entertained. In other words, the act has to be judged primarily on its criminality, and less on its causes or extenuating circumstances. In this case, a criminal act of assault had already been committed. Putting the tail in the front of the horse, the FIR strangely claimed that the Facebook post calling for police action was an act of communal incitement.

A third quote, “The Facebook post read in its entirety pleads for equality of non-tribals in the State of Meghalaya...there was no intention to promote class/community hatred...the Facebook post can be understood to highlight the discrimination against non-tribals in the State of Meghalaya.” This is a humanitarian statement, and calls on all of us to show empathy and equality in how we view and treat all residents in our state.

Right-thinking people of the state applaud Patricia Mukhim for her courage and appreciate the Supreme Court for this timely judgement that has wider ramifications. It comes at a time when the government is curbing free speech and peaceful protests under outdated sedition laws, instituted by the British in 1870, under which free-

dom fighters were jailed. In Britain itself, sedition laws were abolished in 2009, but this relic of colonialism is used to oppress free citizens even today.
Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor
Via email

Land-owner out, tenant in

Editor
The recent call by the UDP General Secretary for the immediate removal of the incumbent Minister for Power exploded as a political bombshell though it was not entirely unexpected. Now even the coalition partner of the MDA itself is questioning the integrity of this Government. People are in fact fast losing faith over the integrity of this Govt as far as its ability to maintain honour between what it says and what it actually does. What faith does the common man retain regarding the ability of this Govt to deliver on what it promises. In political parlance it can be claimed that the credibility of the MDA Govt is at stake!
Under such circumstances the press report (Front page ST March 25, 2021) titled “Keen to resume Marriot

Hotel Project : Dhar” has raised quite a few questioning eyebrows. Those in the know claim that the assurance of the Urban Affairs Minister to call for a meeting to deliberate on the future of the Marriot is all bunkum. Its fate has already been sealed. It has already been sold lock stock and barrel to the new contractor. The examination of whether the demands of the new contractor are reasonable or not, already done; views of the law department, already submitted; modifications to the old agreement as demanded by the new party, already agreed to. Actually the only loose end left is to sell the deal to the public.

If that is the fate of the Marriot, the fate of the Shillong Municipality is even worse. The new modifications stipulate that the new Marriot owners will not house the proposed office of the Shillong Municipality within the Marriot complex. Govt apparently has already agreed to this. So where does the Shillong Municipal Office go? Shillong Municipal Board will now have to start house hunting to accommodate itself. How can this be possible when the Marriot is built on Municipal land? Is it fair to render homeless the landowner simply to

accommodate a new tenant, however tantalising may be the terms of occupancy? Even if the new Marriot owner is willing to build the new Municipal office, is adequate Govt land available for the purpose?

The Shillong Municipal Office is to serve the areas under Shillong Municipality which are located within old Shillong. Locating the new Municipal Office at New Shillong will be totally unfair to all the Dorbars under Shillong Municipality and therefore not acceptable. Shillong Municipality is part of the history of Shillong and is part of our urban governance system, however decrepit that might be. To treat it as the private property of some fly by night and opportunistic politician, who is insensitive to the sentiments of this city is loathsome and disgusting. What underhand deal has taken place to make the Urban Affairs Department agree to such a monstrous proposal? The sharp stink of a sell-out once again fills the nostrils of the citizens of Shillong. Question is will other political representatives tolerate such a sell-out?

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Infighting in MDA

Editor,
Coalition politics is a tricky affair especially when political parties with a national standing versus regionalism come into play. Take for example the bickering and emerging ‘rift’ amongst the coalition members where the statement of the UDP General Secretary isn't taken note of by the NPP vis-à-vis the power scenario of the state. It seems, that within the ruling government political parties don't see eye to eye and none can deny that the UDP is up to its antics of portraying it's holier than thou image. The UDP in the government has lacked any display of courage, political vision and failed to assert itself on several issues. Even the illegal coal transportation has been a major embarrassment for all of the coalition members. People aren't fools and many are watching the political games these regional parties are playing. What achievement would they collectively show in 2023? That year will be the litmus test for the MDA.
Yours etc...
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

Documentary explores three women with Theatre in their veins

By Shoma A. Chatterji

Women in Indian theatre have occupied considerable space since its inception. However, their contribution to the jatra format and opera performances, including folk theatre like tamasha and khemta have never received much attention. Sohini Dasgupta's new documentary Drama Queens pays tribute to three doyens of theatre in India.

Sohini Dasgupta's Drama Queens traces the journeys of three internationally renowned women theatre personalities of India who have made their presence felt in the past few decades.

Dasgupta shot into prominence for her earlier documentary I Could Not Be Your Son, Mom, the first ever film on a transgender more than a decade



B. Jayashree is the creative director of Spandana Theatre, an amateur theatre company based in Bengaluru established in 1976. Her grandfather was noted theatre director Gubbi Veeranna, who founded the Gubbi Veeranna Nataka Company. She graduated from the National School of Drama, Delhi, in 1973 where she trained under noted theatre director and teacher Ebrahim Alkazi. Jayashree has also acted in films, worked as a much-in-demand dubbing artiste and is a gifted playback singer.

However, Dasgupta focuses more on her struggle as a woman wanting to venture into theatre and make it her way of life. Jayashree performs and directs mainly in Kannada, her native language.

Moloyashree Hashmi is the widow of renowned theatre personality Safdar Hashmi who was killed by Hindu Right wing goons in January, 1989, while his group was performing a street play.

Moloyashree took up the mantle he left behind and has been carrying on the flag of the group he founded, Janam (Jana Natya Mancha) from the day

after his demise till this day. Her mode of expression is street theatre that explores topical themes presented from a Leftist perspective attacking capitalist, feudal and exploitative forces in the country.

Sabitri Heisnam is from Manipur. She received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1991 and is also a Padmashri awardee in recognition of her contribution to Manipuri theatre.

She is a legend in her lifetime. Those who have watched her perform on stage will never forget the mesmerising effect she can create for her audience. After the demise of her husband, mentor and teacher Kanhaiyalal not very long ago, she has helmed his theatre group Kalakshetra. Her plays are often based on great literary works of Tagore (Dak Ghar) and Mahasveta Devi (Draupadi) investing them with her own unique touch. Her theatre combines dance, song and histrionics which has

vested her with the prefix 'Ima' meaning 'mother' in Meitei language.

Moloyashree performs in Hindi and attracts a massive audience with her group's street theatre in Delhi and across the northern parts of the country, mainly in the Hindi-speaking belts.

Asked if that the film on the three women, legends though they are, just touch the surface of women's contribution to Indian theatre, Dasgupta says, "I selected my Drama Queens on the basis of their genre of theatre primarily. Their forms are very different from one another - B. Jayashree does proscenium theatre based on music and folk theatre, Moloyashree Hashmi is into Street Theatre and Sabitri Heisnam is into experimental theatre. That gave my film a nice variety."

"I intended to explore their lives and their work but mostly their identity as an artiste - the

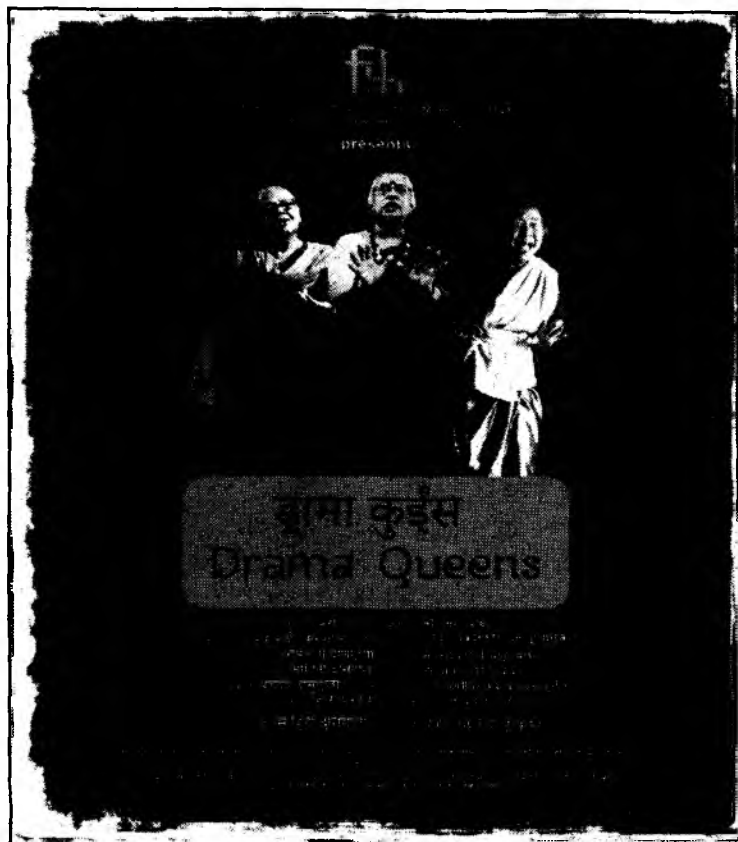
fight they fought as unconventional women in a rather challenging time in society. It makes me happy when I see the film reaching out to a larger audience," Dasgupta says.

Moreover, she says, in a 52-minute documentary she could not have included more subjects and do justice to their stories. "I am looking forward to a series in three parts focusing on some more pioneering women thespians. The Films Division has produced this one. Perhaps they will be interested in this idea too," she hopes.

The film, dotted with the three women talking about their long journey is interspersed with a few abstracts from their performances.

What strikes one is the optimism they radiate even as they speak of their personal tragedies.

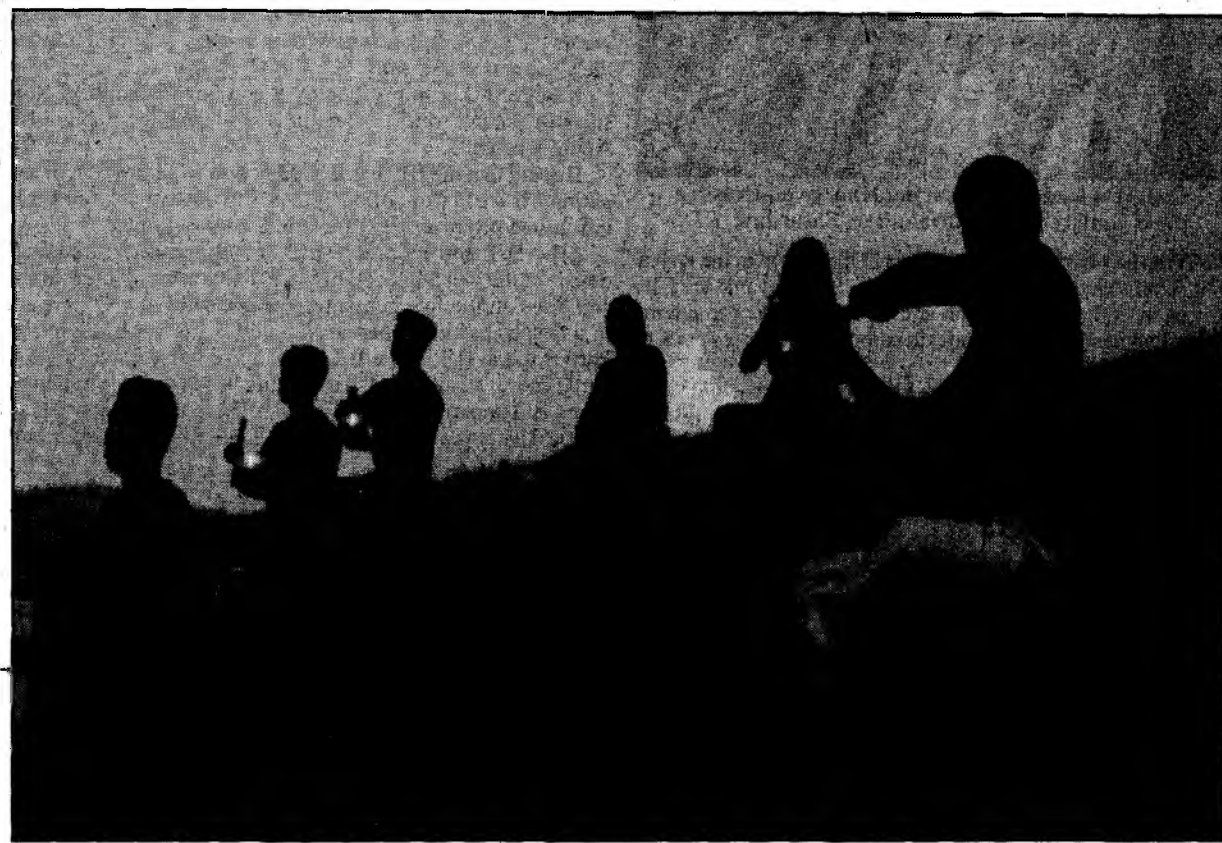
Drama Queens was screened at the 26th Kolkata International Film Festival and at the IFFI in Goa. (TWF)



ago about a boy who decides to go through reconstruction surgery to become a woman.

The three personalities who

have devoted their lives to theatre in the new documentary are B. Jayashree, Moloyashree Hashmi and Sabitri Heisnam.



China - Nepal relations seen through the lens of a book

By Atul K. Thakur

Amish Raj Mulmi's unbelievable jubilation of 'Nepal's turn to China and his painstaking efforts in proving the flawed argument how all roads lead north--sweeps over the possibility of a genuine and unbiased account coming from him on China's misadventures in the South Asian region, their historical progression and Nepal's continuing vulnerability. With 66-pages in notes and purposefully featured details without connecting the dots, the book puzzles even a keen watcher of Nepal. The chosen plot is serious and the authors preoccupied romantic notion in dealing it makes the whole narrative reductionist-- and deeply biased in favour of China, an expansionist force in the northern neighbourhood of Nepal.

The chosen plot is serious and the author's preoccupied romantic notion in dealing it makes the whole narrative reductionist -- and deeply biased in favour of China, an expansionist force in the northern neighbourhood of Nepal.

With hindsight, the author was not expected to juxtapose the ground realities with his uncaring assessment and projections -- overlooking the fragile polity in country and regional geo-strategic sensitivities.

The misinterpretation knows no bound when one reads it at the fag end of the book (page 209-210):

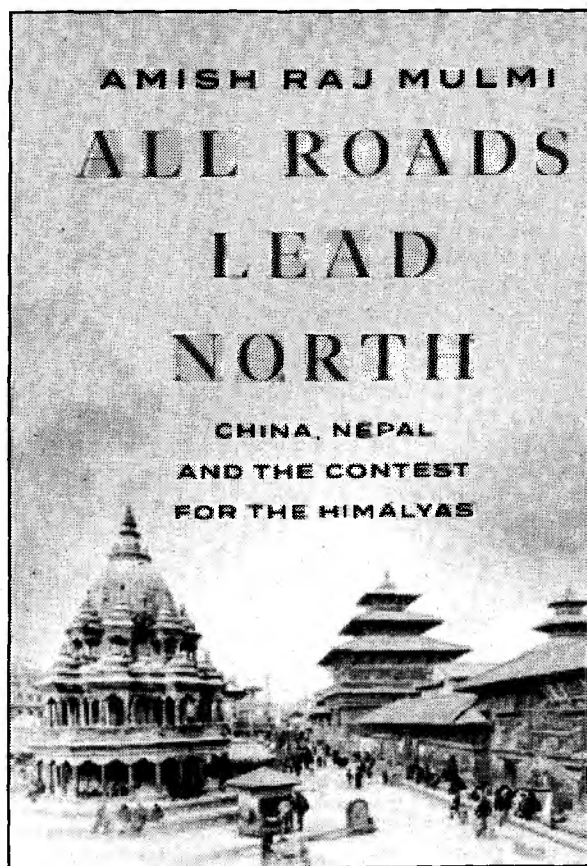
"China in many things at once in Nepal today. It is a superpower, a beneficent aid-giver, a friend in need, an essential provider, a demanding neighbour, an older brother, a competitor, a model of development and a vision of a developed future. China is changing regional and global dynamics in unprecedented way than Nepal. As China declares itself on the world stage, Nepal wants to tag along for the ride. Relations have never been better than in the contemporary era, but they need to be sustained, nurtured and developed as they evolve. It is in Nepal's interest to do so, and imperative to do it in a way that acknowledged its own aspirations."

Mulmi's prose would have earned praise provided he had written his maiden book as an official spokesperson of People's Republic of China, as an independent observer, he had all the reasons to cope any compulsion that made him voicing for China despite its excesses at home and in the world.

Just to shun India and downplaying the complementarity that India-Nepal relations

stand for, he travelled extra miles and hurriedly write off India as 'non-performing asset' (page 213):

"Far away, in Delhi, one



could imagine a chuckle in the corridors of South Block. Nepal's politics, and its politicians, are a quagmire. Its leaders play each other and its neighbours constantly in the struggle for power. India had long waded into the puddle, played the game and lost. Now,

it was China's turn."

Such words are disservice to Nepal, China -- as well as India. While presenting Nepal as a welcoming turf for 'tug war', its sovereign status is undermined. India's ties with Nepal hold not much significance, this book suggests -- and China is at loss as it is represented in poor light as the 'next interventionist power' in Nepal.

The author acknowledges the significance of 'optics' in international relations, however, he appears unassuming as he selectively drops it as a 'virtue' for judging the political course of action at homeland. Mulmi has not enlightened his readers' with loads of preferential sourced materials -- besides his travels to the places, meeting people and presenting them as the only authentic beholders of truth. More often than not, it seems, Mulmi counts not much on the text, context and people that have not come his ways.

The author missed an opportunity to write the first major book about India's share of contributions and mistakes in Nepal as the closest ally integrated through the tenets in social, cultural, economic and diplomatic realms -- Nepal's inability to dissect the fallouts of mixing the domestic and international policies -- and China's expansionism lever-

aging the hiccups in bilateral relations between India and Nepal. As a sovereign country and functional democracy, Nepal should claim for a greater stake in South Asia.

It would be undeserving on anyone's part, if such a chance is denied for just polarising the discourse -- thus leaving behind the aspirations' of mass Nepali.

Even from the nationalist point of view too, it would be much more worthwhile to give due weightage to own action -- rather accusing neighbours of interventionism and still expecting them to stay involved in rivalry at the geostrategic hotspot, Nepal. No longer an imagined one, it is very much real now. A clear demarcating line between the official and social historiography is essential for featuring the most pressing issues, concerning masses.

The book fails to observe this and sadly offers confrontation rather the peaceful co-existence, its well-deserved due (page 218-219):

"Kathmandu's determination to stand up to what it calls Indian 'bullying' has been partially driven by the weight of a newly resurgent China behind it. And China will only become stronger hereon, and Delhi's ability and influence within the Kathmandu establishment will continue to weaken if it does not swiftly recognise and address the foundational shortcomings in the bilateral relationship."

Negating the actual obser-

vations of King Tribhuvan and King Mahendra on the significance of accepting the neighbourhood in its shape and spirit can't be pragmatic at this point of time when Nepal's 'tryst with the democracy' is still fogged with self-inflicted challenges like endemic corruption and lack of responsibility bearing in public life. Be it the political or economic repercussions of China's excesses in Pakistan and Sri Lanka and letting both the countries compromising their sovereign status under guise of the 'developmental projects' they found no particular elaboration from Mulmi. This is again very disappointing since he could have done some damage control here by commenting on China's territorial aggression, including near the borders with Nepal.

Mulmi's book should get a long shelf-life, in the official circle, it should be used widely for reference. His words are comforting for

Nepal's northern neighbour, the book should get translated in Mandarin for adding up to China's existing archives of propaganda and misnomers. More than the diplomatic cables, this will give moments of fleeting happiness to the muscle-flexing policy makers in China. The political classes in Nepal will remain indifferent, this way, they will continue to avail their innocence. India will continue to be a friend, both officially and people front. Lest we forget it! (IANS)

Stories take time to come on paper

By Vishnu Makhiani

An idea, an experience or even a fleeting moment can become a story. But the story does not get written immediately after you think of it.

Sometimes the story ideas live dormant in the mind for years and then one day, become stories, says the multifaceted Dr C.S. Lakshmi.

Lakshmi, an independent researcher and archivist in Women's Studies for more than 40 years and who, writing under the pseudonym Ambai, has been a significant voice in Tamil literature for the past four decades with her stories about love, relationships, quests and journeys.

"One can mull over a story idea every day after it has occurred and yet not write it. The mind keeps going to it and working on it and then one day when one sits down it is ready to become a story.

It is only a question of recognising that moment when it can become a story," Ambai told IANS in an interview.

"A Red-necked Green Bird", her seventh collection of short stories, translated from Tamil by G.J.V. Prasad, a former Professor of English at JNU, has just been published by Simon & Schuster.

Myths and legends jostle with the contemporary in these stories where social issues of our times resonate with the inevitability of the past.

The lyricism of Carnatic ragas permeate the pages of this quiet and powerful book in which love is rendered in all its immeasurable avatars - parental, carnal, platonic, romantic, divine.

There is the woman who re-invents the notion of love in a

unique way that amalgamates technology and spirituality through the internet; a man full of love who can sing Bulleh Shah and the woman who has lost her all in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots; the woman in the title story who stands by her deaf daughter but understands why her husband must leave the home they have built with love all these years; the man who finds out what it is to be a woman after a dip in the



pond. These are stories shorn of sentimentality but have a deep understanding of what it means to live, to love and to die.

How did she come to adopt the short story format?

"That is the only format that worked for me. When I was young I tried writing poetry but they were really bad poems! I have kept them for myself. Even now occasionally I may write something like a poem but I know it is not a poem. I wrote an adventure novel for children when I was 16 and another 1/2adult novel when I was about 19. Both of them won prizes. The adventure novel is

business and your self confidence will improve magically. The path of money going out is stronger than that of money coming in. There are chances of infamy in matters of love. Be careful and cautious, those whom you trust will betray you. People might take advantage of your emotional nature. But you will have common sense to arrive at a correct decision. You will undertake business related trips which will prove beneficial in the long run.

I enjoy writing short stories and I find the short story format quite challenging," Ambai explained.

To that extent, her writing blends seamlessly with her work in the sphere of Women's Studies over the past 40 years. How has the scenario evolved, what are the deficiencies that remain and how can they be resolved?

"I have done work on Tamil women writers and their writing and have also done work on women musicians, dancers and painters.

The work done on writers, musicians and dancers has come out as books. Women's Studies came out of the women's movement and it took time for it to evolve as a discipline and get due recognition.

"It is an interdisciplinary area of studies and a lot of work has been done and a lot remains to be done like in any other discipline.

There will always be lacunas in any area of studies which keep getting pointed out and then new studies come up to fill the lacunas. Considering the vast area Women's Studies covers,

I think a lot of good work has been done taking into consideration many different aspects that cover women's lives in their varied identities and activities and women's history," Ambai elaborated.

How does she balance these two activities?

"Whatever activities one takes up they are what one's life is all about.

And don't remain separate. They have a way of blending into one another. One can't make out where one ends and the other begins, the borders are very blurred. It is like not knowing where the river ends and the sea begins. One does not really have to make an effort. I do research because I am interested in the human condition with gender as a factor and I write for the same reason," Ambai maintained.

Her third avatar is as Director of SPARROW. What does this entail?

"This is a very difficult question to be answered briefly. Like someone once asked me to speak about Tamil literature in five minutes!

To put it briefly, in SPARROW, which is an acronym for Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women, we collect oral history and visual material on the life and history of women. We do this in many different formats like books, journals, films, visual material like photographs.

"It is an archives registered as a trust and we feel that archiving is also being actively engaged in bringing about change.

We have also made documentaries and published books. We take up many activities like workshops, writers' meets, photo exhibitions and so on basically because we believe that positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity," Ambai said.

What next? Is she working on a new collection of short stories?

"I am eternally working on a new collection of stories. That is something I will never cease to do I think," Ambai concluded. (IANS)

Dante's 700th death anniversary in Italy

Events were held across Italy to commemorate the 700th birth anniversary of poet Dante Alighieri, whose "The Divine Comedy" is deemed the most important poem of the Middle Ages and the greatest literary work in the Italian language.

More than 100 events were

held on Thursday after March 25 was decreed as a National Day ("Dantedi") last year, reports Xinhua news agency.

His coherence must be a model for us," President Sergio Mattarella said in an interview with the country's leading daily Il Corriere della Sera.

"Although I'm not fully convinced of the opportunity to actualise historical figures and to compare the medieval country to what Italy is today, I think we must emphasize his (Dante's) ability to transcend his own times and provide teachings that are forever valid," he explained.

Mattarella said that Dante has been "a point of reference and a source of inspiration for generations of Italians, regardless of their specific situation



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Mattarella said that Dante has been "a point of reference and a source of inspiration for generations of Italians, regardless of their specific situation

across the different centuries and ages".

Dante was a poet, a renowned scholar and a philosopher.

He was born in Florence in 1265. He is primarily known as the author of "The Divine Comedy", an epic poem divided into three books of equal length and considered by critics

and historians to be the pre-eminent work in Italian.

The largest celebrations on Thursday were held in Florence, Verona and Ravenna, the three Italian cities that hosted and protected Dante during his turbulent life.

Florence was his birthplace; in Verona, he stayed after fleeing Florence and that is where his descendants still live; and he spent his last years in Ravenna, where his tomb is also located.

In the city of Parma (Italy's Capital of Culture in 2020-2021), a complete series of illustrations of "The Divine Comedy" was on display, and an exhibition in Forlì brought together depictions of Dante's image by ancient and modern artists.

All events on Thursday were restricted and many were held online due to the coronavirus measures currently in force in the country.

The celebrations will continue throughout the year with numerous conferences, lectures, readings and shows. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 28, 2021

Moon parallel Sun on your solar return chart and it will give wonderful results for the whole year. You will be having a lot of energy and passion to get the things right. And will have a killer instinct to hit the bull's eye. New opportunities will knock your door and you will grab them with both hands. Your ability to focus on matters of importance will bring praise from colleagues. You will also be given some big responsibility in your job. This will bring you name and fame. People will take note of you. Your standing in professional and social circle will increase. Your monetary condition will be excellent. And you may receive some property in gift from relatives. You will also get involved in a long lasting romantic relation. Ultimately you may decide to get married.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The doors of progress are going to open for you. Your income will rise. You will have achievements at your workplace. Everything that was stuck up till now will gather momentum. There are chances of buying movable and immovable property. Your boss and seniors will be happy with your work. You will receive good news regarding career and progress of your children. You will give a stiff challenge to competitors and commercial opponents and put difficult objectives in front of them. You will work diligently and with full seriousness fulfill your tasks. You will get desired assistance from friends and you will be ready to help your friends in all possible ways. You will enjoy excellent relationship with your spouse/partner.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You will keep your life balanced. You will plan expansion of business on a large scale. It is a very favorable phase for business or business related activities. Your bosses will be happy with your performance. If you keep on working with devotion, success will come to your way for sure. You need to keep extreme focus on your work and business. Your financial position will be stable. You will work hard to earn money. Students will focus on their study whole heartedly. The people, who are doing hard work to get a job, will achieve their goal ultimately. Give proper attention to your health. And friends will also help you financially. Auspicious events will keep taking place. Keep your spirits up.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You will be making best use of your talents and capabilities. You will shine in your work. You will also increase your profits. You will take tough decisions in business and trade, which will keep your influence and domination intact. You will be in a strong and stable position financially. You will find inspiration for new work. Do not trust others in money matters. You will also extend a hand of friendship to a relative or friend. You will have good gains from family side. Your family members and friends will look forward towards you for help. You will enjoy good bonding with your mate/spouse. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. Your noble deeds will bring you good name and fame.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You will receive some good news from a relative. It will lift your spirit. Something will come to the fore that you wanted to keep a secret. Money might be stalled, but you will make all efforts to obtain your aim. Change in your attitude and behavior will take you towards betterment. You will be active for achieving your aim. Guests may arrive. You will develop contacts with new people. You will also take some permanent work in hand. You will also get money from unexpected sources. You will be interested in religious works, although busy; you will be immersed in social work. The blessings of elders in the family will help you to move ahead. You will be elated.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

There will be marked improvement in your health. You might take part in a function. There can be some minor altercations between partners but matter will get resolved quickly. You will contact your near and dear ones. There will be happiness in married life. You will move towards your objective with concentration. You will also get success in government related works. Your hard work and dedication will yield positive results. You will also do socially useful work whose results will be long-lasting. You will get positive and fruitful results if you use your intelligence and thinking power. There will be financial gains. You will also make investments in property and shares.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 24)

There will be increase in positive domestic environment. You will feel more energetic. You will do each work with full sincerity, hard work and responsibility and will get the desired results. Those doing jobs will be busy in pleasing their bosses. But you will focus your attention on future goals. There will be mutual understanding between husband and wife. There will be profit in your

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
You will be sharing your feelings with your closed ones. Your chance meeting with an influential person will pave the way of success for you. You will do all your work with sincerity. You will be given a new responsibility at work. They will get completed. You will also listen to people's problems very sympathetically and try to find solutions to them. You will meet an old friend or relative and feel happy. You will get respite from worries. Your work will get completed soon. Due to your team efforts long pending disputes and problems will be settled. Your personality will grow and you will get credit for things. You will establish a good balance with your partner and business people. You will try new practices in business.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

There is going to take some significant turn with regard to your career. You could be promoted all of a sudden. There are chances of being successful in competitive exams. You will invest in your children and will get the blessings of your parents. You will also listen to people's problems and try to find a solution. Lovers will be united after a long gap. You will decide to do something new and would not rest till the work is done. All your tasks will get completed. Those doing jobs will get the desired work. You will also meet an old friend or acquaintance which will make you nostalgic by evocation of past.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

Your work will get completed with ease. You will also get support of some senior official. You will be very ambitious in your job. You will be highly extolled and will have special interest in spiritual matters. Plans for doing something special will be made. You will be more than busy in family programs and functions. You will also take out time for romance, hobbies and entertainment. You will also get money from somewhere. Your hopes and expectations will soar. And your attitude towards life will be positive. Your efforts will be fruitful. You will also get the blessings of your parents and elders. In matters related to division of property time will be in your favor.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

The number of your contacts will expand. It will prove beneficial for you. You will achieve your aims and objectives on time. You will be in a strong and secured financial condition. There will be an inclination to do something new at every moment. There will be an inflow of money. The graph of your respect and prestige will go up and you will be successful in competitions and examinations. You will be energetic at work. Despite your busy schedule your family will be your priority. You will not compromise with self-respect at any cost. You will be busy in prayers, meditation and religious works. Don't be careless at any cost.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Your dominance at your workplace will continue. If you decide to do something, you will be able to do it at any cost. There will be an increase in your fame and respect. You will work hard in your field and win everyone's heart. The blessings, advice and inspiration will help you to make progress in your career. And financially also you will be strong. You will complete all works on time by the grace of god. You will be busy but will retain the amicability in personal relationship. Most of your time will be spent in amusement and entertainment. In government matters you are moving towards success. The worry that was there for a long time will be put to rest.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

The path of money going out is stronger than that of money coming in. You will get full credit to your some worthy deed. You may also care for your social obligations which is must. You will use your experience to expand your business and you will get success. You may touch a peak of success, as this phase is quite favorable. Your family members and colleagues will extend their full support to you. You will enjoy vehicular and property comfort, and affection from your mother as well. You may get promotion in service. You will work on your strategy reaching greater heights professionally while also discharging your domestic duties with responsibility. You may have to attend some function and perform some religious ceremonies. It will keep you busy.

Career options in Nutrition

By Ranjan K Baruah

We eat food for getting energy and we also get engaged in different activities for which we need good food for good health. We have been studying about the importance of balanced diet since our school days. In simple we can say that nutrition is must for our progress. Well, nutrition is the biochemical and physiological process by which an organism uses food to support its life. It includes ingestion, absorption, assimilation, biosynthesis, catabolism and excretion. In simple it is the process of taking in food and transferring it into energy and additional essential nutrients vital for our life. It plays a pivotal role in leading a healthy life.

In a country like India there is a paradox which tells us that there are people who can easily afford nutritious foods where as there are millions who still needs it. There are scopes of experts to work in the field of ensuring nutrition to children of this country in many parts like rural areas or people belonging to financially marginalized communities. We are talking about it because nutrition can be a career options for many in India and also in abroad as there are changes in lifestyles.

There are courses like nutrition and dietetics in many colleges and universities which can be pursued after completing senior secondary or graduation. There are graduations, post graduation, diploma courses available in the country and in abroad. Aspirants shall get a broad understanding of clinical nutrition, food science, sports nutrition, public health nutrition and its control on human health and well-being. A Nutrition professional offers supervision to people, families, and organizations on how to change food, lifestyle, etc., for healthy living.

Career opportunities in the field of nutrition includes - Certified Nutrition Specialist, Clinical Dietician, Dietetic Technicians, Holistic Nutritionist, Licensed Nutritionists,

Nutrition Specialties, Registered Dieticians, Registered Nurses, Rehabilitation Counsellors, Sports Nutritionist, among others.

Students may also choose home science or community science as a subject of their studies if they want to be in the field of nutrition.

Nutritionist may work in different

Prime Minister on the occasion of the International Women's Day on 8 March, 2018 from Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan, the POSHAN (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition) Abhiyaan directs the attention of the country towards the problem of malnutrition and address it in a mission-mode. 16th

March to 31st March is POSHAN fortnight and many activities are carried out to ensure proper nutrition. Programme like POSHAN Abhiyan reminds us the importance of nutrition and the scopes in the field of nutrition.

Apart from working in the community there are options in the metros too due to increase of lifestyle diseases. Aspirants with employability skills and qualification may work in both urban and rural areas when it comes to nutrition. As mentioned earlier there are also scopes to start new ventures or begin with startups related to nutrition.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjan@gmail.com)



sector which includes government as well as private sector. They may also become self employed and start their own ventures. Some of the area where they may work includes Hospitals (Government and Private), Multinational Corporations, Research and Advocacy, Schools, Private Clinics, Nursing Homes, Community Health Programmes, Wellness Centers, Fitness Clubs, Health Product Companies, Diabetic Clinics, International Organisations like UNICEF, etc.

The Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition or POSHAN Abhiyaan or National Nutrition Mission, is Government of India's flagship programme to improve nutritional outcomes for children, pregnant women and lactating mothers. Launched by the

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"Knowledge is the ultimate weapon. It always has been."

— Jim Butcher

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 221 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2021

Signals from Dhaka

FRIENDSHIP is a two-way traffic. It's important that both sides remain cautious and positive about carrying this forward. The two-day visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh marking the 50th anniversary of the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 was marred by anti-India, anti-Modi protests that killed several people in multiple locations. This cast a shadow over the visit and will further vitiate the anti-India mood in sections of the population there. India's support to the Mukti Bahini independence movement in the liberation of East Pakistan from the domination of the other Pakistan is well-known. Ever since, for large parts, the newly formed Bangladesh remained friendly towards India and continued to look at Pakistan with suspicion. The largely Bengali-speaking population of Bangladesh has more affinity to Indians than to the Punjabi-dominated Pakistanis. As Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Independence leader Mujibur Rahman, maintained cordial relations with India through successive terms. The same cannot be said about Khaleda Zia, Hasina's principal political rival, who has been put to a corner by the effective governance styles of the Awami League leader.

Sending illegal migrants back to Bangladesh provided they are duly identified to have come from that country, is not a bad idea. However, when the Modi government brought in laws, it acted in a crude manner and gave the impression that the pro-Hindu BJP was trying to drive Muslims out of India. No government can allow illegal migration. That India slept over it and kept the border unguarded for decades is a testament to the poor governance systems here. These migrants, having ended up here and settled down peacefully for generations, are now listed for deportation. Herein lies the rub! There is no treaty between Bangladesh and India for 'return migration.' The utterances by Home Minister Amit Shah terming Bangladeshi immigrants as termites have soured relations between the two countries even as both governments are putting up a facade of mutual respect. But the Bangladeshi public know better the state of affairs in India. The manner in which things have shaped up in the past two years has given the impression that India is becoming anti-Muslim. This had its echo in the Middle East, where millions from India are gainfully employed. It has had its echo in Malaysia and several other Muslim nations. Now, the violent protests against PM Modi in Bangladesh added a new dimension to this and raised a question mark over future India-Bangladesh ties. India is a beautiful mosaic of races, religions, castes and communities. Hence those who govern the country must be mindful of their words and deeds and make sure every segment of the society is properly taken care of without any discrimination.

Fate of the rivers in Jañtia hills

By H H Mohrmen

World Water day was being celebrated every year and this year too, the day was celebrated albeit with less fun and fanfare because of COVID-19. Nevertheless the importance of conserving water which is the basis of life should not play second fiddle to the pandemic. Water is the essence of life and according to science life on earth begins in water, but the question is how are we treating the water now? In fact the future of any society largely depends on how the community treats the water bodies in the neighbourhood.

While in Shillong there is a strong motivated movement to clean Umkrah which is part of Wah Umkrah, a different story is in the making in Jowai town. In spite of the fact that Wah Umkrah is in a stage where pollution has reached its tip, there is a concerted effort to clean a portion of the river by spirited group of people who are determined to see that the river is clean.

Taking a leaf from what is happening with the River Umkrah in Shillong, the people of Jowai have initiated efforts to save river Myntdu from going the Wah Umkrah way. People who do not want to see the river Myntdu suffer the same fate as Wah Umkrah have organised themselves and started working to protect and conserve the river.

Initially it was the Jañtia Fishing Association which is an association of Anglers with the sole purpose of protect fishes in the river, who took unto themselves the mantle to protect the river. To begin with the Association's main objective was to protect the rivers particularly the portion around Jowai town from indiscriminate killing of fishes by unscrupulous elements. The mass killing of fishes by bad element in the society by using chemicals and explosives has greatly affected the aquatic life and quality of the water in the river.

Then one thing led to the other and the JFA which started with the sole purpose of protecting the fishes, realised the need to do more to achieve their goal. In 2007 the Association revised its constitution and renamed as Jañtia Fishing and Environment Protection Association, Jowai. To protect the river and the aquatic life in it, the Organisation initiated the construction of three check

dams at the different part of the river Myntdu.

The major project undertaken by the Association is converting Syntu Ksiar into a fish sanctuary. This is also another illustration showcasing what a successful convergence of the different government departments can achieve. The fish sanctuary is now a major tourist attraction in the town. The success of this project is because of the support of different government agencies which include Superintendent of Fisheries West Jañtia Hills District from the project Aqua Mission, District Basin Development Unit from the



Integrated Basin Development and Livelihood Project, the office of the Chief Executive Member of Jañtia Hills Autonomous District Council and of course contribution of the Association. It may also be mentioned that the Jañtia Hills Autonomous District Council has generously issued a No Objection Certificate to the JF&EPA allowing the organisation to start working on the project. The organisation also signed an MOU with the Council to this effect.

Now the Association has shifted its focus to another problem which is a threat to the river which is caused by pollution. Pollution is a major concern not only for the people of Jowai but by all those who depend on this river. The river Myntdu which flows round Jowai town is not only considered a deity by a sizeable population who live in it, but till today it is the

only source of water supply for the town. As the population of the town grows, the river is also affected from pollution in the form of solid and liquid waste produced by the citizens of the town. To help control the flow of these wastes to the source of drinking water for the people of the town which is located downstream of the river, the Association in collaboration with different government departments and agencies constructed three check dams along the river.

The major threat to the river is waste produced by the residents and shopkeepers of the town and lawmsiang

area in particular which is a commercial area of Jowai. To control the flow of waste particularly plastics into the river, the JF&EPA recently constructed a plastic check dam which is intended to catch the waste from the market area to the river. The project is being funded by the MP (LS) local area development scheme. The river Myntdu is as it is today because of the JF&EPA and the proactive support of the Dorbar Chnong of Jowai and the village around it.

In addition to the efforts made by the Association, very recently another movement of young people which include residents of the town and villages near the river was started. The sole objective of this project under the leadership of Khroo Lam-salanki Pariat is also to protect Myntdu. But the people's movement can only do so much. No matter how strong

and vibrant the movement is, the effort will become futile if the government does not lend its helping hand to support the endeavour.

The people of Jowai are lucky in that the court too has come to their support in their effort to protect and preserve Myntdu. The National Green Tribunal, hearing the case filed by a resident of the town passed an order which prohibited construction of buildings on the banks of the river. But sadly the order was not respected. Construction even as close as one meter on the banks of the river was not stopped by the authorities concerned. There are not only illegal constructions but even encroachment on government land near the old iron bridge at Treongrang on the Jowai Amarem Dawki road. People have encroached on both sides of the old bridge and the officials of the PWD chose to turn their blind eye to the encroachment.

The attempt made by the people of the town to prevent river Myntdu from becoming like Wah Umkrah will not succeed if the departments and government agencies turn a blind eye to the problem that badly affects the river. One of the important steps to ensure that Myntdu does not go the Wah Umkrah way is by ensuring that no construction of houses are allowed on the banks of the river. Rivers being the subject of the ADC as per the Sixth Schedule and the District Administration vide NGT order can ensure that no construction is made near the river Myntdu.

But the good news is expected to come from Sunaprydi where the efforts to rejuvenate the river Lukha is undertaken by the District Administration with the support of the local representative of the communities in the area. The preparation for the process which uses algae to clean the water in the river in that area is currently being prepared. Rupees 2.5 crore was sanctioned by the government from the District Mineral Fund to clean the toxins in river water. In both these cases it is the public which is in the forefront of the fight to conserve the water in the rivers.

Hopefully the Deputy Commissioners of the respective districts will make an effort to see that the water in the rivers which is the lifeline of the people is clean.

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wooing Matua voters in marginal constituencies was also his focus

Narendra Modi had an eye on Bengal poll during Bangladesh visit

By Arun Srivastava

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his two day visit to Bangladesh certainly strengthened India's bilateral ties with its neighbour but his programme in Bangladesh also took care of his party's compulsions in the assembly polls in Bengal which began on March 27. His visit to the birthplace of the founder of the Matua community who have influence in poll bound districts of Bengal, had his party interests in mind.

Though Modi and his close aide Amit Shah have focussed on consolidating the Hindu vote to oust the ruling Trinamool Congress in Bengal, only a day ahead of Modi's visit to Bangladesh Amit Shah has struck a jarring note by saying that illegal infiltrators were "eating" up the rights and rations of the people of Bengal. This allegation coming from Shah could not be dismissed in a casual manner. It has certainly a wider implication and was aimed to embarrass the neighbour.

He is citing infiltration from Bangladesh to polarise Hindu votes in Bengal. Addressing a rally in Purulia, he said, "The infiltrators are taking away your income; you don't get to earn because of the infiltrators. You aren't getting (your full quota of) rice because the infiltrators are eating it". What does it imply? But raising the issue coinciding with the visit unravels new dynamics of the political relation that India intends to maintain with Bangladesh. Shah had earlier called infiltrators "termites".

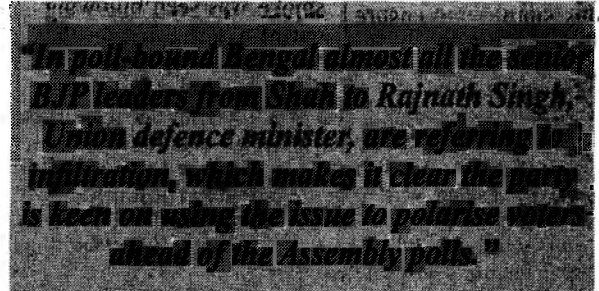
This tour of Modi to Bangladesh was important for

Matua leaders was evident in his pre-departure statement that he would interact with the Matua Hindus at Orakandi in Gopalganj during the visit. In this backdrop his remark is quite important; "I am particularly looking forward to my interaction with representatives of the Matua community at Orakandi, from where Sri Sri Harichandra Thakur-ji disseminated his pious message".

The importance of Modi's Orakandi visit lies in the fact that the BJP is yet to deliver on its promise of implementing the CAA. A section of the Matua namasudras is impatient because the rules have not been framed... This has left people in the dark on the modalities of getting citizenship through this Act.

Thursday however, witnessed a large protest at the heart of Dhaka led by Jubo Adhikar Parishad, against the visit of Modi. At least four people were killed in the Bangladesh city of Chitragang after police fired at protesters. Thousands of protesters had gathered outside Dhaka's Baitul Mokarram mosque after the Friday prayers. Protests held across Bangladesh accused Modi of stoking religious tensions and persecuting Muslims in India. They even slammed Modi for "killing Muslims in Gujarat, Kashmir, Delhi and other parts of India".

Maulana Mamunul Haque, secretary-general of Hefazat-e-Islam, a political organisation said, "People are angry with Modi as his government has passed several laws which make



more than one reason. While the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had invited Modi to be the chief guest on the occasion of 50 years of liberation of the country, Modi has been working on his ambitious plans to use the trip to woo Matua voters, who matter most for him in the elections to the West Bengal assembly.

There is no denying that Bangladeshi people have taken the remarks of Shah as an insult. They point out that Shah is not even aware of the fact that the situation has changed and the Bangladesh economy has surpassed that of Southeast Asian tigers like Singapore and Malaysia. The International Monetary Fund has predicted that Bangladesh's per capita income in dollars is likely to overtake that of India's this year. Obviously in this backdrop how could he utter such nonsensical things?

Matuas, who are a part of the namasudra community, have a significant presence in Bengal's North 24-Parganas and Nadia districts. They can impact the outcome in 32-33 of the total 50 assembly seats (17 in Nadia and in 33 in North 24-Parganas) there. In 2019 Lok Sabha election they helped BJP in a number of marginal seats.

Though Modi had gone to participate in the Golden jubilee celebration of Bangladesh, his prime intention was to visit and pray at the Matua community's Shri Shri Harichand temple and the Hari temple of Guruchand at the Orakandi Thakurbari in Gopalganj. Modi will also meet the family members of Harichand Thakur, founder of the Matua community according to Padmanabha Thakur, president of the Bangladesh Matua Maha Mission. He will also visit the Jashoreswari Kali temple at Ishwaripur. His desperation to meet

Muslims a second-class citizen in India."

Bangladeshi are also cut up with Modi for his showing of big brotherly attitude. People allege, "Bangladesh has not yet received its fair share of Teesta waters. Our rivers, ports, the Sundarbans are all victims of Indian aggression. India is interfering in internal affairs of Bangladesh politics." Foez Ullah, president of the Bangladesh Students' Union, said Modi's policies go against the basic tenets of Bangladesh's founding principles.

In poll-bound Bengal almost all the senior BJP leaders from Shah to Rajnath Singh, Union defence minister, are referring to infiltration, which makes it clear the party is keen on using the issue to polarise voters ahead of the Assembly polls. No doubt they are free to raise this issue but they ought to remember that in the wake of Shaheen Bagh movement Bangladesh's foreign minister had offered to India to take its people back if the Indian government provides concrete proof and evidence.

Nevertheless the top leaders making such allegations, that too coinciding with the visit of the prime minister to Bangladesh obviously underlines the intensity of the importance of the polls for the party. It also makes it clear that the election is more important to the BJP than the country's relationship

For BJP defeating Mamata is akin to success of Ashwamedh Agyan. Modi, Amit Shah and Mohan Bhagwat know that if they manage to trounce Mamata then no one can stop them from conquering India. The ruling regime and its top leaders are ready to make use of any weapon including the visit to Bangladesh to achieve their ends. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

A cogent judgment!

Editor,

It is indeed a happy occasion to note that the learned Division Bench of the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya, by virtue of its Judgment dated March 26, 2021, in the MCS recruitment case, was pleased to dismiss and set aside the appeal by the unsuccessful candidates who had participated in the MCS Junior Grade Preliminary Examination, about 3 years ago. According to the said Judgment, it was observed that there was no merit in their appeal, which challenged an earlier judgment of the learned Single Judge delivered on January 27, 2021, and that through well settled pronouncements of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India and various High Courts in the country, it is a laid down principle that unsuccessful participants of any public examination, cannot, after their participation in the examination process, turn around to challenge the method of selection and procedure adopted by the authority conducting the examination.

Further, the Judgment has reaffirmed the previous judgment of an earlier learned Division Bench of the High Court of Meghalaya, dated December 10, 2019 (also affirmed by Supreme Court of

India on January 09, 2020), which had implicitly considered the question as to whether the rules of the game were changed after the game had begun, and specifically on the question of the MPSC notice dated October 22, 2018, which was actually the primary point of challenge. Overall, in the final judgment of the learned Division Bench (March 26, 2021), it can be safely inferred that there exists no legal challenge whatsoever of substance to the process of MCS recruitment examination and thus, the entire examination as it stands, which makes the procedure very lawful and legal.

I, on behalf of all 576 successful candidates, express our heartfelt and sincere gratitude to the Hon'ble High Court of Meghalaya for such a cogent and justifiable judgment and we are thankful that justice has been delivered to us at last.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S
Via email

On being Khasi and Indian

Editor,

Joining the discourse initiated by Dominick Rymbai, 'On Being Indian and Khasi' (ST Feb. 17&18, 2021) I would like to take a page or two from the Maitshaphrang Ideology as posted on our

website which begins with a quotation by Enro Rubik, "No one can change their origins; if they do they become foreigners for the rest of their lives".

Moses who had a chance to live and become an Egyptian Pharaoh if he renounced his origin chose to identify himself according to his origin and to live like a Jewish slave. Moses never denied his Jewish origins. He lived like a slave but he finally led his people to freedom.

In recent years, Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin was questioned and opposed yet till date she did not renounce her Italian origins although she is an Indian citizen and till a few years back she was one of the few powerful women in the world. Many Indians are also elated that Kamala Harris the newly elected Vice President of the United States of America is (if not fully) of Indian origin.

We belong to the Hynniewtrep/ Khasi nation (u Khyriam, u Pnar, u Bhoi, u War, u Lyngngam, u Maram, u Mawsynram, etc.) by origin and we cannot do away with this fact of life even if we change our names, our titles, our citizenships or even our faces through plastic surgery. The Definition of a Khasi is anyone whose both parents or either one them are Khasis and who proudly identifies himself/ herself as a Khasi within the state

and outside the state as well, and who is ready to fight and defend the land and the rights of the Khasis, irrespective of his/her religious or non religious affiliations.

Hence in this world today that is being increasingly divided and identified along community and ethnic lines, the identity issue is becoming increasingly important. When we go outside India and we introduce ourselves that we are from India, people will want to know from which part of India and what community we belong to. When they learn that we are from the Khasi community, how would we like the world to respond and react? Positively or negatively?

To ensure that we receive a positive response, the vision of the Maitshaphrang is to aspire that one of the historic moments of the Hynniewtrep people will be when we declare one day that in terms of quality and merit we do not want reservation. We will compete and contribute with the rest of India and the world on an equal footing and scholarship will be based only on merit (without leaving out the economically weaker sections of our community). This in turn will further strengthen our fighting spirit. Reservation will only be in terms of quantity/ population, because being a small populated community surrounded by much larger populated communities, we

need 100% political reservation.

Another historic moment is when we declare that in the near future for those among the Hynniewtrep people who have reached a certain level of income, we will pay Income tax and contribute to the growth and progress of India like any other Indian who pays Income tax.

One day when our people have reached this level of achievement, I am sure then, that when our children and their generations go outside the state and introduce themselves as Khasis, India and the rest of the world will be proud to make their acquaintance.

Yours etc.,
Michael N Syiem,
Via email

Positive steps by Govt of Meghalaya

Editor,

The entire world is struggling to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Vaccination drives are being carried on, and people are constantly advised to wear masks and use hand sanitizers. Mental, physical and economic stress is witnessed among a large section of the public because of numerous reasons after the outbreak of the pandemic. Keeping in view the present situation of uncertainty,

the recent decision of the Meghalaya Government to reduce the prices of RAT (Rapid Antigen Test) from Rs 500 to Rs 250 and RT-PCR Test (Reverse Transcriptase Polymerase Chain Reaction Test) from Rs 1000 to Rs 500 is a welcome step.

To ensure the safety of the public, COVID tests were conducted at entry points of various states and it was the need of the hour that the COVID tests be set at a standard price that the common man could afford. The initiative taken by the Meghalaya Government in this regard will bring great relief to the common man. Moreover, it will also attract many tourists to the Scotland of the East. The government has taken the above action keeping in mind the "Below Poverty Line (BPL) section" and "high risk individuals in containment zones," and made the COVID tests free for them. This must be applauded. Overall, the active cooperation of the Government, the medical and paramedical staff and the frontline workers will help us control the spread of the disease.

Yours etc.,
Partha Pratim Duarah
Via email

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“Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today.”

— Olusegun Obasanjo

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Health Department in shambles

THE BJP recently called for a Power Policy in Meghalaya. The Party should also demand a Health Policy since the Health Department, held by its own MLA has been in the news recently for the wrong reasons such as procuring medicines with short expiry dates, so much so they had to be thrown away and new sets of medicines indented. The money for this goes from the public exchequer and the Government cannot be unmindful of this. The Performance Audit of select district hospitals in Meghalaya for the period ended March 2019 shows a dismal picture of the healthcare system in Meghalaya. Hospitals across Meghalaya have no effluents treatment plants. There is only one intensive care unit (ICU) in the Shillong Civil Hospital; other hospitals have none and the Directorate of Health Services never even considered planning for such ICUs in other district hospitals. Hence patients in the other districts had to be referred to or passed on to private hospitals.

There are no district hospitals in the three districts of East Jaintia Hills, South West Khasi Hills and North Garo Hills. This severely limits people's access to healthcare. What is even more shocking is that there is no trauma/accident and burn care centre in any of the district hospitals. Hence patients with serious injuries are referred to NEIGRIHMS or outside the state, thereby losing the golden hour within which a patient's life can be saved.

The State Government has no Equipment Procurement Policy (EPP) or any standardised norms for procurement of equipment for different health facilities and has neither adopted Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) norms, None of the District Hospitals are fully equipped with the essential equipment due to inadequate maintenance thereby impacting the efficiency and health care provided in the hospitals. Besides, there are no Annual Maintenance Contracts signed with the suppliers which would have ensured reduction of breakdown time of essential equipment for diagnosis.

Meghalaya is infamous for incomplete projects leading to time and cost overruns. The CAG report mentions that the construction of a State Spinal Injury centre, the amount for which was sanctioned in 2018 and the Trauma Centre for Shillong Civil Hospital due for completion by September 2018 did not even commence despite funds of Rs 9.08 crore being made available by the Centre.

It may be mentioned that the same person has been holding the post of Health Minister in the Congress-led MUA Government and continues to hold charge of the same Department in the MDA. His interest in the Health portfolio raises many questions. The backlog in the health sector has only accumulated with time and the pandemic has revealed the cracks in the functioning of this vital Department. Till date no account has been given on how the Rs 399 crore of Covid funds have been deployed.

Outrageous UP incident, vigilante groups a bane

By Albert Thyrniang

The incident in Uttar Pradesh where two nuns and two trainees were forced off the train by the Bajrang Dal/Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) activists and the police is outrageous.

The March 19 happening on the Delhi-Rourkela (Odisha) bound Utkal Express proves Yogi Adityanath's UP as a hotbed of religious intolerance and communalism. It affirms the hate that vigilante groups like ABVP, student wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which is in turn BJP's ideological patriarch, the Bajrang and others have for minorities. The 'Hindu samaj' workers' shameful behaviour endorses the existence of goonda raj in the BJP's ruled state where self-appointed outfits take the law into their own hands harassing, intimidating and heckling innocent citizens. The visuals that sent shock waves confirm that freedom of religion in the country is under siege.

One of the nuns being from Kerala, politicians in the poll bound state were quick to condemn the appalling episode. Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to Union Home Minister, Amit Shah seeking strict action, the Congress informed Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the and BJP led the UP CM know its disgust. Fearing electoral backlash in the 'most secular state' Amit Shah promised justice for the nuns and the young ladies. But whether he means what he says is still to be seen. Is the assurance for prompt action related to election in the state? As for the Prime Minister he may not see the attack as abysmal. The outrageous incident may not feature in his weekly Mann Ki Baat.

The call for action from the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council (KCBC), the All India Catholic Union (AICU), the outrage in the media and others may not be sufficient to bring the 'Jai Shriram' and 'Jai Hanuman' shouting zealots to book.

Cow and anti-conversion vigilantism which has been on the rise ever since the BJP came to power in 2014 is a bane for India. Horrific lynching of victims over cattle transportation and beef consumption, the thrashing of pastors, the vandalism of churches, harassment of couples over 'love jihad' is a result of this unauthorised vigilantism. It is because of these "campaigns of harassment", the 2020 Delhi riots, the provocative and communal speeches of politicians, the ever increasing cases of communal violence in UP and elsewhere that we have the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2020

report indicating strongly that religious freedom in India deteriorated sharply last year, the sixth year of the NDA government. We may term the scathing watchdog's annual assessment "biased and tendentious" but it is incidents like the one in Jhansi that tarnish the nation and is responsible for the downgraded rating of religious freedom in the eyes of the world.

The central government instead of stemming out intolerance chose to heighten anti-minority sentiments by passing the contentious CAA and assuring execution of NRC throughout the country. State governments too vitiate communal harmony by enacting anti-conversion laws targeting Muslims and Christians in particular.

Hindutva vigilante groups enjoy political and administrative patronage. Who gives these groups the right to question citizens on any suspicion? Can it be acceptable that the Bajrang Dal and ABVP activists check the identity of individuals? Do they have the delegated authority to implement anti-conversion laws? Are they not acting extra constitutionally? Who grants them the right to humiliate and traumatise fellow humans?

We have been taught that Hinduism is the most tolerant religion. We are made to believe that the 'timeless' religion's trademark is 'tolerance in abundance', that the world's oldest Way of Life preaches 'acceptance of all faiths' even in 'conflicts of views'. We have been raised to believe that Hinduism is not averse to anyone worshipping Allah or Jesus or any other deity. In fact we have been intellectually formed that Hinduism accepts even atheists.

The admiration for henotheistic culture (worship a single deity, known as 'Brahman,' but recognize other gods and goddesses) has not ceased but it makes one question the growing fanatics who claim to represent Hinduism. The 'Jai Shri Ram' chanters have been brought up under which tradition? Which philosophy has influenced the evident fundamentalist elements in the RSS, the Bajrang Dal, the AVBP and a host of other radicals? Do they believe in the oneness and inclusiveness of all beings? Do they hold that the whole universe is 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (one big family)? Do they represent Hinduism? Then why so much intolerance? Why the hatred? Why the violence in the name of Ram or Hanuman? Why the criminal acts in the name of religion? Why the phobia

though Hinduism is nearly 80%, Islam only 15% and Christianity a mere 2.3 % of the population? Religious vigilantes are damaging the image of Hinduism. It is surprising followers of the real Hinduism have not denounced loud enough and often enough against the fundamentalist groups.

The offenders show scant respect to the fact that the victims were all women. Allegedly the police too had no women personnel in the train when the heckling and the forceful debarking was happening in full public view. As demanded one hopes the National Commission for Women and Human Rights Commission and Minority Commission intervene in the matter to ensure justice for the sufferers.

Following the Jhansi outrage Markandey Katju writing for 'The Week' lauds nuns saying they are role models for all Indians. Unequivocally condemning the incident and designating it a disgrace to the country the outspoken retired Supreme Court judge notes the yeoman contributions nuns make to the society in education and healthcare while also vouching that allegations of forcible conversion are palpably false. Obviously the Bajrang Dal/AVBP don't share Katju's sentiments but a respect for every faith adherent is expected from them.

Religious attire has been always revered in India. Sadhus and Sanyasis, god men and women, Buddhist monks and nuns, Sikh gurus, Muslim mullahs (and ordinary people too) and Christian priests and nuns are venerated for donning religious dresses. Wearing one is even a considered safety measure. Should the Bajrang Dal and AVBP activists alter this long existing attitude? Why should individuals with religious clothing feel unsafe? Today Christian nuns are victimised. Tomorrow it could be Muslim mullahs and ordinary citizens with hijab, burka, skull caps or other with religious symbols. If Yogi Adityanath can wear his religious attire and move freely anywhere so too others!

In Meghalaya fascist groups which are part of the ideology to turn India into a 'Hindu Rashtra' with a homogeneous religion and culture' is taking root. Strategically they may be in the shadow at the moment but being aware of their divisive agenda is wise.

In our state vigilantism is of a different kind. In the last few weeks the association that nomenclatures itself as

Rot Association of Meghalaya (RAM) has been aggrieved by gallery playing politicians, moral policing NGOs and unforgiving social media users. Self-appointed law enforcement groups intermittently check trading silence in shops, expel non-tribal labour from construction sites, inspect trucks in highways and lock down shops on their own. Attempts to set up 'ILP checking points' have been made. We the 85.9 % Scheduled Tribe population play victim of an unreasonable fear of the minority 'outsiders.'

Even as we are recovering from the Umoid shock and the unfortunate Golf Link incident is under investigation, a surprising confession by Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong has got the attention of the media. In a video Tynsong is clearly heard that he too used to beat up 'Dkhars' in 1979. Should not an FIR be filed against the second in command in the government based on his own revelation? What if others too start bragging of their role in the 1979/1987 violence? What if others are 'inspired' by him? Cheers were heard from the function attendees. Those who watch the clip on the internet too cheered for him. The intended message from his experience is lost in the 'sensational' admission. A very regrettable disclosure!

This writer could consider himself a 'vigilante'. My recent unexpected home visit forced me to unavoidably take a night ride on the cruel Nongstoin-Mawkyrwat road again. 'Fortunately' the headlights did not yield my videos and shots worthy of sharing. The Nongstoin-Wahkaji road has appeared on this page a number of times. Recently tenders were floated for construction of an intermediate lane but there is no sign of its commencement. Of late the Deputy CM has not missed the opportunity to reiterate that the MDA government's plan was/is to initiate development from rural areas. Really! He has repeatedly mentioned a 'huge' figure spent for roads in villages. I have seen no improvement in my area in the last three years. The Deputy CM, also in charge of PWD (Roads), is requested to take a ride from Nongstoin to Mawkyrwat to Wahkaji and back to Shillong via Mawsaw, Jashiar, Jakrem etc. to see and feel the 'developed' roads by himself.

My self-indulgence is only a diversion. We are in a free country. We are in a country governed by law. No one is to be hounded by vigilante groups of any kind.

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Centre's NCT bill undermines 2018 judgment of Supreme Court

If passed, Delhi citizens will be the real losers

By Indira Jaising

What appears to be an innocuous Bill, in fact, seeks to introduce a complete change in the way the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi is administered. The Bill introduced in parliament conceals more than it reveals, since it contains no substantive reference to the purpose of the Bill. Indeed,

defined in our various statutes. However, what this Bill seeks to do is very clearly go against our established notions of what is a 'government'.

We are accustomed to believing that the government consists of the Executive, appointed from amongst our elected representatives



this Bill — in its Statement of Objects and Reasons — turns the issue on its head and undermines not only the 2018 judgment of the Supreme Court of India, but also certain provisions of the Constitution of India itself. In particular, Article 239AA.

The Statement of Objects says that the Bill is intended to give effect to the judgment of the Supreme Court. But in fact, it does the very opposite. Paragraph 3 of the Statement of Objectives and Reasons is as follows.

"In order to give effect to the interpretation made by Hon'ble Supreme Court in the aforesaid judgments,

and that it commands the confidence of the majority of the house. This Bill, in Section 2 (3), states that the "expression 'Government' referred to in any law to be made by the Legislative Assembly shall mean the Lieutenant Governor."

The Lieutenant Governor of the National Capital Territory of Delhi is not elected, but is instead nominated in a purely political process by the President of India, acting on the aid and advice of the Union Cabinet of Ministers. He is therefore, a purely political appointee.

The National Capital Territory of Delhi enjoys a

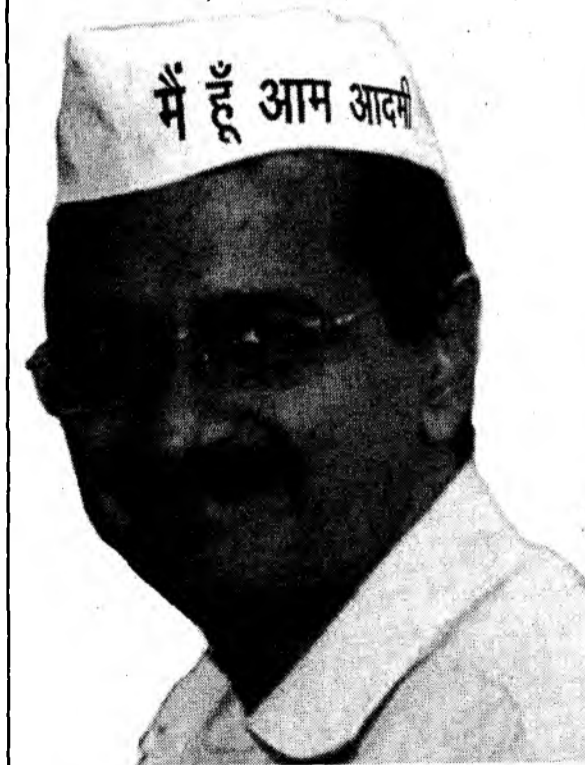
"The Constitution, in the Seventh Schedule, distributes law-making powers between the states and the union, and has a Concurrent List, where both the states and union can make laws. Executive powers follow legislative powers."

a Bill, namely, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021 seeks, inter alia, to clarify the expression "Government", which in the context of legislations to be passed by the Legislative Assembly of Delhi, shall mean the Lieutenant Governor of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, consistent with the status of Delhi as a Union territory to address the ambiguities in the interpretation of the legislative provisions. It further seeks to ensure that the Lieutenant Governor is necessarily granted an opportunity to exercise the power entrusted to him under proviso to clause (4) of article 239AA of the Constitution, in select

special status in the federal scheme of our nation. It is the Capital of India, but it also has an elected legislative assembly for which all the registered voters in Delhi vote. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) swept the polls in 2020, and went on to form the Government of Delhi. That alone can be defined to be the 'government' of Delhi.

Article 239AA of the Constitution of India situates the governance structure of Delhi within the four corners of the Constitution itself, making Delhi a part of the federal unit of the country with an elected government of its own.

The Constitution, in the Seventh Schedule, distrib-



category of cases and also to make rules in matters which incidentally encroach upon matters falling outside the purview of the Legislative Assembly. It also seeks to provide for rules made by the Legislative Assembly of Delhi to be consistent with the rules of the House of the People."

Surprisingly, the word 'government' is nowhere

utes law-making powers between the states and the union, and has a Concurrent List, where both the states and union can make laws. Executive powers follow legislative powers.

In other words, in every matter in which the Government of Delhi has the power to make laws, it also has the Executive power to execute these laws. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Utterances of Dy CM condemnable

Editor,

It is appalling to note that the sitting Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Prestone Tynsong admitted to the media that he "used to beat up non-tribals" in 1979 (ST 28 March '21) though today he is a changed man. Now he doesn't want the Khasi youths to follow his footsteps. A noble change of sorts but does that absolve him of the crime he committed? Who can forget the first major riots in 1979, led by Khasi mobs directed at the innocent Bengali minorities with an aim to drive them out? What followed was mayhem and bloodshed that continued through the decades. Mr Tynsong forgets that among those non-tribals that he hit, one of them could have been our father or an uncle living today perhaps perpetually with a scar on his head or a broken limb bone. Should we take your confession as one of your achievements, or act of self

forgiveness/exoneration, Mr Minister?

Yours etc.,
Bhaskar D,
Via email

Much ado about identity

Editor,
Apropos to Michael Syiem's letter "On Being Khasi" (ST March 29, 2021) what caught my attention was the mention of Enro Rubik and a quote from him, "No one can change their origins, if they do, they become foreigners for the rest of their lives." Most of us have heard of Enro Rubik the great Hungarian inventor, architect and professor of architecture best known for the invention of mechanical puzzles including the Rubik's Cube (1974), Rubik's Magic, Rubik's Snake, I scoured the internet and spent precious time trying to find this quote on identity but couldn't find any. Perhaps Michael Syiem has wrongly attributed this quote to Rubik and by the way there is no person by the name of 'Enro Rubik' as

cited by the writer. I would like Mr Syiem to enlighten us on who Enro Rubik is. Is he a political scientist, philosopher, anthropologist or sociologist? Since Mr Syiem has mentioned that his Organisation, Mait Shaphrang bases its ideology on the above quotation he must have culled it from somewhere. I would like to read the larger context on which the writer based his rationale on identity and also that of his NGO, if he would care to respond to this letter.

When Michael Syiem speaks of origin he links it to identity and defines who a Khasi is. It is almost as if identity is a frozen thing. It has been established that the DNA of a Khasi has several strands. I would like to quote theorist Stuart Hall, "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses. Until recently, we have incorrectly thought that identity is a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action ... the logic of something like a 'true self.' But identity is a process, identity is

split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself."

As a tribal myself, I am in agreement with Michael Syiem that Khasis and other tribals should start paying income tax to assert their self respect and be equal citizens of India. Also they should stop asking for reservation for jobs and education. Reservation should be only for deserving candidates coming from economically distressed sections of society.

Yours etc.,
L Kharwanlang,
Via email

Climate crisis stares at us

Editor,
In the wake of the formation of the new Apex Committee for Implementation of Paris Agreement (AIPA), India must adopt a significant role in combating climate change. As a matter of fact, India and many economies around the world are being severely af-

ected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, India has considerable potential for a recovery from the impact of COVID-19. If India can achieve success in the decarbonisation of its energy sector, it could play a vital role in reviving the economy and the health system. Climate action would be socially and economically beneficial to India.

By harnessing renewable energy India can boost employment. Renewable energy technologies generate more labour than conventional energy technologies. By 2050, millions of people could be employed in the renewable energy sector. By harnessing renewable energy India can reduce air pollution. By successful decarbonisation methods India can avoid thousands of premature deaths by pollution.

Climate change is one of the highest priorities of the bilateral partnership between India and the US. Strong climate partnership between the two countries will definitely strengthen the relations between both

countries. India should take its cue from its neighbour China which has committed to carbon neutrality by 2060. It is important for India to devise decarbonisation plans and announce net-zero plans soon. As one of the big emitters of the world, India needs to be very clear about the steps it will take until 2050. Against the backdrop of the US rejoining the Paris Agreement, there is tremendous optimism that the forthcoming Climate Summit in Glasgow will send a strong message of the importance of climate action.

Considering that there is enormous investment in the renewable sources of energy and green economies, it could lead to industrial development and successful economies. The AIPA and India must never turn down the opportunity to make the Paris Agreement a success. Its success would be beneficial to the planet and the people of India.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS
Kollam

"The real tragedy of the poor is the poverty of their aspirations."

— Adam Smith

The Shillong Times

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Signals from Nandigram

NANDIGRAM is where the top-billed, no-holds-barred electoral fight is on, the epicentre of the political battle for a set of five assemblies — three in the South and two in the East, cutting across borders and gaining the maximum political heat. Campaigning for the constituency has ended on Tuesday, alongside other constituencies in the second phase of the polls in West Bengal, leaving a bitter taste and raising hopes for victory for rival sides — the ruling Trinamool Congress or the BJP.

'Wounded tigress' Mamata Banerjee set on a wheelchair is mindful of the seriousness of the fight as the BJP shouts from the roof-tops that the battle for West Bengal's future is fought and decided precisely in Nandigram. A defeat for the chief minister there would likely seal her political fate and give the BJP a big shot in the arm if its high-profile candidate Suwendu Adhikari wins. The huge rally that Union Home Minister Amit Shah led before the campaign's end has put Banerjee on notice. The pendulum in Nandigram can swing either way.

The BJP gathered strength steadily in recent years in West Bengal due to the omissions and commissions of Banerjee. For one, strong leaders like Adhikari left her camp and joined the BJP bulwark because of the increasing importance that the CM started giving to her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, at the expense of other seniors. At the same time, it is not easy wishing away the huge clout of Mamata. She skillfully raised the "Bengal's daughter versus the largely Hindi belt BJP leadership" imagery to win fresh mass support in the present elections. That the BJP took the fight very seriously is evident from the repeated forays that PM Modi, Amit Shah and several other central ministers made to West Bengal to boost the saffron party's chances.

Caught in between is the Congress-CPI-M alliance, a contradiction in ideological terms. It will not be easy for both the parties to sell to the public the new-found bonhomie among them after their bitter political war lasting four decades. This is a reason why what were once heavyweights in state politics, the Congress and the CPI-M led Left are languishing on the sidelines. People are bound to see through unprincipled political alliances, and this might be to the advantage of the saffron sharks. Strategically, the BJP effectively tied down the CM to her own constituency for the large part, leaving her less time to attend a state-wide campaign till now. An encore for the Trinamool Congress and Banerjee is still a strong possibility.

Aata Majhi Satakli

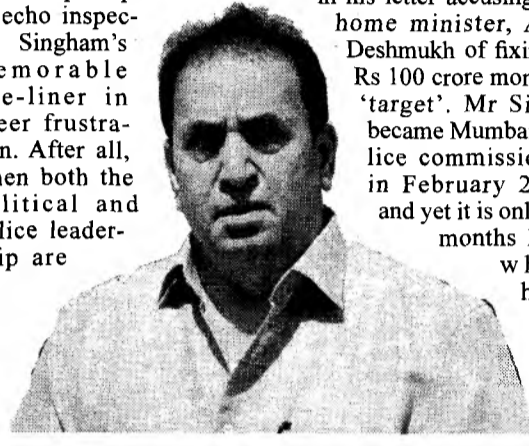
The Singham Syndrome

By Rajdeep Sardesai

'Minister log mere peeche aur police log mere jeb mein rehte hai' (Ministers follow me and the police is in my pocket)

The Hindi film industry has a unique way at times of staying ahead of real life narratives. The above dialogue from the 2011 blockbuster 'Singham' pits the villainous don against an honest inspector, Bajirao Singham and forces the latter to famously retort in anger: "Aata majhi satakli!" (loosely translated from Marathi to mean, "Now, I have lost it!")

Watching the political developments in Maharashtra over the last few days, any right-thinking citizen may well be prompted to echo inspector Singham's memorable one-liner in sheer frustration. After all, when both the political and police leadership are



caught in a web of egregious lies, deceit and possible criminality, it makes one wonder whether law-makers and law-enforcers have abandoned any notion of public service but instead become partners in a cash and carry private enterprise.

How else is one to interpret the unprecedented war of words between the Maharashtra home minister, Anil Deshmukh and the ex Mumbai police commissioner, Parambir Singh? The commissioner soon after being transferred suddenly accuses the minister of seeking a 'vasooli' (bribe) of Rs 100 crore per month from Sachin Vaze, an assistant police inspector, now arrested in the Ambani bomb scare case. The home minister, in turn, claims that the police commissioner is only trying to protect himself from being implicated in the same case in which one person, Mansukh Hiran, has been found dead. Amidst the allegations and counter-allegations, here is the inconvenient truth: the chickens have come home to roost and Maharashtra,

and dare one say, India's politician-police nexus has been laid bare.

A few years ago, a senior Maharashtra police officer Sanjay Pandey admitted as much during actor Aamir Khan's popular 'Satyamev Jayate' TV show while alluding to an 'organised, institutionalised settlement' system by which dance bars and restaurants in Mumbai had to pay a monthly 'hafta' or fixed fee to the local police and their superiors. This is precisely what the former Mumbai police commissioner Parambir Singh has claimed in his letter accusing the home minister, Anil Deshmukh of fixing a Rs 100 crore monthly 'target'. Mr Singh became Mumbai police commissioner in February 2020 and yet it is only 13 months later when he is

transferred to the home guards department that he decides to turn a conscientious whistleblower. And the minister too only now thinks it fit to question the former Mumbai top cop's integrity after having unreservedly backed him during several major investigations in the last year.

Which is why the words of neither Deshmukh nor Singh can be taken at face value. Mr Deshmukh is a five time legislator while Mr Singh is one of the senior most police officers in Maharashtra. Neither can claim to have been unaware of the implications of their actions. Which is also why it is time to end the charade of self-righteous indignation that is being played out by the ruling elite in Maharashtra. If a police commissioner had not been transferred, it is more than likely that he wouldn't have said a word. If Mansukh Hiran's body had not been found at Thane creek, it is possible that the Ambani bomb case would have died a natural death and Vaze would still be calling the shots. And if former Maharashtra chief

minister and BJP leader, Devendra Fadnis didn't have access to confidential documents, maybe the Shiv Sena-led government could simply brazen it out.

Nor can Uddhav Thackeray or Sharad Pawar distance themselves from the murkiness of this episode. After all, Vaze, once glamourised as an 'encounter' specialist, joined the Sena after being suspended in a fake encounter case. What was the compulsion to reinstate him in 2020 when the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) came to power but for the fact that he was widely seen as a 'Shiv Sainik in uniform'? And can a hands-on, veteran politician like Mr Pawar who has towered over Maharashtra politics for almost half a century claim that he was unaware of what his NCP home minister might have been up to?

And while Mr Fadnis as opposition leader can legitimately claim to have put the Maharashtra government on the back-foot, don't forget that he too presided over the same 'system' when he was the chief minister for five years in partnership with the Sena. Will anyone seriously believe that the politician-police nexus only surfaced in November 2019 when the MVA government came to power? Indeed, can any state government claim to have made a genuine attempt to implement the police reforms recommended by the Supreme Court in the 2006

Prakash Singh case? At the core of those reforms is the urgent need to insulate the police from political pressures, be it in transfers or investigations. But neither the union home ministry in the Manmohan Singh UPA years nor the Modi government now have chosen to prioritize police reforms.

But why would any

government bite the hand that feeds them? The fact is, whether it is the alleged extortion racket or the lucrative 'transfer-posting' industry, an increasingly corrupted politician-police culture has corroded and enfeebled institutional structures to the point where the lines between right and wrong have long since been blurred. It isn't just the street constable who seeks a bribe with impunity: the chain it appears extends from the station house officers to shockingly even IPS officers and their political bosses. That even senior IPS officers stand accused of 'lobbying' for profitable posts reveals just how deeply entrenched interests have compromised the police hierarchy.

Which is why heads must roll in Maharashtra and any inquiry must go well beyond the usual political score-settling. Let the guilty be identified and given exemplary punishment. To protect the trustworthy police officers and yes, the upright politician too, the chain of fraudulence must be broken. Else every furious citizen will be entitled to scream: "Aata majhi satakli!"

Post-script: Some of the goings-on in Maharashtra would almost be comical if they were not so tragic (remember, the state has by far the highest number of active Covid 19 cases and a number of beat policemen have lost their lives in the pandemic). Take for example the suggestion by Mr Pawar that 92 year old former Mumbai police commissioner Julio Ribeiro be asked to probe the allegations.

Mr Ribeiro has rightly pointed out that he is hardly at an age where he can now be lead investigator. But the very fact that a nonagenarian is considered as most apt for the task reveals the deep credibility crisis that confronts an entire generation of men in khaki and khadi.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

Budgetary allocations

Neglect of poor inevitable!

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

Budgetary allocations are broadly made on the basis of expected revenue mobilisation for the year. Obviously, the criteria in making such allocations are decided by the ruling government in consultation with economists and industry leaders. If one examines the budget for the last 10 years or so, it will be clearly manifest that the bias is for the urban sector and pro-industry, where a small segment of the of the population lives.

As is well known, the majority of the population, around 28 to 30 per cent, lives in villages and adjoining areas, but their per capita benefit in every budget is very negligible. The reason for the discrepancy is that funds being limited, allocations have to be made in sectors like defence, space research, railways, higher education etc. Another reason is that life has to be made comfortable for urban living where the upper echelons of society live and work.

Late President APJ Kalam though written off as a visionary and felt very much for the ordinary, especially students. He talked of PURA (providing urban facilities in rural areas) but this was not possible due to resource constraints as also the mindset of politician and planners. This perhaps cannot be implemented in the coming few years as investing heavily in rural infrastructure is difficult at this juncture.

Thus the dichotomy will remain prevalent in the coming decade or so. The emphasis on technology, on mechanised systems, on largescale automated manufacturing neglected labour intensive small-scale manufacturing, not modernising agriculture — all these may increase GDP but widen inequality among people and further dent the incomes of the impoverished and marginalised sections. Moreover, it is wrong to believe that higher revenues will go to the poor; these will be used for projects where the Indian mass will not be benefited by even one per cent.

In the rural and semi-urban areas of the country, the shopkeeper, the small farmer or trader, the fisher folk, and even the thekedar (contractor) will continue to suffer in the coming years. The sudden lockdown due to the pandemic last year brought untold suffering to the poor and the situation is unlikely to improve this year or even in 2022 though the rich will continue to prosper.

One may refer here to a study released recently by the Washington based non-profit Pew Research which stated that India's number of poor is expected to have reached 134 million, more than double the 59 million estimated during the recession. Also the country's middle class is estimated to have shrunk by a third in and the number of the country's poor more than doubled due to the pandemic triggered recession. As a result of the downturn, India's middle class shrank by over 32 million from the number it may have reached if there was no pandemic. This accounts for 60 per cent of the global retreat in the number of people in the middle income tier with daily incomes between \$10 and \$20 or Rs 725 and Rs 140.

While even the number also, according to Pew, is now estimated to be near 66 million, the number of poor in India (with daily incomes of \$2 or less i.e. Rs 145 or less) is estimated to have jumped by 75 million due to the Covid-induced recession. This too accounts for nearly 60 per cent of the global increase in poverty. The report also pointed out that the demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employ-

ment Guarantee Scheme has been the highest since its inception. But budgetary constraints have reduced its allocation for MGNREGS for 2021-22 though the requirement in this scheme cannot be denied.

All this clearly points to the deprivation of the rural poor, which has been happening for several years. The induction of technology has motivated the planners to grow faster without examining how to frame a strategy for the economically weaker sections. The assurance of doubling farmers' income has remained a jargon and even the ruling dispensation is not agreeable to make MSP mandatory for which farmers' agitation has been continuing and attracted global attention.

Recently, a so-called educationist, writing in one of the biggest national newspapers said the need for labelling school education 'not-for-profit' should be changed. And the justification given was that the income generated by schools would help improve the condition of government schools and their functioning. Though the private sector wants to grab the money of the rural mass, as because of the grass-root need, the government should not allow this as social infrastructure remains its critical responsibility.

The disinvestment strategy may be understandable to raise resources to meet the budgetary deficit but the private partner has to outline the plan for increasing efficiency and modernisation through technology upgradation. But while selecting this partner, why is not a strategic plan being called for plans to increase capacity and expand, thereby creating jobs. Only then such disinvestment decisions would become acceptable and laudable.

The government's resource crunch is understandable but for that the masses should not be made to suffer. Though the government is giving number of doles to various segments of the population, there is no target of job creation and in which sectors. One may mention here that incentives are being given for purchase of solar lights, electric vehicles etc. but no incentive for micro units, cottage industries or even agro-industries. Should not the government think seriously in this regard and evolve effective plans accordingly?

The whole exercise of budget creation by successive governments with much fanfare, introduction of various schemes — sometimes renaming previous schemes — has not been of much help to the marginalised sections. The debate and discussion goes on every year as those who are involved in this exercise are from the upper echelons of society and mostly belong to urban areas. But such fruitless exercise is just hoodwinking the people whose deprivation and squalor continues. And this is very much evident since April last year due to the pandemic and lockdown, all of which affecting the poor due to loss of livelihood options.

The country may not be facing a dark future but definitely the income divide will continue and the rural sector and its population will continue to be neglected. Just changing the name of Planning Commission to Niti Aayog has not altered the structure and mechanism of planning and allocation of budgetary resources. But a change is imperative and only time will tell when, if at all, this will be accomplished. But for a transformation to become a reality, a change in the mindset of our political leaders as also bureaucrats is imperative. ---INFA

Letters to the Editor

Condoning corruption

Editor,
Refer to ST March 30, 2021 news headlines. "Surprise check reveals power theft at Byrnhat". The surprise inspection of the industrial units at Byrnhat by the MeECL CMD, Arunkumar Kembhavi, revealed extensive and widespread theft of power by ALL existing industrial units of the area. This surprise check by the head of MeECL was most probably triggered by tip offs from whistleblowers and by the recurring shortfall of revenue in the MeECL coffers which ultimately led to power cutoffs from suppliers leading to the hue and cry over the recent load shedding we all suffered from. So when an administrative officer does his duty in ensuring effective service to the public what do we do? Praise him or condemn him?

In this instance the MeECL employees had then lodged an anonymous complaint with the Shillong Times over the CMD MeECL for carrying out the surprise inspection that caught the power thieves red-handed. The allegation is that no inspection can be carried out by anyone without prior intimation to the field officers concerned. As such the surprise inspection by the CMD has been termed by vested interests as illegal. Point to be noted is that no power theft is technically possible

without the active connivance of the MeECL field officers involved. Everyone, even the man on the street knows this. So essentially informing the abettors of the crime (the MeECL field officers) of an upcoming inspection would tantamount to giving prior notice to the thieves themselves. Such action would simply condone corruption.

The other side of the coin has revealed the truth. The massive power thefts at Byrnhat Industrial estate has been going on with the full knowledge and abetment of the field officers of the MeECL posted in the area. Theft of this magnitude that has amounted to hundreds of crores of rupees cannot be left to the tender mercies of the vigilance department. If the Power Minister is really serious about curbing leakages in power revenue; if he really wants a message to be given; then the matter should be handed over to the CBI. A massive power theft has been unearthed which has affected not only the Department concerned; caused tremendous loss of revenue; has had a direct negative impact on the welfare and well-being of the people and the state itself. An FIR with the CBI should be lodged immediately and stringent action initiated against all those involved. Meghalaya can never condone corruption and crime.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

Kudos to CMD MeECL

Editor,
The truth about MeECL is now out in the open. The Byrnhat industrial units were probably the milking cows of vested interests within MeECL. This was a known fact but it is for the first time that the vested interests (engineers and linesmen) have been caught red-handed. I am even more amused by the MeECL engineers citing rules about surprise checks. Don't they know the meaning of "surprise." It is because the CMD was trying to clean up the mess that the engineers' lobby felt threatened and wanted him out. As consumers of electricity we can only be grateful to Mr Arunkumar Kembhavi for busting this scam. I am sure he will find many more scams such as purchase of poles and other equipments, many of which are lying unused.

Also it is common knowledge that quite a few leaders of pressure groups are contractors in the MeECL and making hay from the Corporation. The same people protest on a host of issues and pretend to be anti-government but when it comes to contracts and supply they are the prime movers and shakers. Mr Kembhavi should shake up the entire Corporation once and for all and bring it on track.

Yours etc.,
L Kharibithai,
Via email

Why this no-detention order?

Editor,
I would like to use this space of your esteemed newspaper to highlight a recent order of the Government of Meghalaya regarding the no detention till Class IX format. My personal opinion and that of other parents I have spoken to is that this detention policy is ill conceived insofar as Class IX students are concerned, since they had classes from October last year and continued even during the severe Shillong January winter.

In fact Class IX students had more classes this year as compared to other years, so applying this no detention policy to Class IX students will do away with the spirit of positive competition amongst the students who have toiled day and night for good grades. Education is supposed to instill a spirit of excellence amongst the students; still considering the disruption caused due to Covid19 it is well and good that the students of up to Class VIII are not detained, but if it is applied to Class IX students then it will send a very wrong message to those students that have strived for excellence as well as those who have stayed away from books. And this no-detention policy for Class IX students goes against all sensibility because Class IX exams are

considered equivalent to Board exams since the dates are scheduled by the Board itself.

I appeal to the powers that be to kindly reconsider this order and if possible to exclude Class IX from the no-detention policy which will definitely help to further improve our education system.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Robbers on wheels

Editor,
The local cabbies and tourist taxis in the town are on a looting spree. Soon after the Meghalaya Joint Action Committee of Commercial Vehicles called off its strike, the local cabbies are charging Rs 20 (against Rs.10) as the minimum fare on sharing basis. The tourist taxis are no better either since the Tata Sumo variant is now charging Rs.300 (against Rs.200) per head whereas the Swift Dzire variant is charging Rs 500 instead of Rs 400. This is despite the fact that the Government of Meghalaya soon after lifting the restriction on plying of commercial vehicles imposed in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic has categorically mentioned that all these vehicles are to charge commuters as per the old rates. But who cares in Meghalaya? These vehicles are plundering in broad day-

light whereas there is no mechanism to teach these rogues on wheels a lesson or two.

We have seen recently that the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) following a surprise check has revealed rampant power theft at Byrnhat. Well, now if the MeECL can engage in a surprise check then what is preventing the Meghalaya Transport Department from conducting similar checks and unearthing the rampant loot by the local cabbies and tourist vehicles in the town? One has never heard of any such move ever by the Meghalaya Transport Department and the East Khasi Hills District Administration — which only seek black and white complaints from commuters to initiate action.

It is unbecoming of these departments to turn a blind eye to the existing difficulties being faced by commuters daily by not initiating any action against the errant tourist vehicles and local cabbies. It is because of the ineptitude of the said departments that these commercial vehicles are running their robbery with impunity in this town.

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong — 4

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